

MARITIME PERSPECTIVES 2025

MARITIME SECURITY AND MULTILATERAL CONSTRUCTS

Edited by

Vice Admiral Pradeep Chauhan
Ms Anum Khan



MARITIME PERSPECTIVES 2025: MARITIME SECURITY AND MULTILATERAL CONSTRUCTS

Editors: Vice Admiral Pradeep Chauhan and Ms Anum Khan

First Published in 2025

Copyright © National Maritime Foundation

Cover Picture Credit: Design created using Canva

ISBN: 978-81-994377-7-7

Rs. 300.00

Maritime Perspectives, published since 2014, is an annual publication of the National Maritime Foundation (NMF) that compiles thematically arranged research articles that have been published on the NMF website on issues related to holistic maritime security. The current editions of the Maritime Perspectives 2025, compile articles covering the period 15 September 2024 to 30 September 2025 in six thematically focused areas. Some articles published by the NMF Research Faculty elsewhere are also reproduced with the permission of the original publisher.

The editors would like to acknowledge the special contributions of the production team, comprising the following:

Project Coordinator	: Captain Kamlesh K Agnihotri (Retd)
Cover Design	: Mr Chemi Rigzin
Research Support	: Ms Chitali Kohli, Ms Pavishyaa Balasubramanian
Administrative Support	: Captain YP Sharma, Digvijay Soam PO LOG(Mat), Mukesh Goswami LLOG(F&A)

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without prior permission of the editors and the publisher.

The views expressed in this volume are of the individual contributors and do not represent the official policy or position of the National Maritime Foundation, the Indian Navy, or the Government of India.

Published by:
NATIONAL MARITIME FOUNDATION
Varuna Complex, Airport Road,
NH-8, New Delhi-110 010

Printed by:
Alpha Graphics
6A/1, Ganga Chambers, W.E.A.,
Karol Bagh, New Delhi-110005

Foreword

The ocean functions as a connective rather than a divisive domain — its governance and security depend upon multilateral cooperation to ensure that this shared space remains peaceful, rules-based, and prosperous. Since the advent of the twenty-first century, the ownership of maritime security has progressively shifted from the exclusive domain of the State to the broader stewardship of multilateral constructs. Historically, States assumed primary responsibility for protecting sea lanes, countering piracy, and maintaining maritime law and order within their territorial waters and exclusive economic zones. However, the past two decades have witnessed a marked transformation in this paradigm — from State-centric control to collective, multilateral engagement. At a recent high-level open debate on maritime security, the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) Secretary-General, Arsenio Dominguez, aptly observed that *“multilateralism is key here; maritime security is a shared responsibility.”* This assertion underscores a critical reality: the pursuit of cooperative security at sea has become indispensable in light of the transnational, multidimensional, and increasingly complex nature of maritime threats. Challenges such as piracy, illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, maritime terrorism, cyber vulnerabilities, and environmental degradation transcend national jurisdictions, necessitating coordinated frameworks that integrate the capacities, information systems, and legal mechanisms of multiple States and institutions.

Consequently, multilateral constructs now serve as the principal vehicles for promoting maritime stability and resilience — transforming what was once a fragmented, State-driven endeavour into a collective enterprise grounded in shared responsibility and mutual security. Within India’s immediate and extended maritime strategic geography of the Indo-Pacific (comprising its eastern segment, namely the *Pacific* Ocean as well as its western segment, namely, the *Indian* Ocean) this shift is particularly evident. Over time, a range of multilateral and minilateral frameworks —

most notably the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), and the Forum for India–Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC) — have emerged as key instruments for advancing cooperative maritime security and governance. Though distinct in composition, mandate, and scope, each has progressively embedded the maritime domain at the core of its strategic agenda, reflecting a growing convergence between regional stability, sustainable development, and the security of the global commons. It is within this context that the first section of this volume, *Envisioning a Free, Open, and Secure Indo-Pacific through Collaborative Mechanisms*, offers a lucid and timely exploration of India’s engagement with emerging multilateral and minilateral frameworks that shape the region’s evolving maritime order.

The opening chapter, “*The Wilmington Declaration — Charting India’s Role in a Resilient and Cooperative Indo-Pacific*” by Captain KS Vikramaditya, situates the Quad as a cornerstone of contemporary maritime cooperation. It traces the grouping’s evolution from an informal dialogue to an operational mechanism that now drives regional initiatives such as the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) and MAITRI. Through these platforms, India’s leadership in capacity-building, technology sharing, and maritime training reflects a growing commitment to collective security and the maintenance of a rules-based order at sea. The subsequent chapter, “*Leveraging FIPIC for India’s Indo-Pacific Ambitions*” by Ms Kripa Anand, draws the reader’s attention to India’s engagement with the Pacific Island Countries. It repositions the “Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation” (FIPIC) not merely as a diplomatic forum but as a manifestation of South–South cooperation — one that underscores India’s role as a responsible development partner. By focusing upon climate resilience, renewable energy, digital connectivity, and maritime cooperation, the chapter demonstrates that the concept of a “*Free, Open, Inclusive, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific*” is as much about sustainable partnerships as it is about strategic balance. In the final paper of this section, entitled “*The Power of Three at Sea*”, the author, Ms Saaz Lahiri, demonstrates how trilateral partnerships — particularly that between India, France, and the UAE, and the one between India, France, and Australia — bridge the space between bilateral diplomacy and expansive multilateralism. These focused groupings enable agility, promote trust, and further

practical cooperation in areas such as maritime exercises, information-sharing, and protection of critical infrastructure such as subsea cables.

The next section, entitled, “*Invigorating Maritime Partnerships under India’s IORA Leadership*”, highlights the trajectory of India’s evolving maritime engagement — from its foundational leadership within IORA and cross-institutional collaboration with BIMSTEC, to the cultivation of new partnerships with extra-regional powers such as the Republic of Korea, and finally to the strengthening of capacity and capability in the Western Indian Ocean. As India prepares to assume the Chair of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) for the period 2025 to 2027, this section highlights the evolving contours of India’s maritime diplomacy, marked by a renewed emphasis on regional cooperation, partnership-building, and institutional consolidation across the Indian Ocean. Taken in aggregate, the four papers within this section illustrate how India’s leadership is set to guide IORA towards a more project-oriented and action-driven phase that bridges strategic vision with tangible implementation.

The opening paper, jointly penned by Mr John J Vachaparambil and Ms Muskan Rai is entitled “*IORA at 28: India’s Chairmanship and the Path Forward*”. It traces IORA’s institutional evolution and India’s long-standing engagement as a founding member and advocate of a ‘blue’ model of economic development. It argues that India’s chairmanship presents an opportunity to address key institutional challenges — funding shortfalls, procedural inertia, and limited coordination — and to build a more digital, financially resilient, and outcome-based IORA. The next piece, “*Operationalising the IORA–BIMSTEC MoU*” by Ms Muskan Rai, explores how partnerships can enhance IORA’s functional reach. The discussion on the IORA–BIMSTEC Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) situates this partnership within a wider framework of regional integration, identifying the Blue Economy, Marine Spatial Planning, and Climate Resilience as priority domains for joint action. In the third chapter, entitled “*Optimising the RoK’s Dialogue Partnership with IORA during India’s Chairmanship*” the author, Ms Arijita Sinha-Roy, situates Seoul’s engagement within its Indo-Pacific Strategy and ITEM framework, demonstrating how middle-power cooperation can support India’s IORA agenda through targeted investments, innovation, and capacity-building under the new Indian Ocean Cooperation Fund. The section concludes with Ms Anum Khan’s analysis of “*India’s Maritime Capacity-*

Building and Capability-Enhancement in the Western Indian Ocean” (WIO). She points out that through initiatives such as *IOS SAGAR* and *Exercise AIKEYME*, India has emerged as a “preferred security partner” in eastern Africa. The chapter emphasises the shift from donor-based capacity-building to the need for locally owned, needs-based approaches, focusing upon risk assessment, information-sharing, and legal harmonisation.

This final section, entitled “*Translating Vision into Action: IONS Comes of Age*”, builds upon the preceding discussions on India’s maritime partnerships under IORA and its broader Indo-Pacific engagements. It explores how India’s resumption of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) chairmanship for the 2025–27 cycle can consolidate its leadership across the institutional, operational, and strategic dimensions of maritime security cooperation. Taken in aggregate, the three chapters of this section, all of which have been penned by Ms Sruthylacshmi B Bhat, provide a comprehensive evaluation of how India’s chairmanship can reposition IONS as a more action-oriented and regionally responsive framework for cooperative maritime security. The section opens with a piece entitled “*Revitalising IONS: India at the Helm*”, which undertakes a critical institutional audit of IONS. It traces the forum’s evolution since its inception in 2008 and situates its role within the wider constellation of Indian Ocean and Indo-Pacific maritime architectures. The chapter identifies IONS’ enduring value as consultative mechanism — inclusive, apolitical, and geographically comprehensive — between the principal maritime-security agencies of the countries of the Indian Ocean, while simultaneously highlighting its structural limitations: an absence of a permanent secretariat, a lack of resource autonomy, minimal digital presence, and limited coordination with political-level bodies such as IORA. The author advocates an agenda of institutional renewal that prioritises deliverable-based engagement and sustained visibility.

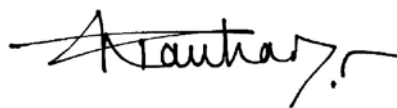
Building on this institutional groundwork, the subsequent chapters examine the regional contexts most critical to India’s chairmanship: West Asia and South Asia. The chapter on *Maritime Geostrategies of the West Asian* maps the evolving security calculus of Iran, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates — five IONS member States that collectively anchor the northwestern Indian Ocean. It examines the manner in which energy interdependence, chokepoint vulnerabilities,

and external military presences, have redefined the maritime balance in the region. The paper also highlights India's strategic opportunity to use IONS as a trust-building mechanism between rival regional actors, balancing engagement with Iran and the GCC States, while ensuring that the forum remains non-political, inclusive, and focused on collective maritime governance.

Sruthylacshmi's final chapter, *Maritime Geostrategies of the South Asian Littorals*, turns the analytical lens toward India's immediate neighbourhood — Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Bangladesh, and Pakistan — underscoring its centrality to India's maritime endeavours. Despite robust bilateral cooperation through exercises such as SLINEX, DOSTI, and BONGOSAGAR, as well as the commendable integration achieved through the "Information Fusion Centre–Indian Ocean Region" (IFC–IOR), South Asia's participation in IONS remains fragmented. The author proposes a more structured approach to embed regional priorities within IONS, recommending the establishment of a "South Asia Maritime Working Group", an IONS Capacity-Building Charter, and common Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for HADR, EEZ surveillance, and counter-IUU operations. She further recommends the introduction of an IONS Climate–Maritime Nexus Dialogue, aligning the forum's agenda with the existential challenges faced by Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and low-lying coastal nations.

The message that emerges from this volume is both pragmatic and forward-looking: that India's maritime rise is best expressed not through unilateralism, but through stewardship — through the ability to lead by building, to secure by sharing, and to prosper by cooperating. As the ocean that connects continues to define the destinies of its rim nations, India's task as a maritime leader is to ensure that this shared space remains inclusive.

Happy Reading! Sam no Varunah!



Vice Admiral Pradeep Chauhan
AVSM and Bar, VSM, IN (Retd)
Director-General
National Maritime Foundation

Contents

Foreword	iii
----------	-----

ENVISIONING A FREE, OPEN, AND SECURE INDO-PACIFIC THROUGH COLLABORATIVE MECHANISMS

The Wilmington Declaration — Charting India’s Role in a Resilient and Cooperative Indo-Pacific	3
<i>Captain KS Vikramaditya</i>	

Leveraging FIPIIC for India’s Indo-Pacific Ambitions	23
<i>Ms Kripa Anand</i>	

The Power of Three at Sea: India’s Trilateral Partnerships in Action	36
<i>Ms Saaz Lahiri</i>	

INVIGORATING MARITIME PARTNERSHIPS UNDER INDIA’S IORA LEADERSHIP

IORA at 28: India’s Chairmanship and the Path Forward	53
<i>Mr John J Vachaparambil and Ms Muskan Rai</i>	

Operationalising the IORA–BIMSTEC MoU	67
<i>Ms Muskan Rai</i>	

Optimising the RoK’s Dialogue Partnership with IORA during India’s Chairmanship	90
<i>Ms Arijita Sinha-Roy</i>	

India’s Maritime Capacity-Building and Capability-Enhancement in the Western Indian Ocean	102
<i>Ms Anum Khan</i>	

TRANSLATING VISION INTO ACTION: IONS COMES OF AGE

Revitalising IONS: India at the Helm	123
<i>Ms Sruthylacshmi B Bhat</i>	
Maritime Geostrategies of the IONS Participating Nations and Implications for India's Chairmanship 2025-27 (West Asian Littoral)	138
<i>Ms Sruthylacshmi B Bhat</i>	
Maritime Geostrategies of the IONS Participating Nations and Implications for India's Chairmanship 2025-27 (South Asian Littoral)	155
<i>Ms Sruthylacshmi B Bhat</i>	

*Envisioning a Free, Open, and
Secure Indo-Pacific through
Collaborative Mechanisms*

The Wilmington Declaration — Charting India's Role in a Resilient and Cooperative Indo-Pacific

Captain KS Vikramaditya

The Indo-Pacific encompasses diverse economies, complex security challenges, and critical sea lanes essential for global trade. The region has emerged as a central theatre of geopolitical competition, characterised by strategic rivalries, territorial disputes, and economic coercion.¹ Increasing Chinese assertiveness in the South and East China Seas, alongside grey-zone activities such as illegal fishing and maritime militia operations, has heightened regional tensions.² These developments have, for some time now, underscored the need for a unified response to safeguard navigational freedoms, uphold international law, and support smaller nations in resisting coercive pressures. The Quad is a significant manifestation of this requirement.³

Evolution of the Quad

Initially established as an informal dialogue following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami,⁴ the Quad was revitalised in 2017, with an enhanced focus on ensuring a “free and open Indo-Pacific.” Over the years, the Quad’s collaborative agenda has expanded significantly,⁵ addressing diverse security and resilience concerns — including maritime domain awareness, infrastructure development, disaster response, and economic security — and addressing both immediate and long-term regional challenges. However, the Quad remains a non-military construct, limiting its direct security engagements and emphasising instead, cooperative measures that reinforce regional sovereignty and stability.

The Wilmington Summit

The sixth Quad Leaders' Summit, held in Wilmington, Delaware, on the 21st of September 2024, marked a pivotal moment for collaboration within the grouping. The joint statement released at the end of the summit, now being referred to as the "Wilmington Declaration",⁶ provides a roadmap for the Quad's unified approach to maritime security, upholding international law, and addressing threats through joint initiatives. Emphasising the principles of peace, stability, and cooperation, the declaration highlights several areas that are critical for sustaining the Indo-Pacific's security architecture, including support for the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), capacity-building for regional maritime partners, and technological investments in surveillance and infrastructure resilience. Since the Indo-Pacific is primarily (although not exclusively) a maritime geography, it is only natural that the primary focus of the Quad's varied endeavours remain maritime.

This paper, referencing the Wilmington Declaration, will examine the Quad's evolving role, and highlight India's potential contributions, particularly its leadership of the Maritime Initiative for Training in the Indo-Pacific (MAITRI), and its prospective roles within the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA), underwater infrastructure protection, and climate-resilient infrastructure development. By analysing the Quad's strategic imperatives and limitations, the paper will propose actionable pathways for advancing a resilient, cooperative, and rules-based Indo-Pacific through India's proactive engagement. It would be prudent to take forward this discussion in terms of the four primary themes related to the maritime domain, that were touched upon during the Quad Summit.

Theme 1: Maritime Security

The Wilmington Declaration explicitly brings out that the Quad comprises *four leading maritime democracies* in the Indo-Pacific, each of which emphasises peace and stability across the region as being indispensable for global security and stability.⁷ The declaration thus lays preminent importance upon maritime security, within which it touches upon several ongoing and future initiatives.

Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA)

The Wilmington Declaration details the Quad’s significant effort to bolster maritime domain awareness (MDA) through the IPMDA. MDA is essential for safeguarding maritime territories, especially for monitoring EEZs to detect illegal fishing, unregistered vessels, and other unlawful activities.⁸ Since the programme’s inception, the IPMDA has expanded its network across various regional hubs, including the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency (PIFFA) and the Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR). This expansion allows over two dozen countries to gain access to critical data on “dark vessels” — ships that deliberately disable their tracking systems to avoid detection.⁹ By providing these partners with real-time, integrated information, the Quad enhances their ability to enforce maritime laws within their waters. Prospective collaboration includes the sharing of satellite data, training in data analysis, and integration with local coast guard and naval operations.¹⁰ Further, over the coming year, Quad partners intend to layer modern technology and data into the IPMDA, thereby continuing to deliver cutting-edge capability and information to the region. India can play a defining role in the fruition of the IPMDA to its envisaged levels.

India’s robust space and satellite capabilities, notably through the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), and ongoing Space Based Surveillance (SBS) programmes,¹¹ would allow New Delhi to contribute advanced monitoring and surveillance data within the IPMDA. Such collaboration would not only strengthen regional security but also position India as a key technology partner and enabler, offering capacity and/ or capability to the Indo-Pacific nations that may not have access to cost-effective and high-quality surveillance tools. Further, the IFC-IOR, with its global linkages,¹² is well placed to function as the IPMDA Hub for the Indo-Pacific. Towards this, the Centre would be well advised to increase its focus from just the IOR to the wider Indo-Pacific — by hosting International Liaison Officers (ILOs) from South Pacific Island nations and developing linkages with all the IFCs in the broader region, including the Pacific Fusion Centre Vanuatu and the PIFFA.¹³ However, providing capacity would not, by itself, be enough. The success of the IPMDA would also depend upon imparting relevant training and other measures

aimed at capability-enhancement. These measures would be covered in subsequent sections of the paper.

Maritime Initiative for Training in the Indo-Pacific (MAITRI)

The Maritime Initiative for Training in the Indo-Pacific (MAITRI) represents a proactive training programme that is focused on empowering Indo-Pacific countries to leverage MDA tools, especially those provided by the IPMDA and other Quad initiatives.¹⁴ Such training would include strategies for monitoring maritime spaces, securing maritime territories, and deterring illegal activities.

India is scheduled to host the first MAITRI workshop in 2025.¹⁵ This underscores not only the Quad's commitment to regional capacity building, where nations gain both practical and technological skills necessary for maritime security enforcement, but also presents India with an opportunity to leverage its substantial capacities and capabilities in this field.

The IFC-IOR would thus become India's early contribution for MDA-related training and analytics, to speed-up timelines for operationalising MAITRI. At this juncture, it would be prudent to also mention the "Regional Maritime Security Centre of Excellence" (RMSCE)¹⁶ that is being established at New Delhi under the Maritime Security pillar of the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI).¹⁷ The RMSCE is an India-UK initiative to address common challenges via capability-enhancement. Both constructs would need to synergise their activities towards covering the entire gamut of training that would further the concept of *holistic* maritime security.

India has long been addressing the requirements of partners on a bilateral basis through Mobile Training Teams (MTTs),¹⁸ which provide *in situ* training to partner States. Dovetailing this concept with MAITRI, especially for small island nations of the IOR and the Pacific, would yield substantial benefits. This also presents the opportunity to put in place a number of multinational MTTs, comprising members drawn from amongst Quad members. These could, at a later stage, be supplemented by members from other countries of the Indo-Pacific, imparting this concept with a regional and collaborative flavour of inclusivity. This would also result in substantial

capability-enhancement, as also cultural sensitisation amongst the Quad members themselves.

Quad Maritime Legal Dialogue

The Wilmington Declaration mentions the launch of the Quad Maritime Legal Dialogue to support efforts to uphold the rules-based maritime order in the Indo-Pacific.¹⁹ It may be discerned that this is a direct outcome of the active and widespread use of *lawfare* by China,²⁰ especially in (but not limited-to) the South China Sea, where through twisting of historical facts, and interpreting international maritime law as per its convenience, China claims and seeks to exert control over almost 85% of this sea.²¹ Another way in which China convolutes maritime law is by the widespread use of “grey zone” activities²² against its adversaries, a majority of whom are unable to respond because of a large differential in comprehensive national power.

China’s increasing presence in the IOR (warships, research and survey vessels, and fishing boats),²³ and its proclivity for stretching the boundaries of law, is of concern to India, too. India must, therefore, wholeheartedly support this dialogue, lest Chinese actions to shape ‘new normal’ succeed, with adverse impact upon regional maritime security. In addition to publicising all such incidents of transgression immediately, Quad countries could establish a standing legal cell that would provide support and advice to help regional partners uphold their sovereign rights and address maritime disputes legally, in the face of Chinese coercion. It would also be prudent to synergise the activities of the legal dialogue with those of MAITRI, with each supplementing the other.

Quad-at-Sea Ship Observer Mission

The “Quad-at-Sea Ship Observer Mission” planned for 2025, involving coast guards from the US, Japan, Australia, and India, would enhance interoperability and strengthen a coordinated response to maritime security threats.²⁴ Such missions could include joint training exercises, shared patrol operations, and collaborative responses to piracy, illegal fishing, and other non-traditional maritime security threats.

The proposed “Indian Ocean Ship” programme,²⁵ wherein India would assign a dedicated warship to conduct EEZ patrols in the small island nations of the Indian Ocean, could be synergised with the Ship Observer Mission, so as to ensure deconfliction and maximise geographical coverage. These endeavours must plough back seamlessly into both IPMDA and MAITRI, towards creation of a self-sustaining, virtuous feedback-and-action loop.

Theme 2: Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR)

The Quad’s HADR initiative has its roots in the historic collaboration among these nations during the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and *tsunami* response.²⁶ Building upon that legacy, the Quad’s recent HADR efforts are now more formalised under the “Quad Partnership on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief in the Indo-Pacific.” This formal partnership is structured to enable rapid coordination among the four nations in the event of natural disasters in the Indo-Pacific, whose frequency is now higher and whose effects are increasingly severe, largely due to climate change and environmental challenges.²⁷

In 2022, the Quad countries established operational guidelines for the Quad HADR partnership.²⁸ These guidelines outline protocols for immediate communication, task allocation, and resource sharing, to maximise the speed and efficiency of response efforts. This protocol enables a faster, more cohesive response, ensuring that essential relief supplies, personnel, and logistics are deployed promptly to areas in need. This foundational coordination reflects the Quad’s commitment to addressing disaster vulnerability and improving resilience across the region.

The Wilmington Declaration, in continuation of the existing structure, lays stress on the “pre-positioning of essential relief supplies.”²⁹ Strategically pre-positioned relief supplies across Indo-Pacific nations would ensure that response times are minimised. Quad nations could enhance regional capacity by providing logistic support, essential goods, and medical resources, pre-emptively in disaster-prone areas.

Collaborative disaster response is essential to address emergencies, which often overwhelm the capacities of individual countries. In cases such as the landslide

in Papua New Guinea and Typhoon *Yagi* in Vietnam, the Quad demonstrated its capability for joint response.³⁰ This coordinated approach, whereby combined resources and expertise are brought to bear, is especially relevant to complex emergencies that require sustained relief and recovery support, thereby reducing the burden on any one country and providing a robust, multilateral response to regional needs.

The launch of the “Quad Indo-Pacific Logistics Network” (QIPLN), mentioned in the Wilmington Declaration, is particularly significant in the context of collaborative HADR. Recognising the logistical challenges posed by the vast and dispersed geography of the Indo-Pacific, the QIPLN focuses on enhancing shared airlift capacity among the four nations, allowing them to mobilise resources more effectively and reach disaster-stricken areas faster.³¹ This initiative leverages each country’s logistical strengths, offering collective capabilities for a rapid and scalable response during crises. This network aims to leverage shared airlift capacity to support rapid civilian disaster response and quick deployment of aid.

India, due to its strategic position and infrastructure of a high order, is suitably placed to play a pivotal role in terms of acting as a HADR logistic hub, especially for the IOR. Since effective HADR is contingent on quick response, alongside the above two endeavours, customs and regulatory harmonisation, and digital logistics platforms need to be promoted in all earnest for smooth and effective movements of supplies.³² This also presents the opportunity of exploring synergies with India’s “*Gati Shakti*”³³ and the “National Logistics Portal (Marine)”³⁴ for further optimisation. Further, India could examine whether the NLP digital platform could be used as a model for deployment of a similar platform under the aegis of QIPLN. At a later stage, other regional stakeholders could be brought into the QIPLN architecture, ensuring that the logistics network is not just Quad-centred but also has more inclusive regional participation, including, for example, the ASEAN member-States.

The time has also come for integrating other countries that have the required capacity and capability, into the Quad HADR framework. In this regard, countries such as South Korea, Singapore, and Indonesia, are particularly relevant.

HADR is a domain that requires specialised training, including cultural sensitisation.³⁵ Once again, India, because of its location, cultural diversity, and

other resident strengths, is optimally placed to take a lead in this activity. The Quad could think of setting up an HADR Centre of Excellence in India, which would undertake training, articulation of standards and SOPs, and predictive analytics in terms of foretelling the occurrence of extreme weather events and natural calamities.

Considering the importance of the subject, and the prospective long-term strategic benefits that could accrue, it is recommended that the Government of India (GoI) set up a multi-domain task group to examine the issues brought out above. This would also align with India's lead of the IPOI pillar of "Disaster Risk Management".³⁶ Conceptual support for this endeavour, under its mandate of furthering holistic maritime security, would be provided by the RMSCE.

Theme 3: Quality Infrastructure

The Wilmington Declaration articulates the Quad's commitment to improved regional connectivity through the development of infrastructure that is not only of high quality but also ranks high on resilience, too. As part of this, the declaration highlighted certain key areas that are progressing.

The Quad Ports of the Future Partnership

The Quad Ports of the Future Partnership represents a significant strategic initiative aimed at enhancing the resilience, sustainability, and security of port infrastructure across the Indo-Pacific region.³⁷ This initiative aims to leverage the collective expertise and resources of Quad members to foster the development of high-quality, climate-resilient port facilities that are based on the principles of sustainability and designed to withstand both, natural disasters and other disruptions/ threats.³⁸ The partnership emphasises the importance of regional collaboration, knowledge sharing, and the mobilisation of both public and private sector investments. As part of this broader effort, the Quad, through the Wilmington Declaration, also recognises the integral role of digital infrastructure in supporting modern port operations, with particular attention to cybersecurity and undersea cable connectivity, underscoring the interconnectedness of the region's physical and digital infrastructure.³⁹

It is significant that the Declaration brings out that a “Quad Regional Ports and Transportation Conference” would be hosted by India at Mumbai in 2025.⁴⁰ This presents an opportunity for India to showcase its expertise in the development of infrastructure that is customised to the requirements of the region, and more importantly, is affordable. The recently commissioned Vizhinjam Port presents a model for the region in terms of green port initiatives and sustainable practices.⁴¹ This workshop also presents the opportunity to highlight India’s willingness and capability in promoting climate resilient infrastructure in the Indo-Pacific, wherein the following are particularly relevant:

- (a) India needs to take a leadership role in the Quad’s efforts to build climate-resilient infrastructure by sharing its own expertise in sustainable development and climate adaptation. This programme could focus on climate-proofing ports, coastal cities, and transportation networks to withstand extreme weather events — a priority for island nations and low-lying coastal areas in the Indo-Pacific.⁴²
- (b) India’s advances in solar, wind, and hydrogen technologies provide an opportunity to lead renewable energy projects across the Indo-Pacific.⁴³ By providing affordable, sustainable energy solutions for climate-resilient infrastructure, such as solar-powered backup systems in ports or solar arrays in island nations, India can help these countries mitigate energy disruptions and reduce dependency on traditional energy sources. India could also showcase its use of low temperature thermal desalination⁴⁴ technology in the Lakshadweep islands for adoption by small island nations of both the Indian Ocean and also those of the South Pacific.
- (c) India must aspire to become a regional leader, and a hub for imparting training on climate-resilient and sustainable infrastructure. This may require the setting-up of a dedicated facility, which could be undertaken in consonance with the other Quad members and institutional linkages with organisations such as the CDRI⁴⁵ and the International Solar Alliance. Dovetailing such endeavours with broader programs such as the Blue Dot Network,⁴⁶ the Bring Back a Better World initiative, and the EU’s “Global Gateway”⁴⁷ programme would help leverage complementary benefits.

Quad Partnership for Cable Connectivity and Resilience

The Wilmington Declaration recognises and reaffirms the criticality of the capacity, durability, and reliability of undersea cable networks to the security and the prosperity of not only the Indo-Pacific, but also the entire world.⁴⁸ The Declaration highlights the increasing relevance of the Quad.

Partnership for Cable Connectivity and Resilience. In this context, the Declaration brings out the constructive role being played by the Australian Cable Connectivity and Resilience Centre,⁴⁹ and the role being played by Quad in enhancing cable connectivity across the Indo-Pacific. The Declaration also makes a mention of the feasibility study commissioned by India to examine the expansion of undersea cable maintenance and repair capabilities in the Indo-Pacific.

The Wilmington Declaration also brings out the inherent vulnerability of undersea cables to cyber threats. Towards this, there is active engagement in taking forward the Quad Action Plan to Protect Commercial Undersea Telecommunications Cables, which has been developed by the Quad Senior Cyber Group.

Recognising the criticality of uninterrupted undersea communications to national security, it is in India's interest that it develops organic capacity and capability in repairing undersea cables. This would require suitable seagoing platforms, and relevant expertise in terms of trained human resources. Most cable manufacturers and consortiums involved in cable laying operations are of Western origin (mostly from the US).⁵⁰ India must leverage its position in the Quad to develop the required human resources. Along with this, it would be prudent to convert at least two Offshore Support Vessels (OSVs) into Cable Repair Ships. While this would depend on commercial considerations, the fact that China is investing heavily in cable repair capacity building,⁵¹ makes this even more meaningful. Private players backed by suitable sovereign risk mitigation arrangements could be encouraged to take forward such an endeavour. Further, the backing of the Quad towards recognising such a facility as not only an alternative, but also an addition to existing cable repair arrangements, especially in the Indian Ocean, would reap very substantive and substantial dividends.

India must contribute its expertise to Quad-led initiatives that are focused upon improving the cyber resilience of undersea cables, by providing technical knowledge and sharing best practices. Further, India should aspire to play a defining role in defining cybersecurity standards and protocols for subsea cables. These would help India gain a stake in digital and cyber governance within the region.⁵²

India's participation in the **Quad Cable Connectivity and Resilience Partnership** offers a multitude of opportunities. By taking an active role in infrastructure development, cybersecurity, research, and regional cooperation, India can help enhance the resilience of global undersea cables while positioning itself as a digital leader in the Indo-Pacific. This initiative would also align well with India's broader geopolitical and economic objectives, such as improving connectivity, fostering digital inclusion, and strengthening strategic alliances with the Quad, as also with other regional partners.

Theme 4: Working Together to Address Regional and Global Issues

The Wilmington Declaration reaffirmed the Quad's unwavering support for the concept of ASEAN centrality and its leadership role in the East Asia Summit (EAS).⁵³ The Declaration was explicit in its support for the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). The Declaration also brought out the lead role of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), and support for the "2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent", which lays great emphasis on climate action, ocean health, resilient infrastructure, maritime security, and financial integrity.⁵⁴ The importance of IORA and the role played by India in finalising the IORA Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (IOIP) were also mentioned.⁵⁵

This Quad theme is in complete consonance with India's own maritime policy of "Security and Growth for All in the Region" (SAGAR), now "Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across the Regions"⁵⁶ and consequently, the "Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative" (IPOI), which provides first-order specificity to SAGAR. It would thus be prudent for India to identify points of congruence between the IPOI, the AOIP and the IOIP, and prioritise projects that leverage the consensus provided by the three political constructs that have formulated these separate yet

similar outlooks for the Indo-Pacific.⁵⁷ This would assist in removing the existing confusion and, to an extent, the competition that exists within these endeavours, and help synergise activities on the ground. Towards this, India could take the lead in setting up a coordination group comprising members from countries invested in these three initiatives and aimed at identifying complementarities, achieving synergy, and deconflicting projects. This would facilitate a holistic and comprehensive approach to all-round development in the Indo-Pacific and is especially relevant considering that India is set to assume the chair of IORA in 2025.⁵⁸

The Wilmington Declaration also brings out the importance of maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific and the rules-based international order. Without explicitly naming China, it clearly articulates its concerns regarding coercive, intimidating, and aggressive actions in the East and South China seas, disruption of offshore resource exploitation activities, and the dangerous use of coast guard and maritime militia — all a clear denunciation of Chinese activities. The most pertinent aspect of this theme is that the Quad has unambiguously brought out the indisputable legal validity of the 2016 Arbitral Award on the South China Sea.⁵⁹ This is of considerable significance, since it indicates that India has, perhaps for the first time, clearly articulated its stand on this issue.

Considering China's propensity for, and extensive use of *lawfare*, India would be well advised to maintain a proactive stance in bringing transparency to Chinese attempts at obfuscating legal positions to its advantage. This is even more relevant in view of increasing Chinese presence in the IOR, and its geoeconomic interests therein.

The Trump Factor

The re-election of Donald Trump to the US presidency presents a multifaceted yet complex opportunity for the Quad as it navigates the evolving security architecture of the Indo-Pacific. It needs to be appreciated that the first Trump presidency (2017–2021) had a significant and positive impact on the development and strategic cohesion of the Quad. Under President Trump, the United States shifted its foreign policy focus toward countering China's rising influence,⁶⁰ especially in the Indo-

Pacific. This priority aligned closely with the goals of the Quad. It was during the Trump presidency that the Quad, which was initially formed in 2007, was revived and institutionalised. While President Trump's approach invigorated the Quad, certain policies, such as a transactional approach to diplomacy⁶¹ and his scepticism towards multilateralism, have led to questions being raised on long-term US engagement in the Quad.

On the other hand, given President Trump's historical focus on countering China's influence, it is likely that the second Trump administration would maintain, if not escalate, efforts to align Quad countries in strategic competition with China. His second term could favourably impact the Quad by consolidating efforts against China's influence, strengthening strategic ties, and broadening the Quad's scope.

Conclusion

The Wilmington Declaration, especially in the maritime domain, encourages an integrated and complementary approach to holistic maritime security. The protection of undersea infrastructure and maritime domain awareness is one such complementarity. While the IPMDA focuses upon real-time surface-level maritime monitoring, undersea cable protection ensures the integrity of critical underwater infrastructure. Together, they embody a holistic strategy that accounts for both, the security of physical assets (such as data cables) and the ability to monitor and respond to surface-level maritime activities. Similarly, there is a natural synergy between HADR and MDA initiatives. For instance, the IPMDA's real-time tracking technology could be used not only for monitoring illegal activities but also for tracking weather patterns, storm formations, or emergency situations at sea. In times of crisis, this data can be shared with regional partners, helping to inform decisions regarding evacuation, search and rescue, and relief operations.

In summary, the Wilmington Declaration articulates a clear stance in favour of maintaining stability, legality, and cooperative holistic-security efforts in the Indo-Pacific. The Quad's initiatives demonstrate a unified approach to counter illegal maritime activities, build regional capacity, and foster adherence to international law. Through collaborative tools, training programmes, and legal frameworks, the

Quad seeks to empower Indo-Pacific countries to uphold their maritime rights and enhance collective security, ensuring that the region remains open, secure, and resilient against external pressures.

The Wilmington Declaration has firmly established the Quad’s intent to deepen cooperation across a broad spectrum of issues — ranging from maritime security to resilient supply chains, critical and emerging technologies, and climate adaptation. However, it is highly likely that US foreign policy could face a major recalibration in consonance with President Trump’s views on each of these individual subjects (his recalcitrance on climate adaptation is especially well known) and could alter the Quad’s trajectory, demanding both strategic foresight and pragmatic adaptation from member States.

India, because of its strategic location, the feeling of trust and dependability that it evokes from the Global South, its substantial capacity and capability in practically all the issues being addressed by the Quad, and its unique competitive advantage as a low-cost manufacturing and services hub, is well placed to take advantage of the opportunities presented by the September 2024 Quad Leaders’ Summit. If India aspires to become a part of the select group of countries that formulates norms, sets agendas, and wields discursive power, New Delhi must step forward and go the extra mile in leveraging these advantages and attempt to take a pre-eminent position in each of the lines of effort articulated in the Wilmington Declaration.

25 December 2024

ENDNOTES

- 1 Robert Beckman, “The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and the Maritime Disputes in the South China Sea.” *American Journal of International Law* 107, no. 1 (2013): 142–163. <https://doi.org/10.5305/amerjintelaw.107.1.0142>.
- 2 Cameron Smith, “Countering China’s Grey-Zone Diplomacy”, Australian Institute of International Affairs, Australian Outlook, 08 February 2022. <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/countering-chinas-grey-zone-diplomacy/>.
- 3 Sheila A Smith, “The Quad in the Indo-Pacific: What to Know”, *Council on Foreign Relations*, 27 May 2021. <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/quad-indo-pacific-what-know>.

- 4 “What’s the 4-nation Quad, and where did it come from?”, *The Economic Times ePaper*, 24 May 2022. https://economictimes.indiatimes.com//news/defence/whats-the-4-nation-quad-and-where-did-it-come-from/articleshow/91772674.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst.
- 5 Garima Mohan, Kristi Govella, “The Future of the Quad and the Emerging Architecture in the Indo-Pacific”, *German Marshall Fund of the United States*, 21 June 2022, <https://www.gmfus.org/news/future-quad-and-emerging-architecture-indo-pacific>.
- 6 Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, “The Wilmington Declaration Joint Statement from the Leaders of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States” *Media Centre*, 21 September 2024. <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/38320/>
- 7 *Op Cit*. “The Wilmington Declaration Joint Statement from the Leaders of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States”.
- 8 Xidi Chen, Xudong Zhang , Qi Xu, “The implications of the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) in the South China Sea: A Chinese perspective”, *Marine Policy*, Volume 167, September 2024, 106247. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0308597X24002458>.
- 9 *Op Cit*. “The Wilmington Declaration Joint Statement from the Leaders of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States”.
- 10 David Brewster, Simon Bateman, “Maritime Domain Awareness”, *Australian National University, National Security College, Report*, September 2024. https://nsc.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/2024-10/WEB%20UPDATED_NSC_MDA_Report_2024_V2_0.pdf.
- 11 Surendra Singh, “CCS Approves Launch of 52 Spy Satellites for Rs 27,000 Crore to Boost Space Surveillance”, *The Times of India*, 12 October 2024. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/ccs-approves-launch-of-52-spy-satellites-for-rs-27000-crore-to-boost-space-surveillance/articleshow/114158442.cms>.
- 12 Commodore Ranjit B Rai, “Guardians Of The Indian Ocean: How India’s IFC-IOR Is Transforming Maritime Security – Analysis”, *Eurasia Review*, 08 August 2024. <https://www.eurasiareview.com/08082024-guardians-of-the-indian-ocean-how-indias-ifc-ior-is-transforming-maritime-security-analysis/>.
- 13 Pacific Fusion Centre. <https://www.pacificfusioncentre.org/>.
- 14 ANI, “Quad Launches MAITRI Maritime Initiative in Indo-Pacific; India to Host First Training Workshop in 2025”, *The Economic Times*, 23 September 2024. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/quad-launches-maitri-maritime-initiative->

in-indo-pacific-india-to-host-first-training-workshop-in-2025/articleshow/113585927.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst.

- 15 *Op Cit.* “The Wilmington Declaration Joint Statement from the Leaders of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States”.
- 16 *The author is a Senior Fellow at the NMF and has been an integral part of the process of establishing the RMSCE.*
- 17 Vice Admiral Girish Luthra, “As it Completes Five Years, it’s Time to Take the IPOI to the Next Level”, *ORF Raisina Debates*, 09 September 2024. <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/as-it-completes-five-years-it-s-time-to-take-the-ipoi-to-the-next-level>.
- 18 Shankul Bhandare, “Indian Team Completes Training of Malagasy Special Forces in Madagascar,” *DefenceXP*, 30 March 2021. <https://www.defencexp.com/indian-team-completes-training-of-malagasy-special-forces-in-madagascar/>.
- 19 *Op Cit.* “The Wilmington Declaration Joint Statement from the Leaders of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States”.
- 20 P Charon and J-B Jeangène Vilmer, “Chinese Influence Operations: A Machiavellian Moment”, *Report by the Institute for Strategic Research (IRSEM)*, Paris, Ministry for the Armed Forces, October 2021. <https://www.irsem.fr/report.html>.
- 21 Study by Office of Ocean and Polar Affairs Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs US Department of State, “Limits in the Seas, No 143, China: Maritime Claims in the South China Sea”, 05 December 2014. <http://www.state.gov/e/oes/ocns/opa/c16065.htm>.
- 22 Bonny Lin, Cristina L Garafola, Bruce McClintock, Jonah Blank, Jeffrey W Hornung, Karen Schwindt, Jennifer DP Moroney, Paul Orner, Dennis Borrman, Sarah W Denton, et al, “A New Framework for Understanding and Countering China’s Gray Zone Tactics”, *RAND Research Summary*, 30 March 2022. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RBA594-1.html.
- 23 Amrita Nayak Dutta, “Uptick in Chinese Vessels’ Presence in Indian Ocean Region: Official”, *The Indian Express*, 11 December 2024. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/chinese-vessels-presence-in-indian-ocean-region-9237134/>.
- 24 *Op Cit.* “The Wilmington Declaration Joint Statement from the Leaders of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States”.
- 25 Presentation by Indian Navy during the Goa Naval Symposium on 23 November 2024.
- 26 Manjari Chatterjee Miller, “The Quad, AUKUS, and India’s Dilemmas”, *Council on Foreign Relations, Asia Program*, 13 October 2021. <https://www.cfr.org/article/quad-aucus-and-indias-dilemmas>.

- 27 Christopher Chen, “CO22119: The Quad and HADR Operations: Prospects for Cooperation with Southeast Asia”, *RSiS*, 21 November 2022. <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/nts/the-quad-and-hadr-operations-prospects-for-cooperation-with-southeast-asia/>.
- 28 Office of the Spokesperson, “Guidelines for Quad Partnership on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) in the Indo-Pacific”, *US Department of State*, 23 September 2022. <https://www.state.gov/guidelines-for-quad-partnership-on-humanitarian-assistance-and-disaster-relief-hadr-in-the-indo-pacific/>.
- 29 *Op Cit.* “The Wilmington Declaration Joint Statement from the Leaders of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States”.
- 30 Robert Mizo, “The Quad Shows Concern over Climate Change as Security Threat”, *The Japan Times*, 09 October 2024. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/commentary/2024/10/09/japan/quad-summit-climate-change-security/>.
- 31 *Op Cit.* “The Wilmington Declaration Joint Statement from the Leaders of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States”.
- 32 Idris Aida, Saiful Nizam Che Soh, “The Relative Effects of Logistics, Coordination and Human Resource on Humanitarian Aid and Disaster Relief Mission Performance”, *The South East Asian Journal of Management* 8(2):87-103, October 2014. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/302960060_The_Relative_effects_of_logistics_coordination_and_human_resource_on_humanitarian_aid_and_disaster_relief_mission_performance.
- 33 Government of India, “About PM Gati Shakti,” Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade. https://ne.pmgatishakti.gov.in/DoNER/about_pmgati.
- 34 Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, “Shri Sarbananda Sonowal Inaugurates National Logistics Portal-Marine, a Single Window Logistics Portal to reduce the Logistics Cost”, *Press Information Bureau*, 27 January 2023. <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1894117>.
- 35 NDMA, “Guidelines on International Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR)”, October 2024. http://www.ndma.gov.in/sites/default/files/PDF/Guidelines/HADR_Guideline_Oct_2024.pdf.
- 36 *Op Cit.* “As it completes five years, it’s time to take the IPOI to the next level”.
- 37 Aagya Gupta, “India’s QUAD Strategy”, *E-international Relations*, 22 October 2024. <https://www.e-ir.info/2024/10/22/indias-quad-strategy/>.
- 38 Harsh V Pant, “The Quad has Defied Critics”, *Observer Research Foundation*, 26 September 2024. <https://www.orfonline.org/english/research/the-quad-has-defied-critics>.

- 39 *Op Cit.* “The Wilmington Declaration Joint Statement from the Leaders of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States”.
- 40 *Op Cit.* “The Wilmington Declaration Joint Statement from the Leaders of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States”.
- 41 Heena Ojha, “Location, Infrastructure, Economic Impact — What Puts Vizhinjam International Port in Spotlight”, *NDTV Profit*, 12 July 2024. <https://www.ndtvprofit.com/economy-finance/vizhinjam-international-port-in-spotlight-due-to-location-infrastructure-economic-impact>.
- 42 P Wong, IJ Losada, J-P Gattuso, J Hinkel, A Khattabi, KL McInnes, Y Saito, and A Sallenger, “Coastal Systems and Low-Lying Areas.” *Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability. Part A: Global and Sectoral Aspects. Contribution of Working Group II to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, edited by CB Field, VR Barros, DJ Dokken, KJ Mach, MD Mastrandrea, TE Bilir, M Chatterjee, KL Ebi, YO Estrada, RC Genova, B Girma, ES Kissel, AN Levy, S MacCracken, PR Mastrandrea, and LL White, 361–409. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/2018/02/WGIIAR5-Chap5_FINAL.pdf.
- 43 Maciej Kolaczowski, Debmalya Sen, Jeremy Williams, “How India is Emerging as an Advanced Energy Superpower”, *World Economic Forum*, 27 May 2024. <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2024/05/india-emerging-advanced-energy-superpower/>.
- 44 Ministry of Earth Sciences, Government of India, “Success of Low Temperature Thermal Desalination Technology,” *PIB*, 29 August 2011. <https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=75249>.
- 45 United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, “The Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI)”. <https://sdgs.un.org/partnerships/coalition-disaster-resilient-infrastructure-cdri>.
- 46 US Department of State, “Blue Dot Network. <https://www.state.gov/blue-dot-network/>.
- 47 European Union, “Global gateway Overview.” https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/global-gateway/global-gateway-overview_en.
- 48 *Op Cit.* “The Wilmington Declaration Joint Statement from the Leaders of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States”.
- 49 Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Government of Australia, “Launch of the Cable Connectivity and Resilience Centre”, *Media Release*, 29 July 2024. <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/penny-wong/media-release/launch-cable-connectivity-and-resilience-centre>.

- 50 Joe Brock, “US and China Wage War Beneath the Waves – Over Internet Cables”, *Reuters Special Report*, 24 March 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/us-china-tech-cables/>.
- 51 Soham Agarwal, “Enhancing Capacity-of and Capabilities-in Repair of Submarine Communication Cables through International Cooperation”, National Maritime Foundation, 14 May 2024. <https://maritimeindia.org/enhancing-capacity-of-and-capabilities-in-repair-of-submarine-communication-cables-through-international-cooperation/>.
- 52 Dr Greta Nabbs-Keller, “Cyber Security Governance in the Indo-Pacific Policy Futures in Australia, Indonesia, and the Pacific”, *The University of Queensland, Policy Futures*, May 2021. https://policy-futures.centre.uq.edu.au/files/9577/Policy%20Futures_Cyber%20Security%20Indo%20Pacific_May21.pdf.
- 53 Rahman Yaacob, “The Translator: ASEAN Centrality”, *The Interpreter, Lowy Institute*, 04 April 2024. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/translator-asean-centrality>.
- 54 Sione Tekiteki, “2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent & Pacific Roadmap for Sustainable Development”, *Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat*. https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/event-documents/Session%202%20-%20Regional%20coherence%20and%20sustainable%20development_%5BPIFS%5D_1.pdf.
- 55 *Op Cit*. “The Wilmington Declaration Joint Statement from the Leaders of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States”.
- 56 Commander Subhasish Sarangi, “Unpacking SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region),” *USI Occasional-Paper 2-19*. https://www.usiofindia.org/images/uploads/2020/02/USI-Occasional-Paper_2_19-Unpacking-SAGAR-Final-print-File-1.pdf.
- 57 Pradeep Chauhan, Prabir De, Sarabjeet Singh Parmar, Durairaj Kumarasamy, “Indo-Pacific Cooperation: AOIP and IPOI”, *RIS, AIC Working Paper No 3*, October 2020. https://aseanindiacentre.org.in/sites/default/files/Publication/AIC%20Working%20Paper%20October%202020_0.pdf
- 58 IORA. <https://www.iora.int/council-ministers>.
- 59 *Op Cit*. “The Wilmington Declaration Joint Statement from the Leaders of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States”.
- 60 Council on Foreign Relations, “2017 – 2020: Trump’s Foreign Policy Moments”. <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/trumps-foreign-policy-moments>.
- 61 Joseph S Nye, Jr, “Trump’s transactional myopia”, *ASPI, The Strategist*, 05 February 2020. <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/trumps-transactional-myopia/>

About the Author:

Captain KS Vikramaditya is a serving officer of the Indian Navy, currently on appointment to the National Maritime Foundation, where he is a Senior Fellow. His research interests are wide and varied and he supplements his formidable academic credentials with his perspectives as an experienced practitioner. His present research focus is on the manner in which India's own maritime geostrategies are (or are likely to be) impacted by those formulated and executed by the People's Republic of China. He may be contacted at: indopac10.nmf@gmail.com

Leveraging FIPIC for India’s Indo-Pacific Ambitions

Ms Kripa Anand

The “Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation” (FIPIC) was established in 2014 as a strategic initiative by India to strengthen its diplomatic, economic, and cultural engagement with the Pacific Island Countries (PICs). FIPIC comprises 14 Pacific Island nations — Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu.¹ These countries hold geostrategic significance due to their location, maritime resources, and votes in international forums such as the United Nations. For India, engagement with PICs serves as a means to counterbalance growing Chinese influence, deepen development partnerships in areas such as energy and sustainable growth, and promote cultural and diplomatic ties. *However, despite its potential significance, FIPIC remains relatively unknown outside diplomatic and academic circles.* This paper explores the reasons behind the lack of global awareness surrounding FIPIC and proposes ways to effectively leverage the platform as a strategic instrument to advance India’s presence across the southern Pacific subregion of the Indo-Pacific.

The Establishment of FIPIC

Established during Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to Fiji in November 2014, FIPIC marked a significant shift in India’s outreach to the Pacific.² By bringing together India and 14 PICs under a formal multilateral framework, FIPIC signalled a renewed and sustained commitment to building closer political, economic, and development ties with the region. Over time, it has evolved into a key mechanism

for deepening India's engagement with Pacific island nations, aligning with India's broader maritime and Indo-Pacific strategy.

The **inaugural FIPIC Summit**, held at the level of heads of government, took place in Suva, Fiji, on 19 November 2014, with the goal of fostering stronger partnerships with the PICs.³

The **second FIPIC Summit** followed in Jaipur, Rajasthan, in August 2015.⁴ Building upon the outcomes of the initial meeting, leaders discussed important shared concerns, including climate change, sustainable energy, food security, and the need for reform in the United Nations.

In September 2019, on the sidelines of the 74th United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in New York, Prime Minister Modi engaged with the leaders of the Pacific Island Developing States in a plurilateral setting.⁵ During the meeting, he emphasised the common values and shared future between India and the PICs, reaffirming India's dedication to supporting the development goals of the region.⁶

The **third FIPIC Summit** took place in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, on 22 May 2023, and was co-hosted by Prime Minister Modi and Papua New Guinea's Prime Minister, James Marape. On the sidelines of the third FIPIC summit, Prime Minister Modi was conferred the Republic of Fiji's highest civilian honour— the Companion of the Order of Fiji (CF)— by Prime Minister Rabuka, on behalf of Fijian President HE Mr Ratu Wiliame Maivalili Katonivere.⁷ This gesture not only reflected the strengthening bilateral relationship between India and Fiji but also signalled a broader strategic shift, as India positioned itself as a reliable and long-term partner for the Pacific Island nations amid intensifying geopolitical competition in the region. It marked a significant evolution in India's Act East Policy, signalling its growing intent to extend its strategic footprint beyond Southeast Asia and into the wider Indo-Pacific.

India's "Look East" and "Act East" Policies

India's "Look East" policy became a cornerstone of its foreign policy in the post-Cold War era. Initiated in 1991 under the leadership of Prime Minister Narasimha Rao,

the policy aimed to strengthen political ties, boost economic integration, and enhance security collaboration with Southeast Asian nations.⁸ It signified a major shift in India's global outlook, acknowledging the strategic and economic significance of Southeast Asia for India's national interests.⁹ Prime Minister Modi formally initiated the "Act East" policy in 2014, furthering the vision of the "Look East" policy with a stronger emphasis on implementation and engagement.¹⁰

India's "Act East" policy (AEP) has increasingly emphasised engagement with the PICs, notably through multilateral frameworks such as FIPIC. However, *despite its potential, FIPIC has not garnered significant international recognition or become a major subject of discourse.* A key reason for this has been the absence of a robust strategic communication and outreach strategy, limiting India's ability to effectively project its soft power and strategic interests across the Pacific.

This gap is particularly notable considering that the AEP completed a decade in 2024. While there has been substantial scholarly and policy focus on India's engagement with ASEAN under the AEP, literature and policy discourse around FIPIC and India's Pacific outreach remain sparse. The dominant narrative continues to prioritise Southeast Asia, overlooking the critical opportunities and challenges emerging in the wider Indo-Pacific, especially among the Pacific Island nations.

In recent years, however, India has begun cultivating a more pronounced maritime consciousness, aligning its strategic posture with its oceanic geography. Central to India's evolving maritime foreign policy is a recognition of the Indo-Pacific as a continuum, wherein the Pacific Islands form an increasingly important component. Strengthening platforms like FIPIC is therefore essential, not only to advance development cooperation but also to reinforce India's credibility and strategic influence across the broader Indo-Pacific region.

FIPIC and the Future of India's Strategic Outreach

In his book, *The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World*, India's External Affairs Minister, Dr S Jaishankar, emphasises the need for India to adopt a more proactive, multi-aligned, and interest-driven foreign policy, especially in an era of shifting

global power dynamics.¹¹ He argues that India must be a *decider* or a *shaper*, not just an *abstainer* or a *bystander* in global affairs.¹² This ethos directly supports the idea that India must step-up its engagement with underrepresented but strategically significant regions such as the Pacific Islands, where the geopolitical vacuum is increasingly being filled by other powers, particularly China.

EAM Dr S Jaishankar repeatedly argues for India to craft and project its own narrative, rather than rely on global institutions or Western powers to define its role. He warns against passivity in foreign policy and insists upon strategic clarity, institutional activism, and visibility in international affairs. He also stresses the importance of building coalitions beyond familiar platforms (not limiting diplomacy to just the G20, Quad, or ASEAN), and engaging across the “Global South” to build diplomatic equity and moral authority. FIPIC exemplifies this shift: it is a uniquely Indian initiative that amplifies the voices of Small Island Developing States (SIDS), provides tangible development support, and fosters South-South cooperation. In this context, strengthening FIPIC through sustained institutional support, strategic outreach, and proactive diplomacy would align closely with EAM Dr S Jaishankar’s vision of a more self-assured India shaping its own global narrative and strategic direction.

The Pacific Islands have evolved into a theatre of great power competition with China’s growing influence in the region— highlighted by its security pact with the Solomon Islands— and the US working to dissuade Pacific Island nations from forging similar security ties with Beijing.¹³ The US maintains no fewer than *eight* defence and security arrangements with nations across the Pacific region.¹⁴ In 2023, the United States signed an agreement with Papua New Guinea (PNG), granting the US military “*unimpeded*” access to key military bases and facilities across the country, significantly strengthening its strategic foothold in the region.¹⁵ Earlier, in 2020, Washington had also entered into a defence and security pact with Fiji, further consolidating its security partnerships across the Pacific Islands in response to growing geopolitical competition.¹⁶

Amid this intensifying geopolitical contestation, India’s own engagement— through FIPIC— offers a distinct, non-militarised alternative. While FIPIC holds strategic importance in India’s foreign policy and is well recognised within

diplomatic, policy, and regional circles involving India and the 14 Pacific Island countries, the grouping is relatively unknown in a global context, especially when compared to major multilateral groupings such as ASEAN, the Quad, or APEC. In Indian strategic circles, of course, FIPIC is seen as a key initiative to deepen ties with the Pacific Island nations. Among the elites of the PICs, it is appreciated as a unique platform where India engages directly with leaders of these nations, outside of larger power frameworks. India is seen as a development and climate partner rather than a military competitor. Possible reasons for a lack of global awareness about FIPIC include:

- **Niche Regional Focus:**

FIPIC involves India and 14 Pacific Island nations within which grouping, even the more important, PICs have fairly limited global political heft, military capacity, or economic weight, when compared individually to larger powers, such as Japan, Australia, or the US.

- **Recent Creation and Limited Summits:**

After the inaugural summit in 2014, only two additional FIPIC Summits have been held, that too, with an eight-year gap between them (2015 in Jaipur and 2023 in Port Moresby)! In contrast, major groupings meet annually or have more structured institutions.

- **Developmental, Not Security-Focused:**

Many global groupings such as the Quad or APEC gain visibility because of security or economic cooperation, whereas FIPIC focuses mainly on development partnerships focused upon more amorphous non-traditional facets of *holistic* security such as climate change, renewable energy, and capability-enhancement (very often but nevertheless incorrectly labelled ‘capacity-building’)—sectors that often remain underreported.

- **Lack of Strong Institutional Backbone:**

FIPIC does not have a permanent secretariat, formal treaty structure, or regular coordination mechanisms like the ASEAN Secretariat. Without institutional visibility, momentum fades between successive Summits. This

is in particularly stark contrast with other far more robust structures such as the *Pacific Islands Forum* (PIF).

- **Limited Public Diplomacy:**

Neither India nor the PICs comprising FIPIC have promoted FIPIC aggressively or even vigorously in global forums, multilateral meetings, or media spaces. Consequently, awareness—outside specialised elite diplomatic circles—remains low. Once again, this lackadaisical approach by New Delhi offers a stark contrast with other far more robust and dynamic structures such as the *Pacific Islands Forum* (PIF), the “*Pacific Community*” (SPC) collective, “*Council of Regional Organisations of the Pacific*” (CROP), and even relatively specialised ones such as the “*Pacific Regional Environment Programme*” (PREP), the “*Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency*” (FFA). Since the South Pacific is seen by Australia and the US (as also by New Zealand and France) as their strategic ‘backyard’, India is unable to leverage extant trilaterals (such as the India-Australia-France trilateral, for example) or even the Quad to its advantage, in its endeavours to position India as a significant player.

Achievements Under FIPIC

New Delhi’s ineptitude in its ability to sustain strategic messaging is all the more ironic— if not tragic— given the several laudable achievements of FIPIC. For one thing, under FIPIC, India has moved beyond generic aid to implement targeted projects in sectors critical to the Pacific region, such as healthcare, digital connectivity, climate resilience, and skill development. Through a blend of grant-based assistance and training programs, India has positioned itself, at least amongst a narrow stratum of PIC elites, as a trusted development partner. India provides an annual grant-in-aid of US\$ 200,000 to each of the 14 PICs to support localised development projects such as solar electrification, community infrastructure, and livelihood initiatives.¹⁷ Through the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), India offers scholarships for students from PICs to pursue higher education in Indian institutions, strengthening people-to-people connections and human capital.¹⁸ Under the “Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation” (ITEC) programme, professionals from PICs receive fully funded technical training at premier Indian

institutions, in fields such as IT, agriculture, public policy, and entrepreneurship.¹⁹ Climate cooperation has been central, with initiatives such as the solarisation of government buildings— announced at FIPIC-III in 2023, and broader alignment with the “International Solar Alliance”.²⁰ While not officially a FIPIC initiative, the “Barefoot College”, based in Tilonia, Rajasthan, has worked with the Ministry of External Affairs to train women from the Pacific and other regions to install and maintain solar lighting systems, often in areas without access to electricity.²¹ This program promotes both sustainable energy access and women’s empowerment and has been highlighted in Indian diplomatic efforts as a flagship example of South-South cooperation.

Under PM Modi’s 12-point action plan announced at FIPIC-III in Port Moresby, India significantly scaled-up its commitments. These include setting up dialysis centres, a regional IT and cybersecurity hub, solar infrastructure, fisheries support, traditional medicine collaboration, and enhanced digital and maritime partnerships.²² The visit of Indian Naval Ships to Papua New Guinea, and Indian naval hydrographic support further signal India’s strategic intent in the Pacific. These initiatives aim to position FIPIC as a key component of India’s Global South diplomacy, as being distinct from other security-intensive initiatives, through its strong focus upon empowerment, sustainability, and mutual respect.

It is reiterated that while FIPIC has yielded tangible benefits and goodwill, it nevertheless remains under-recognised internationally. Greater institutionalisation, a clever and sustained publicity programme that provides heightened visibility, and greater diplomatic investment— aligned with India’s Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) that gives first-order specificity to India’s current maritime policy of MAHASAGAR (*Mutual And Holistic Advancement of Security And Growth across Regions*) and EAM Dr S Jaishankar’s call for India to act as a “*decider*” and narrative-shaper— will be key to strengthening India’s role as a credible, long-term partner in the Pacific.

Recommendations

Against the foregoing backdrop, the following policy recommendations are offered for consideration by the MEA and other concerned ministries:

1. Craft a Strategic Narrative and Institutional Framework

- (a) To elevate FIPIC's profile and long-term impact, the Government of India needs to articulate and consistently disseminate a clear, consistent narrative that frames FIPIC as a values-driven, inclusive platform focused on sustainable development and mutual respect, rather than as a tool of geopolitical balancing. This would align with India's broader foreign policy vision of being a responsible and responsive global leader.
- (b) Institutionalising FIPIC as a *regular* biennial Summit with sectoral working groups (on climate resilience, renewable energy, maritime cooperation, and health security) would lend structure and continuity to the partnership. Additionally, launching an "India–Pacific Islands Strategic Dialogue", a permanent forum for high-level exchange on Indo-Pacific security, regional connectivity, and blue economy priorities would deepen strategic alignment.
- (c) Simultaneously, public diplomacy must be amplified through targeted outreach that showcases concrete deliverables, such as solar electrification projects, disaster resilience efforts, student scholarships, and health collaborations. Communicating these successes widely can help turn FIPIC into a recognised symbol of meaningful South-South cooperation.

2. **Formalise an Annual India-Pacific Dialogue.** Sponsor a Track 1.5 or 2.0 Dialogue Series, bringing together policymakers, scholars, business leaders, and civil society from India and the PICs to exchange ideas on climate change, governance, connectivity, and cultural ties. This would embed FIPIC more deeply within India's Indo-Pacific strategic framework (especially the IPOI) and reinforce its image as a credible development partner and an emerging global leader with strong roots in South-South cooperation.

3. **FIPIC Website.** Establishing a government-led digital presence for FIPIC would significantly reinforce India's leadership and credibility in the Indo-Pacific region. It would offer Pacific Island stakeholders a transparent, accessible platform for information exchange and collaboration, enabling more direct engagement with Indian initiatives. While there is, indeed, a FIPIC website hosted by the Federation

of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry (FICCI), which focuses primarily on trade and investment promotion, there is a clear need for an official government-managed portal dedicated to the FIPIC. Unlike a business-oriented platform such as the FICCI-managed site, a government-driven portal would provide a more comprehensive and strategic overview, encompassing trade, development assistance, cultural exchange, and diplomatic engagement, thereby ensuring a holistic representation of India's multifaceted partnership with the Pacific Island nations. Such website, directly administered by the Government of India (by the Ministry of External Affairs or a dedicated secretariat), would serve as a comprehensive and authoritative platform, consolidating all dimensions of India's engagement with the Pacific Island nations. Obviously, offering the site in English, Hindi, and selected Pacific Island languages would enhance its accessibility and outreach. This website should include:

- (a) Official summit declarations, joint statements, and policy documents.
- (b) Updates on development partnerships, grants, technical cooperation programs, and scholarship initiatives.
- (c) Information on cultural exchanges, people-to-people ties, and capacity-building projects.
- (d) Multimedia content (videos, interviews, webinars) showcasing collaborative efforts.
- (e) Interactive features such as event calendars, virtual forums, and feedback channels.

4. Leveraging of FIPIC by the Indian Navy.

- (a) The Government of India needs to leverage FIPIC to demonstrate regional leadership by exploiting the Indian Navy's established competence in maritime capacity-building and capability-enhancement, especially in terms of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR). Given the vulnerability of PICs to natural disasters, India can position its naval assets as vital instruments of goodwill through pre-positioned relief supplies, rapid

response operations, and disaster management exercises. Simultaneously, FIPIC offers a strategic avenue to expand India's role as a net provider of security in the region. This includes enhancing maritime situational awareness (MSA), information-sharing leading to more comprehensive maritime domain awareness (MDA), conducting combined patrols and naval exercises, offering technical training to Pacific Island naval personnel, and hosting regular port visits. Taken in aggregate, these initiatives would solidify India's image as a reliable and benevolent maritime partner in the Indo-Pacific.

Conclusion

Over a decade since its launch in 2014, FIPIC has emerged as a pivotal—yet largely neglected (even within the MEA itself)—pillar of India's diplomatic engagement with the PICs. Through summits, grants, and capacity-building programmes such as scholarships and training, FIPIC reflects India's commitment to South-South cooperation and inclusive multilateralism. Yet, despite its relevance in the current geopolitical landscape, the forum remains relatively obscure outside policy and diplomatic circles.

This limited visibility stems from the absence of a sustained strategic narrative to drive FIPIC's evolution. Meanwhile, China, Australia, and the United States continue to deepen their presence in the Pacific through expansive economic and military engagement, consistently outpacing India's efforts in scale and particularly in terms of visibility. As EAM Dr S Jaishankar advocates in *The India Way*, India must craft and project its own foreign policy narrative, particularly in regions like the Pacific where PICs can amplify India's global standing and strategic reach.

Going forward, institutionalising FIPIC through a dedicated digital platform, expanding its thematic scope to include climate finance, digital infrastructure, and blue economy partnerships, and embedding it more deliberately into India's broader Indo-Pacific vision especially through the first-order specificity provided by the IPOI to India's maritime policy of MAHASAGAR—will be critical. Moreover, positioning and then leveraging FIPIC as a flagship initiative of India's Global South diplomacy

not only aligns with India's evolving maritime and multilateral strategy but also offers a meaningful pathway to reaffirm India's role as a responsible, responsive, and trusted development partner in an increasingly contested region.

18 June 2025

ENDNOTES

- 1 Business Accelerator for Forum for India – Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC), “About FIPIC”, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. <https://fipic.ficci.in/about.html>.
- 2 Business Accelerator for Forum for India – Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC), “About FIPIC”, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. <https://fipic.ficci.in/about.html>.
- 3 “India – Fiji Bilateral Relations”, High Commission of India, Suva, Fiji, April 2024. https://www.indiainfiji.gov.in/docs/1714023254india_fiji_brief%20%20Apr_24.pdf.
- 4 Business Accelerator for Forum for India – Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC), “About FIPIC”, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. <https://fipic.ficci.in/about.html>.
- 5 “Prime Minister meets Pacific Island Leaders,” Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, September 2019. https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/31854/Prime_Minister_meets_Pacific_Island_Leaders.
- 6 “India – Fiji Bilateral Relations”, High Commission of India, Suva, Fiji, April 2024. https://www.indiainfiji.gov.in/docs/1714023254india_fiji_brief%20%20Apr_24.pdf.
- 7 Prime Minister's Office, ‘Prime Minister's meeting with the Prime Minister of the Republic of Fiji’, *Press Information Bureau*, May 2023. <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1926258>.
- 8 Amb (Retd) Dilip Sinha, ‘India's Look East Policy and the Northeast’, *Distinguished Lectures*, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, April 2016. <https://www.mea.gov.in/distinguished-lectures-detail.htm?505>.
- 9 Haokip, T. (2014). India's Look East Policy: Its Evolution and Approach. *South Asian Survey*, 18(2), 239-257. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0971523113513368> (Original work published 2011).
- 10 Dipanjan Roy Chaudhary, ‘PM Modi's Act East Policy places India as an active stakeholder in regional affairs’, *The Economic Times*, April 2025. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/>

news/india/pm-modis-act-east-policy-places-india-as-an-active-stakeholder-in-regional-affairs/articleshow/119999800.cms?from=mdr.

- 11 S Jaishankar, *The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World* (Gurugram: Harper Collins Publishers, 2022).
- 12 S Jaishankar, *The India Way*, 211.
- 13 Joseph Hammond, “China’s Security Agreement with the Solomon Islands: Wider Implications for Geopolitics in the South Pacific,” *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: US Department of Defense, December 2023), <https://media.defense.gov/2023/Nov/14/2003340194/-1/-1/1/VIEW%20HAMMOND%20-%20JIPA.PDF>.
- 14 Prianka Srinivasan and Virginia Harrison, “Mapped: the vast network of security deals spanning the Pacific, and what it means”, *The Guardian*, July 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jul/09/pacific-islands-security-deals-australia-usa-china>.
- 15 “Agreement Between the United States of America and Papua New Guinea”, Department of State, The United States of America, August 2023. <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/63374-Papua-New-Guinea-Defense-08.16.2023.pdf>.
- 16 , “Agreement Between the United States of America and Papua New Guinea,” Department of State, The United States of America.
- 17 Business Accelerator for Forum for India – Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC), “About FIPIC”, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. <https://fipic.ficci.in/about.html>.
- 18 Indian Council for Cultural Relations, ICCR Scholarship Portal, <https://a2ascholarships.iccr.gov.in>.
- 19 Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation Programme, “Sagar Amrut Scholarships”, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. <https://www.itecgoi.in/Sagaramrut>.
- 20 “India – Fiji Bilateral Relations”, High Commission of India, Suva, Fiji, April 2024. https://www.indiainfiji.gov.in/docs/1714023254india_fiji_brief%20%20Apr_24.pdf.
- 21 Media Centre, “Media Briefing on Barefoot Solar Grandmothers from Least Developed Countries Undergoing Training in India under ITEC Programme,” Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, March 2018. <https://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/21325>.
- 22 Anita Joshua, “12-step action plan to strengthen India’s partnership with Pacific Island nations,” *The Telegraph*, May 2023. <https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/12-step-action-plan-to-strengthen-indias-partnership-with-pacific-island-nations/cid/1938944>.

About the Author

Ms Kripa Anand is a Research Associate at the National Maritime Foundation (NMF). Her research encompasses maritime security issues, with special focus upon the manner in which India's own maritime geostrategies are impacted by the maritime geostrategies of the island-States of Oceania in general and Australia and New Zealand in particular. She may be reached at ocn1.nmf@gmail.com.

The Power of Three at Sea: India's Trilateral Partnerships in Action

Ms Saaz Lahiri

Trilaterals represent a pragmatic diplomatic relationship designed to overcome the inherent limitations of both, purely bilateral engagements (which often have limited reach and scope) and unwieldy multilateral forums (which are frequently hampered by slow decision-making and outcomes that reflect the lowest common denominator). By creating a flexible, yet potent, middle ground for collective action; trilaterals are optimised for efficiency and effectiveness in specific contexts where broader cooperation is difficult or insufficient. The operationalisation of the India-France-United Arab Emirates (IFU) and India-France-Australia (IFA) trilaterals in the maritime domain demonstrate a pragmatic approach toward enhancing regional security through focused cooperation. These partnerships leverage existing bilateral strengths to address contemporary challenges, from traditional threats to emerging concerns like critical infrastructure protection and climate change.

This article offers a focused examination of India's maritime trilateral cooperation with France through two key groupings: the India-France-UAE trilateral and the India-France Australia one. Concentrating exclusively on the maritime domain, the analysis explores how each trilateral promotes combined naval exercises, maritime domain awareness and information-sharing, as well as defence technology cooperation and co-production. The India-France-UAE trilateral is further assessed in the context of strategic collaboration on critical raw minerals essential for maritime and defence applications, while the India-France-Australia trilateral is examined with particular emphasis on the protection of undersea infrastructure, especially submarine cables. By situating these trilaterals within the broader Indo-

Pacific landscape, the article underscores their growing relevance in shaping regional maritime security. It concludes by identifying the key challenges confronting these frameworks and proposes a set of recommendations to strengthen and operationalise trilateral maritime cooperation.

India-France-UAE Trilateral

The India-France-UAE trilateral cooperation was formally launched with a joint statement in February 2023, following ministerial talks in September 2022. It represents a significant step towards a more integrated security architecture in the Indian Ocean. This partnership is rooted in shared strategic interests, particularly in the Indo-Pacific, and builds upon strong bilateral ties between India and France, and India and the UAE.¹ For France, the UAE's strategic location serves as a crucial staging post for military operations between mainland France and the broader Indo-Pacific, reinforcing its comprehensive Indo-Pacific strategy.² Additionally, France's major overseas base is located in Abu Dhabi (part of a larger French military presence known as *Camp de la Paix*) and serves as foothold for France in the northwest Indian Ocean.³ The trilateral's agenda extends beyond traditional defence, encompassing technology, energy, and environmental cooperation.⁴

Combined Maritime Exercises. Combined maritime exercises are a cornerstone of the India-France-UAE trilateral, they serve to enhance interoperability and collective response capabilities. The first-ever trilateral Maritime Partnership Exercise (MPX) was conducted off the Gulf of Oman in June 2023.⁵ This two-day exercise involved a wide spectrum of naval operations, including surface warfare with tactical firing and missile engagement drills, close-quarter manoeuvres, advanced air defence exercises featuring French *Rafale* and UAE *Dash 8* MPA aircraft, and helicopter cross-landing operations.⁶ The exercise also included drills for replenishment at sea and the cross-embarkation of personnel, facilitating the exchange of best practices. Participating surface combatants included INS *Tarkash* and the French Ship *Surcouf*, both with integral helicopters, along with French *Rafale* aircraft and UAE Navy Maritime Patrol Aircraft.⁷ This maiden exercise significantly strengthened maritime ties through the demonstration of a collective commitment to address both, traditional and non-

traditional threats, thereby ensuring the safety of mercantile trade and freedom of navigation on the high seas. Beyond maritime drills, the trilateral has also expanded to include air combat exercises. The air combat exercise DESERT KNIGHT was launched in January 2024 over the Arabian Sea, further bolstering trilateral defence cooperation and enhancing interoperability among the three air forces in complex combat scenarios. The Indian Air Force contributed *Sukhoi-30MKIs*, *Jaguars*, and *Il-78* mid-air refuellers, alongside Airborne Early-Warning and Control (AEW&C) systems. French *Rafale* jets and UAE *F-16s* participated from the *Al Dhafra* airbase in the UAE.⁸

MDA and Information Sharing. Information-sharing is a critical pillar of the IFU trilateral, aimed at enhancing Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) and enabling coordinated responses to threats. The initial trilateral meeting of focal points in July 2022 discussed maritime security and explored potential areas for cooperation, including information exchange.⁹ This commitment was further solidified in the 7th India-France Maritime Cooperation Dialogue, held in January 2025, where both nations agreed to strengthen existing mechanisms for information-exchange.¹⁰

Key mechanisms for information-sharing include exchange between India's Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) in Gurugram, the Regional Coordination Operations Centre (RCOC) in Seychelles, and the Regional Maritime Information Fusion Centre (RMIFC) in Madagascar.¹¹ This network facilitates real-time information-exchange, strengthening Maritime Situational Awareness (MSA) across the Indian Ocean Region.¹² The partners also agreed to develop a joint assessment of maritime security threats, encompassing illicit activities such as piracy, armed robbery, maritime terrorism, contraband smuggling, illegal unreported and unregulated fishing (IUUF), and maritime cyber-security threats.¹³ This collaborative approach to threat assessment and information-sharing is vital for developing coordinated surveillance and response mechanisms to ensure maritime safety and stability.

Technology Transfer and Co-production. Technology-transfer and co-production are central to the India-France-UAE trilateral's long-term vision, which

aims to enhance defence manufacturing capabilities and promote self-reliance among partners. Cooperation through joint development and coordination across semiconductors, battery technologies, data processing, renewable energy components, and the defence and aerospace sectors, stand at the heart of this trilateral.¹⁴ Critical minerals are intrinsic to this agenda, driving demand for advanced defence applications such as enhanced precision features, laser guidance, missile propulsion, and stealth capabilities.¹⁵

India and France have a longstanding defence industrial partnership, exemplified by the progress in constructing *Scorpene* submarines in India, with a focus on integrating India's indigenously developed Air Independent Propulsion (AIP) system.¹⁶ Discussions are also underway for incorporating the Integrated Combat System (ICS) into future submarines. Collaboration extends to missile systems, helicopter engines, and jet engines, with France's *Safran* Group working closely with Indian defence entities on codeveloping critical aerospace technologies to boost India's self-reliance. France has also included India as an observer in the Eurodrone MALE¹⁷ programme.¹⁸ The launch of FRIND-X (France-India Defence Startup Excellence) in Paris further fosters innovation by connecting startups, investors, and defence agencies.¹⁹

The trilateral also focuses on critical minerals, recognising their importance for data centres, defence manufacturing, and transition technologies.²⁰ Each nation brings complementary strengths: India with rare-earth deposits and R&D capabilities, France with advanced R&D in data-centres and defence, and the UAE with expertise in smart grids and AI integration. Collaborative initiatives include establishing recycling infrastructure, sharing expertise in processing (e.g., India's copper and manganese, France's hafnium), investing in alternative materials to reduce rare-earth usage, and exploring technology patents.²¹ The trilateral also aims to promote capacity-building, capability-enhancement, and value-addition from mine-to-market, particularly in partnership with African countries, by exploring alternative financing models to counter existing dependencies.²² This comprehensive approach to co-production and technology-transfer is designed to build resilient supply chains and enhance strategic capabilities across multiple sectors.

India-France-Australia Trilateral

The India-France-Australia trilateral dialogue, initiated via videoconference on 09 September 2020, marked a significant step in strengthening cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.²³ Co-chaired at the Foreign Secretary level, the dialogue focused on geostrategic challenges; strategies for a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific; and prospects for cooperation, particularly in the maritime sector and in global commons such as climate and biodiversity.²⁴ This trilateral builds on existing robust bilateral relationships, with India and France being strategic partners since 1998, and India's ties with Australia elevated to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2020.²⁵ While the dialogue was placed in abeyance following the AUKUS announcement, it resumed in September 2022, reaffirming a shared commitment to a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific.²⁶ The third Focal Points Meeting in June of 2024 further solidified cooperation across sectors such as maritime safety and security, marine and environmental cooperation, and multilateral engagement.²⁷

Combined Maritime Exercises. Of similar consequence, combined maritime exercises are integral to operationalising the IFA trilateral. Although the primary trilateral exercises are still evolving, India and Australia have significantly increased bilateral defence engagements, tripling them in the past decade. This includes Australia joining India's annual Exercise MALABAR (with Japan and the United States) in 2017 and hosting it for the first time three years later.²⁸ India also participated in Exercise TALISMAN SABRE for the first time in 2025²⁹ (albeit this was limited to personnel alone rather than platforms).

A key multinational exercise involving both India and Australia, led by France, is Exercise LA PEROUSE. The fifth iteration of LA PEROUSE, held off the coast of Indonesia between 20 and 24 January 2025, involved 13 ships and over 30 aircraft from as many as nine Indo-Pacific nations, including Australia, France, and India. Conducted by the French Carrier Strike Group (CSG) led by the FNS *Charles de Gaulle* nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, the exercise focused on strengthening maritime safety, developing interoperability, and enhancing the ability to act collectively in maritime crises.³⁰ Missions included boarding operations, air-based search-and-rescue procedures, and training in the use of IORIS (Indian Ocean

Region Information Sharing) — an EU-developed web-based communication and coordination system for information-exchange.³¹

Information-Sharing. Information-sharing is a crucial component of the India-France-Australia trilateral. The trilateral dialogue has consistently emphasised enhancing information-exchange and combined surveillance efforts.³² Since 2020, Australia and India have cooperated on bilateral MDA by deploying patrol aircraft to each other's territories on eleven separate occasions.³³ The partners aim for a near-constant coverage of the Indian Ocean through trilateral MDA cooperation, enabling a truly shared common operational picture of the maritime neighbourhood. A trilateral information-sharing workshop on MDA has been held at India's IFC-IOR, where both France and Australia have assigned liaison officers.³⁴ This mechanism, along with potential information-sharing between humanitarian and disaster relief agencies, is vital to address shared security concerns, particularly in the northeastern Indian Ocean (Bay of Bengal).³⁵ The trilateral also seeks to develop collaborative strategies to address non-traditional security threats, including IUUF, piracy, and transnational crime, through enhanced information-sharing and operational coordination.³⁶

Technology Transfer and Co-production. Technology transfer and co-development are emerging areas of focus for the India-France-Australia trilateral, particularly in terms of capacity-building and capability-enhancement for maritime security in the Indo-Pacific. While the direct co-production initiatives within this specific trilateral are less explicitly detailed than the India-France bilateral, the broader strategic alignment emphasises leveraging complementary technologies to address shared challenges.

One significant area of cooperation is the protection of critical subsea communication cables.³⁷ These cables form the backbone of modern communications, carrying over 95 per cent of international data across the Indo-Pacific — yet, they are vulnerable to natural hazards, negligence, and intentional acts of disruption.³⁸ Australia, France, and India possess unique and complementary capabilities in this domain; France has adopted a Seabed Warfare Strategy and its companies such as Alcatel Submarine Networks and Orange Marine are major players in cable supply

and repair. Likewise, Australia has developed impressive regulatory frameworks for undersea cable protection and cybersecurity.³⁹ For its part, India's strategic location and skilled workforce makes it an attractive regional hub for cable-laying and repairs.⁴⁰ The trilateral could explore opportunities for a regional cable-laying and repair hub in South India, work with the International Cable Protection Committee on security standards, and facilitate information-sharing on suspected cable attacks.⁴¹ Further, there is potential for a co-branded project wherein Australia leads efforts in the Pacific, and India and France lead in the Indian Ocean.⁴²

Beyond cables, the trilateral can foster innovation through joint start-up funds in collaboration with the private sector, and explore collaboration in marine biotechnology.⁴³ The three countries also need to collaboratively address norms for technology governance and data transfer, especially at international forums such as the International Telecommunication Union (ITU).⁴⁴ While direct defence co-production projects within the trilateral are not as prominent as in the India-France bilateral (which involves *Scorpène* submarines, missiles, helicopters, jet engines, and the FRIND-X platform),⁴⁵ the emphasis needs to be on leveraging combined technological strengths to reduce maritime security risks in order to build regional capacities for resilience.

Challenges and Future Trajectories

Despite the inherent advantages and strategic imperative driving trilateral cooperation, these frameworks are not without their challenges. The India-France-Australia trilateral, for instance, experienced a substantial period of inactivity following the announcement of the AUKUS security partnership in 2021, highlighting how broader geopolitical realignments can impact specific minilateral initiatives.⁴⁶ While the dialogue has since resumed, such instances underscore the need for careful diplomatic navigation in order to maintain cohesion and promote trust.

The competitive nature of State behaviour, even amongst partners, can influence the depth and scope of cooperation.⁴⁷ For example, while France's freedom of action on IUUF is constrained by European Commission prerogatives, it has the ability to act independently only on maritime law enforcement — necessitating a nuanced approach to trilateral efforts in this area.⁴⁸

Operationalising complex initiatives across three distinct national systems also presents practical hurdles related to capacity, capability, coordination, and technical interoperability. Issues such as uneven levels of expertise in dealing with maritime cyberattacks across partners, or the sheer scale of MDA needs (e.g., the presence of several hundred Chinese vessels in certain maritime segments), highlight the vast requirements that even focused trilaterals must address.⁴⁹ Further, the risk of minilaterals being perceived as exclusive or confrontational, particularly in the context of major power competition, can lead to half-hearted participation or limit their scale and efficacy. Ensuring that these partnerships are seen as contributing to broader regional stability and inclusivity, rather than solely as containment strategies, remains a diplomatic balancing act.

Way Ahead. The future trajectories of the IFU and the IFA trilaterals point towards deeper integration and expanded scope, driven by the persistent and evolving maritime security challenges in the Indo-Pacific. These partnerships are poised to become increasingly action-oriented, leveraging their combined strengths to address a comprehensive range of threats.

For the India-France-UAE trilateral:

- A key area of future focus could be the continued development of a robust critical minerals' ecosystem. This includes the systematic creation of recycling infrastructure, sharing of expertise in processing, investment in alternative materials to reduce rare-earth usage, and the collaborative development of technology patents that could become new currencies in future climate negotiations.⁵⁰
- The trilateral will also likely expand its capacity-building and capability-enhancement efforts, particularly in partnering with African countries to foster sustainable cooperation in the critical minerals' ecosystem, learning from past mistakes of the hydrocarbon economy and exploring viable alternative financing models. The application of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning (ML) models in mining processes and equipment to offset ecological costs also presents a significant opportunity.⁵¹

- The India-France-UAE trilateral should consider pushing for the integration of the Port of Marseille into the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) as a key EU gateway. For India, this would strengthen access to European markets through a stable French-administered entry point, reducing the overdependence on northern ports and the instability in Aegean Sea. For the UAE, this would position Emirati ports as central transshipment hubs linking South Asia to Europe, leveraging existing logistics infrastructure to expand trade and influence along the corridor.

For the India-France-Australia trilateral:

Given the infrequency of formal dialogues between the three partners, Track One-point-Five informal workshops could provide actionable recommendations to policymakers. Such workshops would feed into the existing trilateral architecture on issues such as maritime security and surveillance, operational and technical interoperability, seabed infrastructure protection, regional maritime governance, amongst others. Revival of the India-France-Australia trilateral on maritime issues could even take a leaf out of the successful Australia-India-Indonesia one.

Enhanced cooperation on the protection of critical seabed infrastructure and undersea communication cables will remain a priority, potentially leading to co-branded initiatives for cable laying and repair hubs. Additionally, this trilateral could establish dedicated task force focusing on safeguarding submarine cables via joint monitoring and patrols, harmonising regulatory frameworks (legal and operational standards), investing collectively in the research and development of resilient cable technologies, and collaborative crisis management (including rapid response mechanisms and simulation exercises).

The trilateral must leverage the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) to lead coordinated action on maritime security, marine environmental protection, and climate resilience by incorporating each country of the trilateral into the seven maritime lines-of-thrust (spokes/pillars) of the IPOI. For instance, India could take the lead in terms of maritime security, Australia could do the same in terms of marine ecology, and France could lead in disaster risk reduction. This would allow such projects to be undertaken jointly

under the framework of IORA while simultaneously providing substance to the IPOI. Likewise, funding joint initiatives on blue carbon mapping, clean port infrastructure, and anti-IUUF operations through IORA's seed funds and IPOI networks would also be beneficial.

Both trilaterals are expected to continue building on their respective bilateral foundations, expanding combined training exercises and technology exchanges to enhance operational and technical interoperability. The increasing comfort of India with minilateral formats suggests a sustained commitment to these agile partnerships as a means of projecting influence and securing interests in a multipolar Indo-Pacific.

Conclusion

The operationalisation of the IFU and IFA trilaterals in the maritime domain represents a strategic and pragmatic adaptation to the complex and evolving security landscape of the Indo-Pacific. These minilateral frameworks clearly offer distinct advantages over broader multilateral initiatives, primarily their enhanced agility, focused objectives and rapid capacity to build upon bilateral relationship. This allows for greater synergy, efficient decision-making and targeted responses to specific threats and problems across diverse geographic areas. Looking ahead, these trilaterals will obviously depend upon sustained political will, consistent resource allocation, and a proactive approach to addressing emerging challenges. Deepening technology transfer and co-production, expanding the scope and complexity of combined exercises, and strengthening information-sharing networks will be critical. These partnerships are not merely reactive measures but proactive instruments of statecraft, enabling India, France, Australia and the UAE to collectively shape the dynamics of the Indo-Pacific.

04 August 2025

ENDNOTES

- 1 Yuma Takahashi, “Why France is Focusing on the UAE in its Indo-Pacific Strategy -- An Energy and Resource Diplomacy Perspective.” *International Information Network Analysis (IINA)*, *Sasakawa Peace Foundation*, 12 June 2025. https://www.spf.org/iina/en/articles/takahashi_06.html.
- 2 Yuma Takahashi, “Why France is Focusing on the UAE...”
- 3 “*Camp de La Praix* (Peace Camp)”, Airforce-Technology.com, 16 August 2010. <https://www.airforce-technology.com/projects/campdelapaixpeacecam/>.
- 4 Observer Research Foundation, “France-India-UAE Trilateral: India’s Minilateral Engagements Ticks Up,” 16 February 2023. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/france-india-uae-trilateral>.
- 5 Press Information Bureau (PIB), Government of India. “India-France-Australia Joint Statement on the Occasion of the Trilateral Ministerial Dialogue.” *Ministry of Defence (MoD) Press Release*, 04 May 2021. <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1930811>.
- 6 PIB, MoD Press Release “India-France-Australia Joint Statement.”
- 7 PIB, MoD Press Release “India-France-Australia Joint Statement.”
- 8 Swarajya Staff, “India, France, UAE Strengthen Defense Cooperation With ‘Desert Knight’ Air Combat Exercise over Arabian Sea”, *Swarajya*, 12 December 2024. <https://swarajyamag.com/news-brief/india-france-uae-strengthen-defense-cooperation-with-desert-knight-air-combat-exercise-over-arabian-sea>.
- 9 Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs Press Release, “Meeting of Focal Points of India, France and UAE.”, 28 July 2022. https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/35562/Meeting_of_Focal_Points_of_India_France_and_UAE.
- 10 Embassy of France in India *Press Release*, “7th India-France Maritime Cooperation Dialogue – Joint Declaration.” 14 January 2025. <https://in.ambafrance.org/7th-India-France-Maritime-Cooperation-Dialogue-Joint-Declaration>.
- 11 Embassy of France in India, “7th India-France Maritime Cooperation Dialogue – Joint Declaration.”
- 12 India News Network, “India-France Maritime Partnership Exercise: Showcasing Robust Military Cooperation for Stability in Indian Ocean Region” 11 January 2025. <https://www.indianewsnetwork.com/en/20250111/india-france-maritime-partnership-exercise-showcasing-robust-military-cooperation-for-stability-in-indian-ocean-reg>.

- 13 Shivani Sharma, “India and France to Jointly Assess Maritime Threats in Indian Ocean Region”, *India Today*, 21 January 2025. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/india-and-france-to-jointly-assess-maritime-threats-in-indian-ocean-region-2667770-2025-01-21>.
- 14 Cauvery Ganapathy, “Addressing the Critical Minerals Conundrum: Pathways for the India-France-UAE Trilateral”, *Expert Speak, Observer Research Foundation*, 11 May 2025. <https://orfme.org/expert-speak/addressing-the-critical-minerals-conundrum-pathways-for-the-india-france-uae-trilateral>.
- 15 Cauvery Ganapathy, “Addressing the Critical Minerals Conundrum.”
- 16 Shivani Sharma, “India and France to Jointly Assess Maritime Threats in Indian Ocean Region.”
- 17 *The Eurodrone programme also known as the Medium Altitude Long Endurance Remotely Piloted Aircraft System (MALE RPAS) is a combined initiative by Germany, France, Italy and Spain with Airbus Defence and Space as the prime contractor. Companies such as Dassault Aviation and Leonardo are key industrial partners.*
- 18 “India Observer Nation of Eurodrone Programme: Defence Technology.” *ETVBharat*, 22 January 2025. <https://www.etvbharat.com/en/lopinion/india-observer-nation-of-eurodrone-programme-defence-technology-enn25012205495>.
- 19 “Launch of FRIND-X 2024.” *iDEX-DIO*, 05 December 2024. <https://indoeuropean.eu/paris-hosted-the-launch-of-the-france-india-defence-startup-excellence-project-frind-x-2024/>.
- 20 Cauvery Ganapathy. “Addressing the Critical Minerals Conundrum.”
- 21 “Order and Disorder in the Indo-Pacific: Trilateral Policy Perspectives from Japan, India and France.” CSEP Blog, 20 February 2024. <https://csep.org/blog/order-and-disorder-in-the-indo-pacific-trilateral-on-policy-perspectives-from-japan-india-and-france/> .
- 22 Cauvery Ganapathy. “Addressing the Critical Minerals Conundrum.”
- 23 Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, “Rise of the Minilaterals: Examining the India-France-Australia Trilateral”, *The Diplomat*, 17 September 2020. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/09/rise-of-the-minilaterals-examining-the-india-france-australia-trilateral/> .
- 24 Embassy of France in Australia Press Release, “The Indo-Pacific: 1st Trilateral Dialogue between France, India and Australia”, 09 September 2020. <https://au.ambafrance.org/The-Indo-Pacific-1st-Trilateral-Dialogue-between-France-India-and-Australia>.
- 25 Yuma Takahashi. “Why France is Focusing on the UAE in its Indo-Pacific Strategy.”

- 26 David Brewster, Rory Medcalf, Darshana Baruah and Antoine Bondaz, “Options for Australia, France and India Trilateral Cooperation”, *National Security College, Australian National University, Policy Options Paper No 29, June 2024*. https://nsc.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/2024-06/NSC_POP_Options%20for%20AUS%2C%20FRA%2C%20IND_No.29_V4_FINAL_web.pdf.
- 27 India News Network. “At 3rd Focal Points Meeting, India, France, and Australia reaffirm Commitment to a Free, Open and Inclusive Indo-Pacific”, 20 June 2024. <https://www.indianewsnetwork.com/en/20240620/at-3rd-focal-points-meeting-india-france-australia-reaffirm-commitment-to-free-open-inclusive-indo-pacific>.
- 28 Royal Australian Navy, “Exercise Malabar”, *Royal Australian Navy – Navy Activities: Exercises*. <https://www.navy.gov.au/navy-activities/exercises/exercise-malabar>.
- 29 Australian Government, Department of Defence, Address by Peter Khalil to the Australia-India Institute Trilateral Maritime Security Dialogue, 24 June 2025. <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/speeches/2025-06-24/address-australian-india-institute-trilateral-maritime-security-dialogue>.
- See also: Boris Pradhan, “India to Join Australia, Japan and the United States for the First time in Talisman Sabre 2025 Military Drill.” *Business Standard*, 30 April 2025. https://www.business-standard.com/external-affairs-defence-security/news/talisman-sabre-2025-india-to-join-australia-military-exercise-for-first-time-us-japan-china-125043000540_1.html.
- 30 Australian Government, Department of Defence News Release, “Strengthening Indo-Pacific Maritime Safety”, 03 February 2025. <https://www.defence.gov.au/news-events/news/2025-02-03/strengthening-indo-pacific-maritime-safety>.
- 31 Embassy of France in India Press Release, “Multinational Exercise LA PEROUSE 25”. <https://in.ambafrance.org/Multinational-exercise-LA-PEROUSE-25-20434>.
- 32 Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs Press Release, “India-France-Australia Joint Statement on the Occasion of the Trilateral Ministerial Dialogue, 04 May 2021”, https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/33845/IndiaFranceAustralia_Joint_Statement_on_the_occasion_of_the_Trilateral_Ministerial_Dialogue_May_04_2021.
- 33 Australian Government, Department of Defence, Address by Peter Khalil to the Australia-India Institute Trilateral Maritime Security Dialogue...
- 34 Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Media Release, “India-France-Australia Joint Statement on the Occasion of the Trilateral Ministerial Dialogue”, 05 June 2024. <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/marise-payne/media-release/india-france-australia-joint-statement-occasion-trilateral-ministerial-dialogue>.

- 35 University of Melbourne, Australia India Institute, Trilateral Maritime Security Dialogue 2025 Brief, April 2025. <https://aii.unimelb.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Trilateral-Maritime-Security-Dialogue-2025-Brief-1.pdf>.
- 36 University of Melbourne, Australia India Institute.....
- 37 University of Melbourne, Australia India Institute.....
- 38 David Brewster et al, “Options for Australia, France and India Trilateral Cooperation”.
- 39 Jessie Jacob, “Let’s Take a Close Look at How we Protect our Undersea Cables”, *The Strategist, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 14 March 2024*. <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/lets-take-a-close-look-at-how-we-protect-our-undersea-cables/> .
- 40 Soham Agarwal, “Seabed Warfare Strategy of France: Lessons for India.” *National Maritime Foundation website, 16 August 2024*. <https://maritimeindia.org/seabed-warfare-strategy-of-france-lessons-for-india/>
- See also:** Soham Agarwal, “Underwater Domain Awareness for and by Submarine Communication Cables.” *National Maritime Foundation website, 03 March 2025*. <http://maritimeindia.org/underwater-domain-awareness-for-and-by-submarine-communication-cables/>
- See also:** Soham Agarwal, “Enhancing Capacity of and Capabilities in Repair of Submarine Communication Cables through International Cooperation.” *National Maritime Foundation website, 14 May 2024*. <https://maritimeindia.org/enhancing-capacity-of-and-capabilities-in-repair-of-submarine-communication-cables-through-international-cooperation/>
- See also:** David Brewster et al, “Options for Australia, France and India Trilateral Cooperation”.
- 41 David Brewster et al, “Options for Australia, France and India Trilateral Cooperation”.
- 42 “How Australia and India can collaborate in the western Indian Ocean.” Perth USAsia Centre. <https://perthusasia.edu.au/research-insights/how-australia-and-india-can-collaborate-in-the-western-indian-ocean/>.
- 43 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, “India-France-Australia 1.5 Trilateral Dialogue” Event, April 2021. <https://carnegieendowment.org/events/2021/04/india-france-australia-15-trilateral-dialogue>.
- 44 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. “India-France-Australia 1.5 Trilateral Dialogue.”
- 45 Shivani Sharma, “India and France to Jointly Assess Maritime Threats in Indian Ocean Region.”

- 46 Australia India Institute, “Trilateral Maritime Security Dialogue 2025 Brief”.
- 47 David Brewster (ed), “The Limits to Maritime Security Collaboration in the Indo-Pacific Region”, *Indo-Pacific Maritime Security: Challenges and Cooperation*, National Security College, Australian National University, 2016. <https://ro.uow.edu.au/ndownloader/files/50562441>.
- 48 David Brewster (ed), “The Limits to Maritime Security Collaboration in the Indo-Pacific Region”.
- 49 Prasanth Parameswaran, “Southeast Asia Maritime Security and Indo-Pacific Strategic Competition,” *Wilson Center*, 13 March 2025. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/southeast-asia-maritime-security-and-indo-pacific-strategic-competition>
- 50 Cauvery Ganapathy. “Addressing the Critical Minerals Conundrum.”
- 51 Cauvery Ganapathy. “Addressing the Critical Minerals Conundrum.”

About the Author

Ms Saaz Lahiri is a Research Associate at the National Maritime Foundation (NMF). She holds a Bachelor’s degree in ‘History and International Relations’, and a Post Graduate Diploma in ‘International Relations’ from Ashoka University. Her research focuses upon the manner in which India’s maritime strategies interface and interact with those of the European Union (EU). She can be reached at eu4.nmf@gmail.com

*Invigorating Maritime
Partnerships Under
India's IORA Leadership*

IORA at 28: India's Chairmanship and the Path Forward

Mr John J Vachaparambil and Ms Muskan Rai

In 1995, former (Late) President Nelson Mandela of the Republic of South Africa during his visit to India said, “*The natural urge of the facts of history and geography should broaden itself to include the concept of an Indian Ocean Rim for socio-economic cooperation and other peaceful endeavours. Recent changes in the international system demand that the countries of the Indian Ocean shall become a single platform*”.¹ This statement emphasised the significance of economic cooperation amongst countries either bordering the Indian Ocean or located within its expanse. It also laid the foundation for the Indian Ocean Rim Initiative (IORI) in March 1995, which was followed by the establishment of the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC) in March 1997.

Today, the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), formerly the IOR-ARC, stands as a principal regional organisation, comprising 23 member States and 12 dialogue partners. Its geographical span extends from South Africa in the west, along the eastern coast of Africa, through the Persian Gulf, across the South and Southeast Asia, and ends with Australia in the east. Annually, 07 March is observed as the ‘**IORA Day**’, dedicated to raising awareness about the Association’s significance and achievements. This year, as it celebrates its 28th anniversary, the Association looks forward to India’s upcoming chairmanship, a testament to the country’s enduring commitment to fostering regional collaboration and economic integration.

This article, therefore, aims to not merely trace the evolution of the IORA but, of greater consequence, to outline India’s path forward, offering insights into the Association’s past achievements and future aspirations under India’s chairmanship.

Jurisprudence of the IORA

In March 1995, representatives from seven countries – Australia, India, Kenya, Mauritius, the Sultanate of Oman, Singapore, and South Africa, convened to explore avenues for enhancing economic cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). This group, initially known as the ‘core group States’ or ‘M-7’, issued a joint statement affirming their commitment to the principles of open regionalism and inclusivity. Their objectives, centred on trade liberalisation and strengthening trade cooperation, also focused on facilitating trade, promoting investment, and fostering economic collaboration.

The second meeting held in September 1996, expanded the membership of the Association to include Indonesia, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Yemen, Tanzania, Madagascar, and Mozambique. With these additions, the group came to be known as the ‘M-14’.

On 07 March 1997, during the first Ministerial Meeting in Port Louis, Mauritius, the Charter establishing the IOR-ARC was adopted (**Refer Figure 1**).²

Figure 1: First Ministerial Meeting of IOR-ARC in 1997



Source: Italy-IORA Committee

<https://iora-italy.org/iora-day-2024-congratulations-on-your-27th-anniversary/>

In 2010, during the 10th meeting of the Council of Ministers (COM), held in Sana'a, Yemen, the Charter was reviewed. In 2014, during the 13th meeting of the COM, convened in Perth, Australia, the Charter was amended, and the Association was renamed the “Indian Ocean Rim Association” (IORA). In 2018, further amendments were made to the Charter during the 18th meeting of the COM, held in Durban, South Africa.³

Mandate of the Association

The Charter of the Association mentions that it aims to foster understanding and mutually beneficial cooperation through a consensus-based, evolutionary, and non-intrusive approach. It does not impose binding laws or contracts, and all decisions are made by consensus. Cooperation is guided by the principles of sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity, political independence, non-interference in the internal affairs of member States, peaceful coexistence, and mutual benefit.

However, the Charter explicitly excludes discussions on bilateral and other contentious issues that could hinder regional cooperation. This ensures that cooperation within the Association does not prejudice the rights and obligations of member States under the economic and trade agreements. Rather than serving as a substitute, IORA aims to reinforce, complement, and remain consistent with the bilateral, plurilateral, and multilateral commitments of its member States, adhering to an open regionalism approach.⁴

Membership of the IORA

The membership of IORA is open exclusively to all sovereign States in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Article 4 of its Charter mentions that to become a member, a State must adhere to the principles and objectives enshrined in the Charter of the Association.⁵ Further, it mentions that the COM can also grant the status of ‘Dialogue Partners’ or ‘Observers’ to other States that have the capacity and interest to contribute to IORA.

Currently, there are 23 member States in the IORA inclusive of the ‘M-14’. It also has 12 dialogue partners – China, Egypt, the European Union, Germany, Italy,

Japan, Republic of Korea, Saudi Arabia, Russia, Turkey, the United Kingdom and the United States of America (**Refer Figure 2**). These dialogue partners are integral to IORA's activities, offering financial and technical assistance, sharing best practices, and participating in its events.⁶

The Association has two specialised agencies — (1) the Regional Centre for Science and Technology Transfer (RCSTT), located in Tehran, Iran, and (2) the Fisheries Support Unit (FSU), located in Muscat, Oman. The former was established in 2008 to promote technological collaboration, while the latter was established in 2011 to enhance regional fisheries cooperation.⁷

IORA also has two observers — (1) the Indian Ocean Research Group (IORG), and (2) the Western Indian Ocean Marine Science Association (WIOMSA) — which actively provide scientific and academic expertise and significantly enrich IORA's initiatives. The IORG and the WIOMSA also conduct in-depth research on marine ecosystems, environmental trends, and sustainable resource management, providing evidence-based insights that inform policy-making and operational strategies. Their academic inputs not only help refine IORA's strategic plans but also facilitate cross-border collaboration among researchers and experts, ensuring that decisions are grounded in the latest scientific findings and international best practices. This collaborative approach strengthens regional resilience and fosters innovative solutions to maritime security threats, disaster preparedness, and environmental conservation.⁸

All levels of IORA meetings, as well as those of its specialised agencies and observers, are required to comply with IORA's "Rules of Procedure". These Rules remain effective until amended by the COM.⁹

Figure 2: IORA member States and Dialogue Partners



**Strengthening Regional Architecture:
Reinforcing Indian Ocean Identity**

Source: IORA (<https://www.iora.int/>)

Achievements, Key Initiatives and Projects of IORA

Over the past 28 years, IORA has made significant strides in promoting regional cooperation and economic integration among its member States. One of its key achievements is the establishment of a robust framework for cooperation across diverse sectors, including trade and investment, maritime technology, and tourism and cultural exchanges.¹⁰ In this regard, IORA has facilitated numerous trade and investment forums, resulting in increased intra-regional trade and investment flows. It has also developed action plans and strategies to enhance collaboration in areas such as the “Blue Economy”, which emphasises the sustainable use of ocean resources.¹¹ Another notable achievement is the strengthening of maritime safety and security in the IOR.¹² Through collaboration with member States and dialogue partners, IORA has addressed challenges such as piracy and illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing (IUUF), as also other maritime threats, while promoting capacity-building and capability-enhancing initiatives to bolster the degree of agency of its member States.

Additionally, in disaster risk management, the Association has coordinated regional responses to natural calamities such as cyclones and tsunamis, establishing mechanisms for information sharing and mutual assistance that have enhanced the region’s resilience.¹³ Similarly, IORA has fostered cooperation in education and human resource development through scholarships, training programmes, and academic exchanges, contributing to a skilled workforce and knowledge sharing across the region.¹⁴

Amongst its many key initiatives, the “IORA Sustainable Development Programme” (ISDP) stands out. This is a flagship initiative, promoting sustainable development through capacity-building, capability-enhancement, and technical assistance.¹⁵ Another significant effort is the “IORA Blue Carbon Hub”, which focuses on the conservation and restoration of blue carbon ecosystems such as mangroves and seagrasses — to mitigate climate change and enhance coastal resilience.¹⁶

Further, the “IORA Women’s Economic Empowerment Initiative” seeks to advance gender equality and a sharply increased degree of participation of women

in economic activities across member States.¹⁷ Additionally, the Association has established working groups, and committees on thematic areas such as trade and investment, tourism, and science and technology, which drive cooperation and oversee the implementation of a variety of projects.

India's Role in the IORA

India's involvement with the Association dates back to its inception, with the vision for the IORA emanating during the visit to India of President Nelson Mandela, in the year 1995. Indeed, being one of the founding members of IORA, India's role has been pivotal. It not only influences IORA's agenda, but also helped India leverage its position as one of the largest economies in the IOR.

India has hosted numerous meetings, including that of the COM,¹⁸ reaffirming its commitment to facilitating regional dialogue and fostering consensus among other member States. Notably, during the 11th meeting of the COM, in 2011, which was held in Bengaluru, India was able to reinvigorate IORA by prioritising its agenda and by setting new directions. Six priority areas were identified during this meeting — (1) maritime safety and security, (2) trade and investment facilitation, (3) fisheries management, (4) disaster risk reduction, (5) academic and science and technology cooperation, and (6) tourism promotion and cultural exchanges.¹⁹

Additionally, within IORA, India has emerged as a champion of the “Blue Economy”, a concept introduced in 2014 to drive sustainable socio-economic growth. The “Blue Economy” encompasses the sustainable development of ocean resources, including fisheries, marine biotechnology, and renewable energy. India has hosted several workshops and shared its expertise. India's “Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry” (FICCI) has played a significant role in these, culminating in seminal publications such as the “*Blue Economy Vision 2025*” (released at the 2017 IORA Meeting of IORA Senior Officials, in Jakarta), and fostering regional dialogue.²⁰ India's efforts have focused on the sustainable management of ocean resources, the promotion of innovations in disciplines such as marine biotechnology, and ensuring that these efforts and endeavours remain aligned with IORA's Action Plan 2017-2021, which includes capacity-building programs in the sectors of fisheries and renewable energy.²¹

India has also played a key role in supporting IORA's specialised agencies through financial and technical contributions. In 2018, the nation established the "IORA-RCSTT [*Regional Centre for Science and Technology Transfer*] Coordination Centre" in Lucknow at the "Central Institute of Medicinal and Aromatic Plants" (CIMAP) to enhance regional collaboration in science and technology.²² This centre facilitates knowledge sharing and the commercialisation of medicinal plants among the IORA member States. Additionally, India contributes to the IORA Special Fund, which supports the Fisheries Support Unit (FSU) in Muscat, Oman.

In 2024, members of the research faculty of the National Maritime Foundation (NMF), New Delhi, participated in a series of workshops and national-level seminars, which substantively contributed to the enhancement of regional cooperation, as also the sharing of expertise and information on a number of maritime issues.²³

India's IORA Chairmanship: Way Ahead

As the Association celebrates its 28th anniversary this year, it will also welcome India as its chair for the period 2025-27. This chairmanship transition, expected to occur during the COM meeting in late-2025, will mark a pivotal moment for India and underscore New Delhi's enduring commitment to regional cooperation and sustainable development across the IOR.

This also aligns closely with India's maritime policy, encapsulated in the acronym 'SAGAR' (Security and Growth for All in the Region) which articulates India's desired end-state of a peaceful, secure, and prosperous maritime region, fitting in perfectly with India's broader "Act East" policy and its lesser known but equally important "Link and Act West" one. Through IORA, India can further institutionalise her role as a net provider of security,²⁴ reinforcing regional stability through cooperative mechanisms rather than relying solely upon unilateral approaches.

Additionally, India's leadership will be instrumental in advancing the objectives outlined in the 'IORA Vision 2030 and Beyond' plan. This plan focuses on economic integration, sustainable development, and climate action — all of which are areas in which India's experience and expertise can drive meaningful progress.²⁵

Strengthening partnerships with dialogue partners and international organisations will be critical in mobilising the necessary resources and technical support required to implement these long-term goals.

Despite its significance and achievements, the IORA continues to face several structural and operational challenges. The diversity of its member States and dialogue partners, ranging from large economies to small island developing States (SIDS), often makes consensus-building complex. Consequently, in its tenure as the IORA chair, India must focus on some specific areas, including:

1. **Strengthening Institutional Frameworks.** India is expected to focus on enhancing IORA's institutional frameworks to improve efficiency and decision-making. Building on initiatives undertaken during its vice-chairmanship (2023–2025), such as the introduction of an e-office system at the IORA Secretariat,²⁶ India will need to push for further digital transformation and procedural streamlining. Efforts should also be directed towards strengthening the Association's financial sustainability by expanding funding sources beyond voluntary contributions.
2. **Promoting Maritime Security.** Given that the Indian Ocean is the principal conduit for approximately 80 *per cent* of global oil trade and 50 *per cent* of containerised cargo, India will need to prioritise safety and security of shipping lanes (ISLs), the countering of illicit maritime activity (including but not limited to piracy) and a variety of other non-traditional threats, so as to ensure uninterrupted maritime commerce.²⁷
3. **Advancing the Blue Economy.** As a long-standing advocate of the “Blue Economy”, India must promote sustainable ocean resource management within IORA. Initiatives such as the “IORA Blue Carbon Hub”, which focuses on conserving and restoring marine ecosystems, align with India's broader environmental commitments. Additionally, India will need to drive collaborative efforts in marine biotechnology, sustainable fisheries, and renewable ocean energy, ensuring that the economic growth does not come at the cost of ecological degradation.

4. **Enhancing Disaster Risk Management.** With its extensive experience in disaster management, India is well-positioned to strengthen regional mechanisms for disaster preparedness and response — and New Delhi must be (and be seen to be) proactive in this critical area. Given the Indian Ocean’s vulnerability to extreme weather events such as cyclones and *tsunamis*, as also rising sea levels, India will need to advocate strongly for enhanced early warning systems, capacity-building programs, and coordinated humanitarian assistance. Institutions such as the Indian National Centre for Ocean Information Services (INCOIS) will play a key role in providing technical expertise to IORA member States.²⁸
5. **Fostering Economic Cooperation.** IORA’s economic agenda remains crucial to regional development. India’s chairmanship must meaningfully address the need to reduce trade barriers (both tariff and non-tariff ones), improve investment flows, and strengthen trade facilitation mechanisms amongst member States. Particular attention will need to be given to digital trade solutions and the enhancement of connectivity between ports in order to ensure resilient supply chains. The integration of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) within the regional trade networks is another area that India will need to emphasise, thereby fostering inclusive economic growth.²⁹

A few additional key takeaways from the recently concluded national conference on “India and IORA: Pathways Ahead” held at Kurukshetra University’s International Centre for Indo-Pacific Studies on 27 February 2025, merit recounting here:

- I. **Strategic Shift from Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific.** Unlike the Asia-Pacific, which has traditionally been dominated by economic cooperation among States of East- and Southeast Asia, the Indo-Pacific construct integrates the Indian Ocean and acknowledges India’s strategic and economic importance. For India to effectively lead in the Indo-Pacific, it must enhance IORA’s visibility and institutional capacity. In this regard, it is critical that under India’s chairmanship, the 2nd IORA Summit organises, so as to provide a high-level platform for member States to align their interests and strategies.

- II. **Addressing Resource Constraints.** A recurring concern involves IORA’s financial limitations. Despite its vast geographical scope, it suffers from seriously inadequate funding, thereby limiting its ability to implement meaningful projects. To overcome this, India should take the lead by providing a generous quantity of “seed funding”, which could serve as a catalyst to attract financial contributions from other member States and dialogue partners. The IORA also needs to market its initiatives far more effectively, particularly by developing a detailed publication outlining past and future projects which could help in engaging business and industry stakeholders ensuring better financial backing and practical implementation of the IORA’s objectives. Expanding funding mechanisms through Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) could also enhance financial sustainability and project implementation capacity.
- III. **Improving Ocean Governance.** It is imperative that a series of high-level conferences be organised on themes such as maritime safety and security, and the Blue Economy, in order to catalyse regional cooperation. Further, it is also necessary to leverage the IORA Indian Ocean University Network (UNIOR) and to meaningfully foster collaboration amongst universities, academics, and think tanks. Additionally, a vigorous process of engagement with the media is essential in order to bring editors and journalists into discussions on maritime affairs. Similarly, an “Alliance of Coastal Communities” within the IORA needs to be established to strengthen grassroot-level connections.
- IV. **Addressing Human Activities vs Ocean Health.** Given the growing concerns over the impact of human activities on ocean health, IORA under India’s chairmanship must adopt a long-term vision for sustainable ocean governance.
- V. **Countering Aggressive Extra-regional Influences.** India must proactively strengthen the IORA’s maritime security framework in order to counter the aggressive policies of some States that choose to be outliers in the prevailing consensually derived international rules-based order. Competing constructs such as the “Indian Ocean Forum”, need to be exposed for what they truly

are — thinly disguised extensions of one or another country’s geopolitical strategy in the IOR. Perhaps the best way to do this is by creating stronger linkages between the IORA and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS).

- VI. **New Mechanisms for Regional Cooperation.** India needs to revive and strengthen its own historical maritime consciousness while highlighting shared cultural and commercial histories of Indian Ocean communities, through the reinvigoration of initiatives such as “*Project Mausam*”. Further, the “SAGAR Samvaad Initiative” must be leveraged as a harbinger for new geopolitical engagements in the Indo-Pacific, reinforcing regional identity and fostering a sense of maritime unity among IORA member States.
- VII. **Strengthening MDA/MSA and Connectivity.** Maritime Situational Awareness, Maritime Domain Awareness, and information-sharing are crucial mechanisms through which IORA can enhance regional security cooperation. India should focus on building flexible strategic partnerships through which information can be meaningfully shared to regional benefit. In this regard, a significant strengthening of the connectivity between IPOI, BIMSTEC, and the QUAD, too, is necessary.³⁰

Conclusion

From its inception in 1997 to date, the potential of IORA for maritime safety and security, economic integration, and sustainable development, has grown exponentially, binding its 23 geographically disparate member States and 12 dialogue partners in a common endeavour to create and consolidate a sub-region in which the comity of nations is both intrinsic and assured, where every nation, big or small, is treated as an equal, where multiple options of governance are recognised as being functions of the independent choice of the people of each nation-State, where poverty stands banished and prosperity sits in its place, where the people of every State of the region can live in dignity and peace, where the State protects the individual and the individual preserves the State in a symbiotic relationship that establishes and spreads stability and prosperity across the region.

India’s foundational contributions — strengthening trade, championing the Blue Economy, and enhancing regional resilience — have culminated in its imminent chairmanship, and the country is poised to advance institutional reforms, security, and sustainability in alignment with the ‘IORA Vision 2030 and Beyond’. With the support of its member States, dialogue partners, and its specialised agencies, IORA is well-positioned to seize emerging opportunities. This moment is not just relevant to reflect upon past successes but to generate and sustain a renewed commitment to a prosperous, stable, and cooperative future for the countries of the IOR — a legacy of unity that continues to evolve.

07 March 2025

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to acknowledge and thank Mrs Traicy J Plackattu for designing the image accompanying this chapter.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Indian Ocean Rim Association, “IORA”, <https://www.iora.int/sites/default/files/2024-08/GUIDE%20TO%20IORA%20as%20at%20AUG%202024%20pdf.pdf>.
- 2 IOR-ARC, “Report of the First Meeting of the Council of Ministers (COM)”, 05-07 March 1997, IOR/1COM/REP/97, <http://iora2689.dev.ghost.mu/media/8221/com-report-1997.pdf>.
- 3 Indian Ocean Rim Association, “Charter”, https://www.un.org/en/ga/sixth/70/docs/iora_charter.pdf.
- 4 *Ibid.* 1, Indian Ocean Rim Association, “IORA”.
- 5 Article 2, & 3, IORA Charter: Fundamental Principles and Objectives of the IORA.
- 6 EEAS, “Indonesia, EU host regional talks on information sharing to enhance maritime safety and security in Indo-Pacific”, 25 May 2023, *Press and Information Team of the Delegation to Indonesia and Brunei Darussalam*, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/indonesia/indonesia-eu-host-regional-talks-information-sharing-enhance-maritime-safety-and-security-indo_en?s=168.

- 7 IORA, “Specialised Agencies”, <https://www.iora.int/specialised-agencies>.
- 8 IORA, “Observer Organization”, <https://www.iora.int/iora-observer-organization>.
- 9 IORA, “Rules of Procedure”, https://www.un.org/en/ga/sixth/70/docs/iora_rules_of_procedure.pdf.
- 10 IORA, <https://www.iora.int/>.
- 11 IORA, “IORA Cross-cutting Issues: Blue Economy”, <https://www.iora.int/blue-economy>.
- 12 IORA, “IORA Priority Areas: Maritime Safety & Security”, <https://www.iora.int/maritime-safety-security>.
- 13 IORA, “IORA Priority Areas: Disaster Risk Management”, <https://www.iora.int/disaster-risk-management>.
- 14 IORA, “IORA Priority Areas: Academic, Science & Technology Cooperation”, <https://www.iora.int/academic-science-technology-cooperation>.
- 15 IORA, “Sustainable Development Programme”, <https://www.iora.int/sustainable-development-programme#:~:text=The%20IORA%20Sustainable%20Development%20Program,as%20well%20as%20streng>.
- 16 Indian Ocean Blue Carbon Hub, “IORA Blue Carbon Hub”, <https://research.csiro.au/iora-blue-carbon-hub/>.
- 17 IORA, “IORA Cross-Cutting Issues: Women’s Economic Empowerment”, <https://www.iora.int/womens-economic-empowerment>.
- 18 IORA, “Council of Ministers (COM)”, <https://www.iora.int/council-ministers>.
- 19 Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, “11th Meeting of the Council of Ministers of IOR-ARC Bengaluru Communique’, 15 November 2011, <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/6916/11th+Meeting+of+the+Council+of+Ministers+of+IOR+ARC+Bengaluru+Communique>.
- 20 Gateway House, “India, IORA and the blue economy”, 25 February 2021, *Ministry of Defence*, <https://www.gatewayhouse.in/india-ior-and-blue-economy/>.
- 21 IORA Action Plan 2017-2021, <http://iora2689.dev.ehost.mu/media/1031/iora-action-plan-7-march-2017.pdf>.
- 22 Business Standard, “IORA’s centre on medicinal plants inaugurated in Lucknow: MEA”, 09 May 2018, *Press Trust of India*, https://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/iora-s-centre-on-medicinal-plants-inaugurated-in-lucknow-mea-118050901493_1.html.
- 23 IORA, “IORA Activities and Participation”, July-September 2024, <https://www.iora.int/sites/default/files/2024-11/IORA%20e-newsletter%20%28July-Sept%202024%29.pdf>.

- 24 Rahul Mishra, “India as a net security provider in the Indo-Pacific: Ambitious but attainable”, 30 April 2024, *The Diplomat*, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/04/india-as-a-net-security-provider-in-the-indo-pacific-ambitious-but-attainable/>.
- 25 IORA, “IORA VISION 2030 AND BEYOND”, <https://www.iora.int/sites/default/files/2024-10/IORA%20Vision%202030%20and%20Beyond.pdf>.
- 26 Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, “20th Meeting of Indian Ocean Rim Association Council of Ministers”, 17 December 2020, <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/33312/20th+Meeting+of+Indian+Ocean+Rim+Association+Council+of+Ministers>.
- 27 IORA, <https://www.iora.int/indian-ocean-rim-association>.
- 28 Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, “Indian Ocean Rim Association and India’s role”, https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/IORA_new.pdf.
- 29 PMO, Mauritius, “IORA’s Experts discuss barriers to trade and investment in the Indian Ocean Region”, 30 January 2020, <https://govmu.org/EN/newsgov/SitePages/2020/IORA%E2%80%99s-Experts-discuss-barriers-to-trade-and-investment-in-the-Indian-Ocean-region.aspx>.
- 30 Ms Muskan Rai, co-author of this article had attended this conference.

About the Authors

Mr John J Vachaparambil is an Associate Fellow at the National Maritime Foundation and meaningfully contributes to the Foundation’s ‘Public International Maritime Law’ (PIML) cluster. His current research focuses on the legal aspects of IUU fishing and the conservation of the marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction (BBNJ). He can be reached at law5.nmf@gmail.com

Ms Muskan Rai is a Research Associate at the National Maritime Foundation, New Delhi, specialising in multilateral constructs of the Indian Ocean Region. Her research focuses on maritime security, regional cooperation, and India’s strategic interests in IORA, IONS and BIMSTEC. She has a bachelor’s degree in History, from the University of Delhi, and a master’s degree in International Relations, Security and Strategy, from the OP Jindal Global University. She can be reached at ior.nmf@gmail.com

Operationalising the IORA–BIMSTEC MoU

Ms Muskan Rai

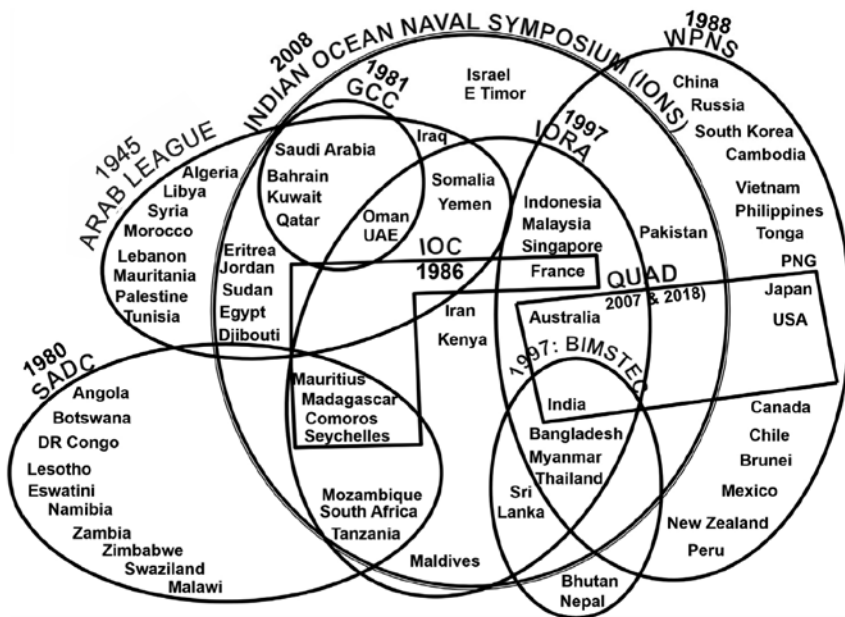
On 03 April 2025, at the Sixth BIMSTEC Summit held in Bangkok, the Secretary-General of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), Mr Sanjiv Ranjan, and the Secretary-General of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), Mr Indra Mani Pandey, signed a landmark Memorandum of Understanding (MoU)¹ that formally linked two of the Indian Ocean Region’s most prominent regional organisations and established a cooperative framework spanning trade and investment, maritime security, science and technology, environment and climate change, and people-to-people engagement. Notably, it placed particular emphasis on emerging sectors such as blue economy, ocean governance, and fisheries management, all of which are critical for ensuring sustainable development across the interconnected maritime spaces of the Bay of Bengal and the wider Indian Ocean.

Arriving at a strategically important time, this MoU coincides with India’s ongoing leadership role as a founding member of BIMSTEC and its assumption of the IORA Chair for the period 2025–2027. It also fits into the current recalibration of India’s maritime policy thereby driving a number of the several maritime strategies of India that emanate from this policy. Indeed, in March of 2025, during an official visit to Mauritius, Prime Minister Narendra Modi introduced an evolved *avatar* of India’s maritime policy, now encapsulated in the acronym MAHASAGAR (*Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions*) — which has replaced the earlier maritime policy acronym SAGAR (*Security and Growth for All in the Region*).² MAHASAGAR retains the regional emphasis of SAGAR but extends its strategic focus to encompass not only subsume India’s expansive conceptualisation

of the Indo-Pacific but also the wider Global South, reinforcing India’s commitment to equitable maritime cooperation, inclusive growth, and capacity-building across regions. The Government of India has subsequently framed MAHASAGAR as a guiding doctrine³ for its ocean endeavours. Importantly, the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) — a non-treaty-based, voluntary initiative aimed at promoting cooperation for a free, open, and rules-based Indo-Pacific region — continues to provide the first-order specificity to this maritime policy/doctrine.

With the signing of the IORA–BIMSTEC MoU, two of the major institutional frameworks operative within the Indian Ocean — *perhaps better thought-of as the western segment of the Indo-Pacific, with the Pacific Ocean forming the eastern segment*) — are sought to be harmonised under the policy rubric of MAHASAGAR. As may be seen from **Figure 1**, there are, of course, other important multilateral institutional frameworks extant within

Figure 1: Multilateral Constructs in the Western Segment of the Indo-Pacific (the Indian Ocean)



Source: Vice Admiral Chauhan, “India’s Maritime Geopolitics”, NMF Internship Teaching-Capsule, PowerPoint Slides, 18 February 2025

Figure 2



Source: Vice Admiral Chauhan, “India’s Maritime Geopolitics”, NMF Internship Teaching-Capsule, PowerPoint Slides, 18 February 2025

Council, the Southern Africa Development Community [SADC], amongst others). However, as may be seen in **Figure 2**, given the comparative inclusiveness of IORA (twenty-three members, twelve dialogue partners, two specialised agencies and two observers) — which was established in 1997 as the “*Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation*” before being renamed in 2014 as the “*Indian Ocean Rim Association*” — the IORA-BIMSTEC partnership offers an exciting template that could be used for similar sub-regional harmonisation.

As may be seen in **Figure 3**, the agenda of IORA —which was founded in 1997 as the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC) but was renamed IORA in 2014 — covers maritime safety and security, trade and investment facilitation, fisheries management, disaster risk management, science and technology cooperation, tourism, women’s economic empowerment, and the blue economy,⁴ and addresses a broad swath of maritime issues from security to sustainable development.

Turning to BIMSTEC, it has seven members (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand). As an institutional construct, Figure 1 above shows that although four of its seven member-states (India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Thailand) are present in IORA as well, BIMSTEC is not quite a subset of IORA in that it incorporates Bhutan and Nepal within its ambit, while IORA does not. The five core sectors of BIMSTEC are connectivity;

environment and climate change; people-to-people contact; science, technology and innovation; security; and trade, investment, and development, plus eight sub-sectors such as the blue economy, energy, disaster management, and fisheries⁵. It should be noted that while there are significant thematic overlaps with IORA, BIMSTEC focuses principally, if not exclusively, upon the Bay of Bengal. BIMSTEC is, therefore, often viewed as a “minilateral” construct.

This semantic distinction between a multilateral construct and a minilateral one notwithstanding, what is of very much greater significance is that the MoU under review institutionalises cooperation between two complementary multinational frameworks. Through this convergence, both IORA and BIMSTEC are positioned to capitalise upon each other’s comparative advantages. For instance, BIMSTEC’s established connectivity and corridor-development mechanisms can feed into IORA’s wider trade and economic facilitation initiatives.⁶ Concurrently, IORA’s specialised working groups — such as the “Blue Economy Working Group” — can transfer domain-specific knowledge and best practices to BIMSTEC member countries, particularly in areas such as ocean governance and sustainable resource management.

Figure 3: Priority Areas of IORA



Source: Vice Admiral Chauhan, “India’s Maritime Geopolitics”, NMF Internship Teaching-Capsule, PowerPoint Slides, 18 February 2025

The MoU has been widely welcomed, with BIMSTEC leaders describing it as a “*milestone in deepening inter-regional cooperation*” and highlighting its potential to enable collaborative projects, enhance institutional capacities, and promote structured knowledge exchange.⁸ Operationally, this agreement permits the rationalisation of parallel efforts — for example, unifying fisheries management and disaster resilience programmes, which might otherwise be duplicated — thereby optimising resources, avoiding redundancies, and enlarging the potential scope for donor engagement and multilateral financing. More broadly, the MoU aligns with India’s Indo-Pacific approach, which combines ASEAN centrality with Indian Ocean regionalism.⁹ It provides a mechanism to actualise India’s maritime policy of *MAHASAGAR* (poorly described by an MEA source as a “*vision*”)¹⁰ as well as the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), both of which seek to integrate regional institutions into a cohesive and mutually reinforcing architecture.

While the IPOI is not a regional framework in and of itself but rather, a collation of thematic maritime lines-of thrust, it nevertheless invokes synergy with existing regional frameworks such as IORA and BIMSTEC and, as has already been stated, provides first-order specificity to India’s maritime policy of MAHASAGAR.

India’s Strategic Role

India’s leadership is pivotal at this juncture. As it prepares to assume the chair of IORA this year, India is uniquely positioned to advance the agenda of intra-regional cooperation outlined in the IORA–BIMSTEC MoU. Importantly, India has long regarded BIMSTEC as the institutional cornerstone of its “Act East” policy and a vital complement to its “Neighbourhood First” approach in the Bay of Bengal.¹¹ As the IORA Chair, New Delhi can — and, indeed, must — play a decisive role in translating the MoU’s ambitions into action, steering projects through working groups, aligning sectoral priorities, and building consensus across member States. With Bangladesh, too, assuming the chair of BIMSTEC this year,¹² India’s informal influence across both platforms creates a rare window of opportunity to institutionalise India–Indian Ocean cooperation and deliver strategic outcomes.

Indo-Pacific Framework

To effectively operationalise the IORA–BIMSTEC Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), it is imperative to reference their joint, collaborative efforts to one or more of the maritime lines-of-thrust of the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI). Such alignment would not only enhance regional cooperation but also attract global partners and funding, thereby preventing policy silos.

For instance, the “IORA Blue Carbon Hub”, established in Perth and led by Australia, focuses on the protection and restoration of blue carbon ecosystems such as mangroves, tidal marshes, and seagrasses.¹³ These ecosystems play a crucial role in climate mitigation and adaptation, supporting livelihoods and reducing disaster risks. This initiative aligns with the IPOI’s marine ecology spoke, which represents a specific maritime line-of-thrust. Similarly, BIMSTEC’s emphasis on environmental and disaster management complements the IPOI’s disaster risk reduction and management spoke.

It is noteworthy that the European Union (EU) became the 12th Dialogue Partner of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) in October 2023, and subsequently, in February 2025, volunteered to lead one or more of the seven maritime lines of thrust represented by the seven spokes of the deeply interconnected web that constitutes the IPOI (even though the specific line[s] of thrust that the EU would like to advance has not yet been promulgated). This dual engagement of the EU with IORA and the IPOI, exemplifies how major global actors can integrate into regional architectures, effectively serving as conduits for a variety of cooperative and/or collaborative endeavours. The European Union’s (EU) participation in both IORA and IPOI serves as a precedent for such integrative approaches.¹⁴ The EU’s involvement has amplified initiatives like sustainable fisheries management, combating maritime crime, and marine conservation. This model demonstrates how major global actors can integrate into regional architectures, effectively serving as conduits linking various cooperative frameworks.

To replicate this success, IORA and BIMSTEC need to be well integrated into all seven of the IPOI’s maritime lines-of-thrust. Joint initiatives under the

IORA–BIMSTEC MoU should be explicitly declared as contributing to specific IPOI spokes/pillars/lines-of-thrust. Such alignment would not only attract global partners and donors but also ensure that new inter-regional projects are recognised as core components of India’s Indo-Pacific outreach, fulfilling the objectives of MAHASAGAR and IPOI.

Thematic Analysis

Maritime Security and Safety

Security of sea lines and coastal states is a shared priority. Both IORA and BIMSTEC mandate security and counter-piracy cooperation. The MoU’s inclusion of “*maritime security and connectivity*”¹⁵ opens the door to coordinated patrols, information-sharing, and best practices to counter non-traditional threats. For example, Bangladesh and Myanmar have overlapping maritime boundary issues and counter-smuggling challenges;¹⁶ Sri Lanka and India face piracy threats in the southern Indian Ocean.¹⁷ Joint forums can synchronise rules-of-engagement (e.g. combined naval and coast guard exercises) and deepen maritime domain awareness. BIMSTEC has already established an “Expert Group on Maritime Security”,¹⁸ linking it with the “Information Fusion Centre-IOR” (based in Gurugram, India). This could create a broader intelligence network for alerts and MDA. Likewise, harmonising maritime law enforcement databases and legal frameworks (e.g. on ship registries or fisheries violations) would help tackle cross-border IUU (illegal, unreported, unregulated) fishing and trafficking.

A unified security approach would deter crime and stabilise the region. Operationally, coordinated patrols and shared domain-awareness systems (radars, AIS) would enhance early warning of incidents (e.g. stowaways or intrusions) and speed joint response. Fragmentation and uncoordinated actions at sea, by contrast, risk creating gaps that transnational criminals could exploit. Economic losses from piracy and smuggling (which the World Bank has estimated at billions annually in the IOR) would persist unchecked.¹⁹ Moreover, rival powers could offer security deals to smaller littorals (as China has begun to do), which might undercut regional trust.²⁰

Blue Economy, Climate and Environmental Resilience

Climate change and marine resources appear to lie at the heart of the agendas of both IORA and BIMSTEC.²¹ Natural mechanisms for carbon sequestration (such as mangroves and seagrasses) are prime examples, given the threats that they face from unsustainable human development. The Australia-led “IORA Blue Carbon Hub” has been engaging think-tanks to explore the use of carbon markets to finance mangrove restoration.²² A joint endeavour between IORA and BIMSTEC member States to develop a ‘Bay-to-Rim’ Blue Carbon Market could pool projects in Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, Seychelles, etc. As things stand, several of these projects are being duplicated by the two institutional mechanisms. Such a joint endeavour would also help in standardising measurements and the issuance of shared carbon credits —examples that could then be proliferated to other institutional constructs such as the IOC and SADC. Likewise, a unified credit registry could reduce transaction costs and make credit fungible across the region. Both IORA and BIMSTEC could agree — as early as 2026 — on common MRV (Measurement, Reporting and Verification) methodologies and launch pilot projects. Given that nations pursue blue carbon agreements only bilaterally at present, such a mechanism would prevent fragmentation and be more effective in attracting global funds such as the UN’s “Blue Carbon Fund”.²³

The fact that fisheries are critical requires no elaboration. Taken in aggregate, BIMSTEC member States account for a large share of the overall Indian Ocean catch.²⁴ A “*Bay-to-Rim Fisheries Code*” could establish a regional code of conduct that seeks to counter IUU fishing by requiring certified tracking (catch documentation) and sustainable quotas, akin to the UNFAO Port State Measures²⁵ or the EU IUU Regulation.²⁶ A joint “*Seafood Traceability Certification*” (an “eco-label”) would allow products from the Bay-Indian Ocean region to command premium prices in global markets (similar to the manner in which the “Marine Stewardship Council” label works).²⁷ For example, by 2027 BIMSTEC’s fisheries groups could coordinate with IORA’s Fishers Forum and jointly issue the first “*Bay-to-Rim Sustainably Sourced*” label. Scientific exchanges (e.g., fish-stock assessments) and shared surveillance (e.g., combined maritime patrols) could then act as effective supplementary and complementary mechanisms.

A unified blue carbon and fisheries framework would multiply conservation gains — enhancing carbon sequestration and ecosystem services through rehabilitated mangroves, while curbing IUU and overfishing to restore fish stocks and coastal livelihoods. The integration of “green financing” mechanisms such as carbon credits and sustainable seafood certification, offers a direct revenue stream for local communities engaged in ecological stewardship. Conversely, doing nothing risks continued degradation leading to the destruction of mangroves as a consequence of a lack of carbon finance, fish stocks collapsing, and lost opportunities to capture climate funding (which is already being fiercely competed-for). Failure to align standards could also invite market barriers. For instance, EU bans on unsustainable fish imports could significantly fetter exports.

Energy conversion from Ocean Renewable Energy Sources (ORER) such as offshore wind energy, ocean-mechanical energy conversion and ocean-thermal energy conversion, constitutes another frontier that could be meaningfully pushed by this MoU. Given that ocean renewable energy is a key component of a “blue” model of economic development, BIMSTEC’s energy sub-sector and IORA’s blue economy group could easily collaborate on the development of feasibility studies for Bay of Bengal offshore wind or tidal projects, possibly via an Indo-Pacific energy research consortium.

Marine Spatial Planning and Data-Sharing

The Bay of Bengal and its superset, namely, the Indian Ocean, face a common challenge by way of competition for marine spaces. This competition incorporates, *inter alia*, shipping lanes, fisheries grounds, conservation areas, and tourism zones. It hardly needs to be emphasised that *ad hoc* efforts at deconfliction or spatial management breed only inefficiencies and follow-on conflicts.²⁸ A joint “*Marine Spatial Planning (MSP) Taskforce*” would harmonise ocean zoning across the maritime area of interest of IORA, while enabling BIMSTEC to focus such harmonisation upon the Bay of Bengal, which is, it is emphasised, included, in its entirety, within the IORA maritime space. Yet, by mapping overlaps (for instance, transboundary fish migration routes, coral reef areas, shipping corridors), the taskforce can recommend

allocations — designating, for example, a marine protected area that transcends national boundaries, or aligning shipping lanes to avoid prime fishing grounds. It is further recommended that this plan be underpinned by a “*Regional Ocean Data Observatory*” which is envisaged as a shared data-platform where States upload bathymetry, fisheries surveys, ocean currents, weather models, etc. Data-sharing agreements and standardised formats (similar to UNESCO’s IOC programs)²⁹ would ensure that all members, large and small, benefit. Moreover, harmonising marine-space zoning and enabling cross-border data sharing will eliminate jurisdictional gaps —especially given that the overwhelming bulk of the maritime space lies outside national jurisdiction. Likewise, a unified system for exchanging meteorological and oceanographic information would allow BIMSTEC States to tap directly into IORA’s Indian Ocean *Tsunami* Warning System in real time, while IORA States could similarly draw upon BIMSTEC’s more granular, local weather and sea-state forecasts relevant to the Bay of Bengal. This would strengthen regional resilience and ensure that vulnerable coastlines receive timely warnings and protection.

Efficient MSP would maximise sustainable ocean use and minimise conflict. Moreover, shared data (from satellites to buoys) lowers costs and avoids duplication of expensive hydrographic surveys. On the other hand, if this is neglected, coastal States might end-up initiating unilateral projects (ports, dredging, fishing zones) that damage neighbours (an example would be sediment runoff harming another country’s reefs) and miss synergistic opportunities. Poor coordination can cause clashes of interest (mercantile shipping vs fishing, for instance) and false starts (when two agencies study the same thing in isolation).

Connectivity, Ports and Trade-Facilitation

Economic connectivity (ports, shipping, corridors, etc.) is another common interest. The focus upon trade and investment facilitation³⁰ and on “transport connectivity” (a BIMSTEC pillar) within the ambit of the MoU under review highlights this. Rather than build new infrastructure in isolation, the two institutional frameworks would do better to integrate their respective digital and physical transport networks. One actionable idea is a “*Smart-Port Collaborative Network*”. By interlinking major

ports (for example, Colombo, Chennai, Chittagong, Krabi, Port-Louis, Maputo, etc.) through a common digital system, customs and logistics information could be shared in real-time. The adoption of AI and IoT (automated cranes, blockchain cargo tracking, predictive maintenance, etc.) across IORA–BIMSTEC ports would standardise efficiency gains. A joint “*Digital Trade Facilitation Platform*” could likewise be developed (perhaps under India’s leadership, drawing on its “Port Community System” experience) to allow merchants in, say, Bangladesh to book cargo space on, say, a Sri Lankan ship, seamlessly, with a one-stop customs clearance.

Beyond hard infrastructure, the two organisations can coordinate corridor planning. Examples might include linking BIMSTEC’s planned trans-Asian highways or port links (such as the planned Myanmar–Bangladesh coastal highway) into IORA’s ocean shipping networks. As a concrete step, a feasibility study could be commissioned with a completion-target of 2026, for a multimodal “*Bay-to-Rim Corridor*”, combining shipping lanes with coastal rail/road links (backed by IORA’s “Transport Taskforce”³¹ and BIMSTEC’s “Connectivity Working Group”).

Trade facilitation reduces shipping time and cost, thereby boosting exports. Shared digital standards would translate into fewer delays at borders and be beneficial for landlocked (perhaps better described as “land-linked”) BIMSTEC members — Nepal and Bhutan — to access seaports, and for islandic IORA States to access markets. A common platform attracts investment as it enhances the ease of doing business. Failure to act would mean continued fragmentation, with each country’s port systems using different technologies, leading to avoidable delays, and fostering corruption. Emerging technologies (AI, IoT) would slip into disjointed adoption, missing network effects.

Science, Technology, Education and People-to-People Ties

The MoU also underscores the importance of cooperation in terms of science and technology, coupled with enhanced “*people-to-people contact*”, recognising that academic and civil-society engagement underpins enduring regional integration. Establishing an annual “IORA–BIMSTEC Maritime Innovation Challenge” would create a structured platform for students and early-career professionals in marine

sciences, oceanography, and maritime technology to collaborate on concrete solutions.³² Hosting the event as a “hackathon” or “startup competition” modelled on successful formats such as the “Storm 2025 Maritime Hackathon”³³ and “Maritime Hackathon 2025” that was held in Singapore³⁴ would tap into interdisciplinary skills and spark rapid prototyping. Co-hosting responsibilities shared between India’s National Maritime Foundation (NMF) and institutions such as the “Bangladesh Oceanographic Research Institute” would enable the NMF’s policy-research expertise³⁵ and BORI’s mandate in oceanographic science³⁶ to be leveraged to regional benefit.

Seed funding and mentorship, inspired by best practices in early-stage financing and accelerator programmes, could be awarded to winning teams to develop pilot projects. Proposed prototypes might include autonomous plastic-cleanup robots (akin to concepts showcased at the Ocean Hackathon),³⁷ low-cost sensor kits for artisanal fisherfolk,³⁸ and climate-resilient mariculture systems designed to withstand rising sea temperatures. These initiatives would drive innovation, nurture regional networks of young experts, and translate academic knowledge into tangible blue-economy solutions. By corollary, a failure to establish such a challenge, risks perpetuating siloed research efforts, slowing technology transfer, and undermining the next generation’s capacity to address transboundary maritime challenges.

A recommended timeline is to launch the first challenge at a joint side-event of the 2026 IORA Council and BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting, with prizes aligned to MoU-engendered themes (for example, with one track being utilised for coastal resilience, one for blue economy startups).

A parallel recommendation is to form an “Academic Consortium on Indo-Pacific Maritime Studies”, comprising universities and think tanks from IORA/BIMSTEC countries. This consortium would coordinate joint research grants and hold annual conferences (possibly merging IORA Day with BIMSTEC research symposia). A “Track 1.5 dialogue series” involving maritime think tanks from IORA and BIMSTEC (the latter including Nepal and Bhutan, both of which have meaningful interest in the Bay of Bengal) would institutionalise exchange on policy ideas and provide ‘second-order’ and ‘third-order’ specificity to MAHASAGAR, building upon the first-order specificity that is already provided by the IPOI and the disambiguation

of its seven maritime lines-of-thrust through forums such as the annual “Indo-Pacific Regional Dialogue” (IPRD) organised for the Indian Navy by the NMF. There is no gainsaying that such youth challenges and academic networks build human capital and public support. They foster a generation of professionals with cross-regional ties and a shared sense of purpose. Such bottom-up linkages strengthen institutional cooperation (graduates become policymakers and technocrats who know each other). If neglected, the integration remains purely inter-governmental and top-down; opportunities for innovation and community-building are lost, and the region may lack the research to guide decisions.

Disaster Resilience and Early Warning Systems

The Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean more generally constitute a major global hotspot for extreme weather events and for accelerated sea-level rise. The MoU’s emphasis on environment, climate change and disaster management, logically extends to joint preparedness within both institutional constructs. To translate this into operational readiness, the creation of a “Joint Climate Resilience Node” is recommended — a fusion centre integrating both frameworks to harmonise early warning systems and data protocols. Currently, many South Asian countries participate in networks like the “Indian Ocean Tsunami Warning System” and regional hydromet forums, but communications tend to remain fragmented.³⁹ The proposed node would standardise protocols and share real-time alerts for cyclones, floods and *tsunamis* across Bay-Indian Ocean coastal and island States of IORA and of all seven constituent States of BIMSTEC. For example, Bangladesh’s cyclone bulletins and India’s nuclear event alerts could be disseminated on a unified platform, while remote-sensing data (satellite imagery on sea-level rise, storm tracks, etc.) would be pooled and analysed collaboratively. By 2026, country NMHS (**National Meteorological and Hydrological Services** agencies) should agree on interoperable technology (e.g., common data formats, joint simulation drills, etc.). An integrated early warning system saves lives. As the World Bank notes, South Asia sees an unprecedented “*new climate normal*” of storms and floods,⁴⁰ and cross-border sharing of forecasts has proven lifesaving (as seen when Indian forecasters warned Myanmar of Cyclone *Mocha*).⁴¹ The joint mapping of vulnerable zones (part of the proposed node’s charter

of work) would help coordinate evacuations and relief. Without this, slow warnings and uncoordinated responses will continue to cause preventable disaster losses (past cyclones killed tens of thousands and cost billions in damage). It would also forfeit the chance to leverage international climate funds designated for adaptation (since donors favour regional risk-sharing arrangements). The proposed node could be hosted at the proposed BIMSTEC Centre of Excellence in Disaster Management in India⁴² or at the IORA Secretariat, acting as a “nerve centre” for regional crises. This would align with broader initiatives such as the World Bank’s “South Asia Hydromet Forum” which already underscores the need for regional collaboration in terms of early warning⁴³ and would build upon (and expand) such platforms to integrate IORA and BIMSTEC members fully.

Strategic and Operational Challenges

It must be acknowledged that implementing the IORA–BIMSTEC agenda presents significant challenges.

Institutional limitations. The MoU is a framework agreement but lacks dedicated funding or a joint secretariat. IORA’s Secretariat in Mauritius and BIMSTEC’s in Dhaka are both understaffed and budget constrained. Without earmarked financial commitments (from members or external donors), projects risk being stillborn. There is also a mandate overlap. Some of the proposed initiatives span multiple pillars (for example, port connectivity touches trade, environment, and security), requiring careful coordination among the working groups of both structures. Differing institutional cultures, too, can slow progress. BIMSTEC, for instance, has often been criticised for its slow decision-making and resource gaps, while IORA’s broad membership means attaining consensus can be a complicated process.

Political factors. Not all BIMSTEC States belong to IORA (for instance, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar are not members of IORA), creating potential “free rider” issues. Likewise, IORA includes African members and others outside the Bay, who may not prioritise projects that are specific to the Bay of Bengal. Ensuring balanced representation (e.g. giving a voice to both larger States and smaller island members) will be tricky.

Another challenge is duplication and fragmentation. Several existing mechanisms already address similar issues. Examples are ASEAN-IOR dialogues, Bay of Bengal coalitions, the Quad's Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, etc.⁴⁴ The Quad, for instance, coordinates maritime security drills and supply-chain initiatives. Unless aligned, IORA–BIMSTEC work might step on its toes or *vice versa*. India values its strategic autonomy and may hesitate to commit BIMSTEC fully to Indo-Pacific blocs like the Quad. Care must be taken to complement rather than duplicate. Yet coordination is possible. For instance, Quad partners could be invited to support data platforms (without formally linking it to that grouping). In short, avoiding “stovepipes” will require clear governance: each new initiative should have an agreed lead country or rotating chair, deliverables, and a timeline.

Finally, there are significant gaps in capacity (material wherewithal) and capability (human skills, training, ingenuity, innovation, etc.). Some BIMSTEC members have limited technical ability (for example, in sophisticated port-ICT or climate modeling). Targeted capability-enhancement, through workshops, training, and capacity-building through the provision of tangible technical assets, must accompany new schemes. Moreover, geopolitical sensitivities lurk: any overt security component could alarm observers (notably China). Hence, the focus on development/technical cooperation is prudent. Nonetheless, if India, BIMSTEC and IORA leaders leave these challenges unaddressed, the MoU will amount to little more than symbolism. It will be imperative to pre-empt funding shortfalls, clarify institutional roles, and communicate the benefits clearly to all stakeholders.

Summary of Recommendations

1. **Align with IPOI and MAHASAGAR.** Explicitly link IORA–BIMSTEC joint initiatives to specific maritime lines-of-thrust of the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), thereby attracting global partners and donors and fulfilling MAHASAGAR's strategic objectives.
2. **Coordinate Maritime Security.** Conduct joint patrols and combined naval/coast guard exercises under the MoU, synchronising rules-of-engagement to deepen maritime domain awareness. Link BIMSTEC's Expert Group on

Maritime Security with IORA's Information Fusion Centre, and harmonise maritime law-enforcement data (e.g. ship registries, fisheries violations) to counter IUU fishing and smuggling.

3. **Create a Bay-to-Rim Blue Carbon Market.** Pool mangrove and seagrass restoration projects across IORA–BIMSTEC States by developing a joint 'Bay-to-Rim' blue carbon market. Agree on common MRV (measurement, reporting and verification) methodologies and establish a unified carbon-credit registry to standardise accounting and make credits fungible region-wide.
4. **Develop a Bay-to-Rim Fisheries Code and Eco-label.** Establish a regional "Bay-to-Rim Fisheries Code of Conduct" (including certified catch documentation and quotas) to combat IUU fishing, and launch a joint "Seafood Traceability" eco-label (e.g., a "Bay-to-Rim Sustainably Sourced" certification) by 2027. Coordinate BIMSTEC fisheries agencies with IORA's Fishers Forum to issue the label, supported by scientific exchanges (fish-stock assessments) and combined patrols.
5. **Pursue offshore renewable energy cooperation.** Leverage the MoU to advance ocean-renewable energy projects: for example, jointly conduct feasibility studies on Bay of Bengal offshore wind and tidal energy via an Indo-Pacific energy research consortium involving BIMSTEC's energy pillar and IORA's blue economy group.
6. **Form a Marine Spatial Planning (MSP) Taskforce with a Shared Data Observatory.** Establish a joint MSP Taskforce to harmonise ocean zoning across the IORA-BIMSTEC maritime space (mapping transboundary corridors, reefs, migration routes, etc.) and recommend area allocations (e.g., transnational marine protected zones). Underpin this effort with a Regional Ocean Data Observatory — a common data-sharing platform where all States upload bathymetry, ecological surveys, ocean currents, weather models, etc., using standardised formats.
7. **Unify Early-Warning and Meteorological Data.** Standardise cross-border exchange of meteorological and oceanographic information so that

BIMSTEC States can tap into IORA's Indian Ocean tsunami/cyclone warning system in real time, and IORA States can draw upon BIMSTEC's detailed Bay of Bengal forecasts. This integrated data sharing will strengthen regional disaster resilience by ensuring timely alerts to all vulnerable coasts.

8. **Establish a Smart-Port Collaborative Network.** Interlink major IORA and BIMSTEC ports (e.g. Colombo, Chennai, Chittagong, Krabi, Port Louis, Maputo) via a common digital platform to share customs and logistics data in real time. Leverage AI and IoT technologies (e.g. automated cranes, blockchain cargo tracking) to harmonise efficiency gains across the network.
9. **Develop a Digital Trade Facilitation Platform.** Create an IORA–BIMSTEC digital trade portal (potentially India-led, drawing on its Port Community System) to enable seamless inter-regional shipping. For instance, allow merchants in Bangladesh to book cargo space on Sri Lankan vessels (and vice versa) with one-stop customs clearance.
10. **Study a Multimodal Bay-to-Rim Corridor.** Commission (by 2026) a feasibility study for a “Bay-to-Rim Corridor” that integrates coastal shipping lanes with coastal rail/road networks. Coordinate this project through IORA's Transport Taskforce and BIMSTEC's Connectivity Working Group, linking planned trans-Asian highways and port links (e.g. the Myanmar–Bangladesh coastal highway) into the Indian Ocean shipping system.
11. **Launch an Annual Maritime Innovation Challenge.** Organise an IORA–BIMSTEC Maritime Innovation Challenge each year (hackathon/startup competition format) co-hosted by India's National Maritime Foundation and institutions like Bangladesh's Oceanographic Research Institute. This challenge would convene students and young professionals in marine science and technology to prototype solutions (e.g. autonomous cleanup robots, low-cost marine sensors, climate-resilient aquaculture) for regional blue-economy needs.
12. **Fund and time the Innovation Challenge.** Provide seed funding and mentorship (inspired by tech-accelerator models) to the winning teams of the innovation challenge for pilot project development. Schedule the

inaugural challenge as a joint side-event of the 2026 IORA Council and BIMSTEC Ministerial meeting, with prizes aligned to MoU themes (e.g. coastal resilience, blue startups).

13. **Establish an Academic Consortium and Track-1.5 Dialogue.** Create an “Academic Consortium on Indo-Pacific Maritime Studies” linking universities and think tanks from IORA and BIMSTEC countries to coordinate joint research grants and convene annual conferences (potentially merging IORA Day with BIMSTEC symposia). At the same time, institute a Track-1.5 dialogue series among regional maritime think tanks (including Nepalese and Bhutanese scholars) to exchange policy ideas and ensure knowledge flow across both organisations.
14. **Create a Joint Climate Resilience Node.** Set-up a joint fusion centre (the “Joint Climate Resilience Node”) to fully integrate IORA and BIMSTEC disaster-management. This node would harmonise early-warning protocols and share real-time alerts on cyclones, floods and tsunamis across all Bay-Indian Ocean littoral and island States.
15. **Ensure Interoperable NMHS technologies.** Require national meteorological and hydrological services (NMHS) in all member States to agree (by 2026) on interoperable technologies and data standards (common formats, joint simulation drills, etc.). This will enable the envisioned unified early-warning system to function effectively and save lives.
16. **Host the Resilience Centre at a Regional Hub.** Designate an existing institution (for example, the proposed BIMSTEC Centre of Excellence in Disaster Management in India or the IORA Secretariat) to host the Joint Climate Resilience Node. As a regional “*nerve centre*,” it would coordinate real-time alerts and serve as a focal point for Bay-Indian Ocean crisis response.

Conclusion

The IORA–BIMSTEC MoU has the potential to transform regional cooperation into a tangible “Blue Futures” agenda. It is not just symbolic. As officials have noted, this

partnership will “*facilitate joint initiatives, capacity development programmes, knowledge exchange, and best practice sharing*”. But realising that potential requires moving beyond summit photo-ops to concrete projects. India, on the cusp of leading IORA and a senior BIMSTEC partner, must champion the listed initiatives and ensure follow-through. By embracing innovative ideas like a shared carbon credit market, coordinated MSP, region-wide trade platforms, and a united early warning hub, the grouping can deliver real benefits, ranging from climate resilience to economic growth, all across the Indo-Pacific. The cost of inertia is high. Ecosystem services will degrade, disasters will strike unprepared coasts, and strategic vacuums may invite instability. By contrast, a well-executed IORA–BIMSTEC agenda will yield a more integrated, prosperous, and secure Indian Ocean, incorporating both littoral and hinterland States of the Bay of Bengal, and offer a fungible model of cooperation and collaboration to the whole of the Indo-Pacific. Policymakers should, therefore, treat this MoU as a launchpad — one that, if operationalised with urgency and diligence, chart a shared course for the future to the benefit of all.

09 May 2025

ENDNOTES

- 1 Indian Ocean Rim Association, “Press Release – Signing of Memorandum of Understanding between IORA and BIMSTEC,” April 3, 2025, <https://www.iora.int/press-releases>.
- 2 Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs. “Prime Minister Narendra Modi Unveils MAHASAGAR Vision in Mauritius.” March 2025. <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm>.
- 3 *Unlike militaries, which distinguish between the terms “doctrine” and ‘policy’, civilian echelons in many governments tend to use these two terms as synonyms.*
- 4 Indian Ocean Rim Association. “Priority Areas and Cross-Cutting Issues.” Accessed April 5, 2025. <https://iora.int/en/priorities>.
- 5 IORA. “Priority Areas and Cross-Cutting Issues.”
- 6 Associated Press. “Leaders in the Bay of Bengal Region Agree to Improve Trade Ties and Disaster Relief Efforts.” April 4, 2025. <https://apnews.com/article/ef0acb22640a4b66ed7d357d169a9ee8>.

- 7 IORA Secretariat, “Press Release: Signing of Memorandum of Understanding between IORA and BIMSTEC”, 03 April 2025, <https://www.iora.int/sites/default/files/2025-04/Press%20Release%20-%20SIGNING%20OF%20MEMORANDUM%20OF%20UNDERSTANDING%20BETWEEN%20IORA%20AND%20BIMSTEC.pdf>
- 8 IORA Secretariat, “Press Release: Signing of Memorandum.....”
- 9 Observer Research Foundation. “The Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative: Towards a Coherent Indo-Pacific Policy for India.” Accessed April 10, 2025. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-indo-pacific-oceans-initiative-towards-a-coherent-indo-pacific-policy-for-india>.
- 10 Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, “Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi Announced Vision MAHASAGAR—‘Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions’ for the Global South in Mauritius,” March 12, 2025, <https://www.mea.gov.in/newsdetail1.htm?13355%2F=>.
- 11 “PM Modi Injects Dynamism in BIMSTEC Through Neighbourhood First Policy, Act East Policy, MAHASAGAR Vision,” *The Tribune*, April 4, 2025, <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/world/pm-modi-injects-dynamism-in-bimstec-through-neighbourhood-first-policy-act-east-policy-mahasagar-vision/>.
- 12 “Bangladesh Takes Over Chairmanship of BIMSTEC for Next Two Years,” *Adda247*, April 5, 2025, <https://currentaffairs.adda247.com/bangladesh-takes-over-chairmanship-of-bimstec-for-next-two-years/>.
- 13 “IORA Blue Carbon Hub,” CSIRO Research, accessed April 29, 2025, <https://research.csiro.au/iora-blue-carbon-hub/>.
- 14 European External Action Service. “Boosting EU Indo-Pacific Partnerships: Chair’s Press Release Following the EU Indo-Pacific Ministerial Forum.” February 2, 2024. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/boosting-eu-indo-pacific-partnerships-chair%E2%80%99s-press-release-following-eu-indo-pacific-ministerial_en.
- 15 The Financial Express. “BIMSTEC, IORA Sign MoU to Deal with Security, Developmental Challenges.” *The Financial Express*, April 4, 2025. <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/trade/bimstec-iora-sign-mou-to-deal-with-security-developmental-challenges>.
- 16 “Navigating Challenges of Bangladesh-Myanmar Border Management and Its Strategic Solutions,” *Society & Sustainability* 7, no. 1 (2025): 32–43, https://riiopenjournals.com/index.php/society_sustainability/article/view/657.
- 17 “Maritime Security Challenges and Countermeasures in the Indian Ocean Region,” *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Research* 11, no. 2 (2024):

- 45-59 https://ijhssm.org/issue_dcp/Navigating%20the%20Waters%20%20Maritime%20Security%20Challenges%20and%20Countermeasures%20in%20the%20Indian%20Ocean%20Region.pdf.
- 18 BIMSTEC Secretariat, “Expert Group on Maritime Security Cooperation in the Bay of Bengal,” accessed April 15, 2025, <https://bimstec.org/expert-group-on-maritime-security-cooperation-in-the-bay-of-bengal>.
 - 19 World Bank, “Pirate Trails: Tracking the Illicit Financial Flows from Pirate Activities off the Horn of Africa,” November 1, 2013, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2013/11/01/pirate-trails-tracks-dirty-money-resulting-from-piracy-off-the-horn-of-africa>.
 - 20 Harini TR, *Shifting Currents: China’s Rise in the Indian Ocean Region and India’s Policy Response*, Indo-Pacific Studies Center, December 10, 2024, <https://www.indo-pacificstudiescenter.org/briefs/shifting-currents-chinas-rise-in-the-indian-ocean-region-and-indias-policy-response>.
 - 21 Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), *Press Release – Signing of Memorandum of Understanding between IORA and BIMSTEC*, April 3, 2025, <https://www.iora.int/sites/default/files/2025-04/Press%20Release%20-%20SIGNING%20OF%20MEMORANDUM%20OF%20UNDERSTANDING%20BETWEEN%20IORA%20AND%20BIMSTEC.pdf>.
 - 22 Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), *Newsletter: The Latest News from the IORA Blue Carbon Hub*, November 2024, <https://www.iora.int/sites/default/files/2024-11/IORA%20Blue%20carbon%20hub%20Newsletter.pdf>.
 - 23 “Financing,” Reef Resilience Network, accessed April 12, 2025, <https://reefresilience.org/management-strategies/blue-carbon/financing/>.
 - 24 BIMSTEC Secretariat, “Agriculture and Related Statistics of Each Member Countries,” accessed April 21, 2025, <https://bimstec.org/pages/agriculture-and-related-statistics-of-each-member-countries>.
 - 25 Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), *Agreement on Port State Measures to Prevent, Deter and Eliminate Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing*, accessed April 18, 2025, <https://www.fao.org/iuu-fishing/international-framework/psma/en/>.
 - 26 European Commission, “Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing,” last modified April 18, 2024, https://oceans-and-fisheries.ec.europa.eu/news/fighting-illegal-unreported-and-unregulated-fishing-new-report-2020-2023-achievements-2024-04-18_en.
 - 27 Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), “Chain of Custody Standard for Seafood Traceability,” accessed April 12, 2025, <https://www.msc.org/standards/chain-of-custody>.
-

- 28 Md Monwar Hossain, *Marine Spatial Planning: Bangladesh Perspective*, ResearchGate, accessed April 21, 2025, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/339940687_Marine_Spatial_Planning_Bangladesh_Perspective.
- 29 Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission of UNESCO (IOC), “About IOC,” accessed April 21, 2025, <https://www.ioc.unesco.org/en>.
- 30 FE Online Desk, “BIMSTEC, IORA sign MoU to deal with security, developmental challenges,” *The Financial Express*, April 6, 2025, <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/trade/bimstec-iora-sign-mou-to-deal-with-security-developmental-challenges?amp=true>.
- 31 Indian Ocean Rim Association. “Transport Taskforce.” Accessed April 23, 2025. <https://www.iora.int/transport-taskforce>.
- 32 European Marine Board, “Ocean Hackathon – Thinking Outside the Box,” April 2023, <https://marineboard.eu/ocean-hackathon-thinking-outside-box>.
- 33 “2025 Storm Hackathon Celebrates Maritime Innovation,” *NNS to Go*, April 23, 2025, <https://www.nnstogo.com/articles/2025-storm-hackathon-celebrates-maritime-innovation/>.
- 34 Centre for Maritime Studies, National University of Singapore, “Maritime Hackathon 2025,” accessed April 25, 2025, <https://www.maritimestudies.nus.edu.sg/maritime-hackathon-2025/>.
- 35 National Maritime Foundation, “Home,” accessed April 21, 2025, <https://maritimeindia.org>.
- 36 “Bangladesh Oceanographic Research Institute,” *Wikipedia*, last modified October 22, 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bangladesh_Oceanographic_Research_Institute.
- 37 “Bangladesh Oceanographic Research Institute,” *Wikipedia*.
- 38 FasterCapital, “Everything You Need to Know to Get Started: Funding Your Marine Tech Startup: Options and Strategies,” accessed April 26, 2025, <https://fastercapital.com/topics/everything-you-need-to-know-to-get-started%3Afunding-your-marine-tech-startup%3A-options-and-strategies.html>.
- 39 World Bank, “South Asia: Collaborating for Climate Resilience,” PreventionWeb, accessed April 26, 2025, <https://azure.preventionweb.net/news/south-asia-collaborating-climate-resilience-through-hydromet-and-early-warning-systems>.
- 40 World Bank, “South Asia: Collaborating for Climate Resilience,”

- 41 World Bank, “South Asia: Collaborating for Climate Resilience,”
- 42 Press Information Bureau, “English Translation of Prime Minister’s Statement during the 6th BIMSTEC Summit,” April 4, 2025, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2118663>.
- 43 World Bank, “South Asia: Collaborating for Climate Resilience through Hydromet and Early Warning Systems,” September 4, 2024, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/results/2024/09/04/south-asia-collaborating-for-climate-resilience-through-hydromet-and-early-warning-systems>.
- 44 Tejal Khanna, “BIMSTEC in the Indo-Pacific,” in *BIMSTEC in the Indo-Pacific*, ed. Tejal Khanna (London: Taylor & Francis, 2023), 1–20.

About the Author

Ms Muskan Rai is a Research Associate at the National Maritime Foundation, New Delhi, specialising in multilateral constructs of the Indian Ocean. Her current research focuses on maritime security, regional cooperation, and India’s strategic interests in IORA, IONS, and BIMSTEC. She has a Bachelor’s degree in History from the University of Delhi and a Master’s degree in International Relations, Security and Strategy from the OP Jindal Global University. She can be reached at ior.nmf@gmail.com.

Optimising the RoK's Dialogue Partnership with IORA during India's Chairmanship

Ms Arijita Sinha-Roy

In 2022, the Yoon Suk Yeol administration unveiled the Republic of Korea (RoK)'s Indo-Pacific Strategy, marking a significant shift towards a more proactive regional role. The strategy reaffirmed Korea's enduring commitment to promoting freedom, peace, and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific, while embracing the principles of openness, inclusiveness, and rules-based order. It underscores Seoul's ambition to evolve from a regional player into a global pivotal State, contributing meaningfully to the stability and resilience of the Indo-Pacific.

A central pillar of this strategy is the enhancement of partnerships with like-minded countries that share democratic values, economic interests, and a commitment to multilateralism. Amongst these, India features prominently, along with countries in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean region, reflecting the RoK's recognition of the strategic and economic weight that these regions hold. The strategy envisions deeper engagement through economic cooperation, maritime security, sustainable development, and technological collaboration, positioning the Republic of Korea as a constructive and reliable partner in shaping the future of the Indo-Pacific.¹

Why the Indian Ocean Region Matters to the RoK

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is of growing strategic significance to the RoK, given its centrality to global trade, energy flows, and maritime security. As a heavily trade-dependent economy, Korea relies on secure and open international shipping lanes (ISLs)— particularly through the Indian Ocean— for the uninterrupted flow

of its merchandise imports and exports. Over 80% of Korea’s energy imports traverse the Indian Ocean, making the region critical to Korea’s energy security and economic stability.

In addition to trade and energy considerations, the IOR has emerged as a key geopolitical theatre where regional and extra-regional powers intersect. This dynamic reinforces the need for Korea to engage more robustly with the region to contribute to maritime stability, uphold the rules-based international order, and counter non-traditional security threats such as piracy, climate change, and transnational crime.

The IOR also aligns with the RoK’s aspiration to become a “Global Pivotal State” as articulated in its 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy. By deepening its presence and partnerships in the Indian Ocean, the RoK can reinforce its image as a responsible stakeholder, support capacity-building, capability-enhancement, promote development cooperation, and work with key regional partners— most notably India— to foster sustainable growth, infrastructure development, and resilience in the region.

Further, the RoK’s expanding economic, diplomatic, and development engagements through regional frameworks such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) present opportunities to collaborate on blue economy initiatives, scientific research, and climate adaptation— areas that are vital for the future of littoral and island States in the IOR.

In essence, a stable, inclusive, and cooperative Indian Ocean region is indispensable for the RoK’s strategic interests, and sustained engagement with IORA and its member States will enhance the RoK’s long-term economic security, geopolitical relevance, and global partnerships.

RoK’s Footprints in IORA

The RoK was made a dialogue partner of IORA, during the 18th IORA Council of Ministers Meeting, which was held in 2018. As the eighth dialogue partner— following the US, China and Japan— the RoK’s engagement with IORA underscores its recognition of the Association as a pivotal inter-governmental organisation

with substantial potential for fostering regional and economic growth.² The RoK recognises the significance of IORA and its position as an increasingly important geopolitical and geoeconomic nexus. From a broader strategic standpoint, the RoK is acutely aware of the escalating strategic competition between the US and China in the IOR and, consequently, assigns considerable strategic importance to enhancing multilateral and regional cooperation through regional institutions such as IORA. This is also emblematic of RoK's foreign policy orientation that is aimed at contributing constructively to regional stability, connectivity and sustainable development.

From a maritime and security standpoint, the RoK's engagement with the IORA reflects its strategic intent to position itself as a 'quasi-island' maritime nation,³ thereby expanding its geopolitical reach through active participation in regional cooperative mechanisms. This aligns with Seoul's broader objective of reconfiguring its foreign policy architecture around multilateral and regionally anchored frameworks.⁴ Further, the RoK acknowledges that maritime cooperation within the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is increasingly organised through an evolving mix of bilateral, minilateral and multilateral arrangements, with institutions such as IORA serving as central platforms for dialogue and collaboration. Consequently, RoK's accession as a Dialogue Partner to IORA is not merely a symbolic extension of its foreign policy footprint but carries substantive maritime and strategic connotations. Notably, the RoK's aspirations to emerge as a maritime power with extended regional influence were articulated well before the formulation of its New Southern Policy (NSP) or its Indo-Pacific Strategy.⁵ Indeed, these ambitions are rooted in earlier national strategic documents relating to the RoK's self-assessment as a maritime State. The more important of these are its turn-of-the-millennium policy initiative, entitled "*Ocean Korea 21*" covering the period 2001-2010, and its successor, the "*Second Ocean Korea 21*" that sought to refine and extend this national ocean policy over the period 2011 to 2020. Importantly, midway through this latter period, in the year 2014, the RoK's Office of National Security published a *strategy* document (as distinct from these ocean *policy* ones) entitled, "*A New Era of Hope: National Security Strategy*". This strategy outlined South Korea's vision for its national security and foreign policy in the 21st century, emphasizing cooperation and trust-building

in the Asia-Pacific region as prerequisites for the realisation for the RoK's ambition to be amongst the world's top five maritime powers.⁶

Towards this, in June 2020, RoK further submitted its future plans to the IORA Secretariat, conveying its intention of actively contributing to three of IORA's six priority sectors, namely, "Maritime Safety and Security", "Academic Co-operation", and "Trade and Investment Facilitation", as also both IORA's 'Special Crosscutting Areas', namely, "the Blue Economy" and "Women's Economic Empowerment".⁷ These offer areas of clear convergence with the RoK's "Indo-Pacific Strategy" (2022) and its nine core lines of action, thereby establishing a robust platform for long term cooperation.⁸ Thus convergence opens up a large space for Track One-point-Five/Track-Two engagements. Table 1 provides a summary of engagements that the RoK has thus far established with IORA *through Track 1.5 Partnership Seminars*:

Table 1: RoK's Engagements with IORA

Year	Theme	Outcomes
2020	Navigating a Path to Peace and Prosperity for People in the Indian Ocean amid COVID-19	Increase the direction of cooperation between the RoK and the Indian Ocean Community
2021	Blue Economy	Support IORA members with RoK's marine science technology and efficient use of marine resources through Official Development Assistance (ODA)
2022	Tourism and Cultural Exchanges	Eco-friendly and Digital tourism policy for resilience and transformation alongside cooperation for sustainable tourism
2023	Maritime Disaster Management	Systematic management of response strategy for marine debris
2024	Maritime Resources Development	Promoting sustainable development and shared prosperity by strengthening collaborative networks with IORA

Source: Compiled by the author

As may be gathered from Table 1 above, the RoK has demonstrated an increasingly active and influential role as a Dialogue Partner of IORA, marked by substantive engagement and strategic outreach. One of the most significant instances of this

partnership was the seminar held in 2021, which featured the participation of two prominent Korean government-funded think tanks— the Korea Maritime Institute (KMI) and the Korea Institute of Ocean Science and Technology (KIOST).⁹ This particular event underscored the RoK’s commitment to contributing advanced marine science and technology towards the sustainable and efficient utilisation of marine resources among IORA member states.

Continuing its proactive engagement with IORA, a high-level delegation from the RoK visited the IORA Secretariat on 04 April 2025 to explore additional avenues for enhanced cooperation, once again focusing upon IORA’s priority areas and the two cross cutting ones. Discussions focused on the potential signing of a MoU between IORA and RoK that would formalise and deepen cooperation. While the details of the MoU are yet to be disclosed, the visit reaffirmed RoK’s strategic interest in the region and commitment to support regional capacity building initiatives.¹⁰ Hence, RoK’s engagements is reflective of convergence of interests and presents new opportunities for multilateral collaboration in maritime governance, sustainable development and institutional capacity enhancement.

RoK’s ITEM Strategy: A Leap towards Enhanced Maritime Cooperation

In 2024, the Government of RoK conducted a mid-term evaluation of its Indo-Pacific Strategy during the second session of the government-wide implementation review. Cho Gu-rae, Director, Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ Diplomatic Strategy and Information Bureau, introduced a new set of strategic directives, encapsulated within the acronym “ITEM”, were aimed at refining and advancing the operationalisation of Seoul’s Indo-Pacific Strategy.¹¹ In his address, Director Cho emphasised the RoK’s aspiration to contribute to the proliferation of the principles of freedom, peace and prosperity throughout the Indian and Pacific Ocean regions. He noted that the ‘ITEM’ framework was particularly calibrated to align with the RoK’s evolving maritime and international stature. Within this acronym:

The letter ‘I’ stands for ‘*Institutionalisation*’ (제도화) and emphasises the *formalisation of strategic dialogues*. In line with this directive, bilateral and trilateral Indo-Pacific dialogues, namely, the “Korea-France” bilateral dialogue and the “Korea-

US-Japan”, the “Korea-Japan-Australia” trilateral dialogues were inaugurated in 2024,¹² to foster deeper policy coordination and strategic alignment. Building upon this momentum, the RoK had expressed its intent to launch additional dialogues with the European Union (EU) and Canada in the forthcoming years, thereby expanding the institutional framework for regional cooperation and enhancing its maritime stature in the region. The review also suggested similar lines of effort to be launched with countries such as India and Germany. This proactive engagement of both, resident and non-resident powers in the region, represents a major shift away from the RoK’s traditional reticence.

The letter ‘*T*’ denotes ‘*Tailored*’ (맞춤형) and seeks to enhance bilateral and multilateral cooperation by identifying and prioritising specific areas of strategic interest, such as strategic communication, maritime security, and the countering of foreign information-manipulation. This approach is designed to be adaptive, taking into careful consideration the respective capacities, policy orientations and strategic preferences of each key partner within the region.¹³ By aligning its own model of cooperation with the unique contexts of its partners, the RoK aims to foster more effective and mutually responsive partnerships under its Indo-Pacific Strategy. Further, in line with this directive, the RoK wishes to establish a “Comprehensive Basic Plan” and an “Implementation Plan” for international development cooperation that would enhance its Official Developmental Assistance (ODA) policies.

The third letter, ‘*E*’ denotes ‘*Expand*’ (확장형) and aims to expand the geographical scope of cooperation beyond East Asia to the Pacific and the Indian Ocean Region. The RoK would strategize the use of this pillar through several bilateral cooperation funds, including the ‘*RoK-Indian Ocean Cooperation Fund*’, which would further maritime cooperation projects, and expand the scope of emerging technologies. The approach would be similar to the ones RoK has devised for IP4, NATO and G7.¹⁴

The final letter, namely, ‘*M*’, denotes ‘*Maritime*’ (해양) and seeks to establish a ‘*rules-based maritime order*’ that is directly related to the stability and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific region and forms the core of the RoK’s national security. It also outlines the RoK’s efforts to cooperate with coast guards and navies across the region in order to build its capacity and enhance its capability in areas such as Humanitarian

Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), the countering of Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing (IUUF), and the suppression of Illicit Maritime Activities (IMA).¹⁵

RoK Indian Ocean Cooperation Fund: A Chapter for Future Cooperation

Despite domestic political turmoil in the country, the RoK has been able to demonstrate notable policy continuity in advancing its Indo-Pacific Strategy. As previously discussed, the RoK's strategic engagement through its ITEM framework has underlined a coherent and multidimensional approach to regional cooperation, particularly in the Indian Ocean. Hence at the 24th IORA Ministerial Meeting held on 21st May 2025, the RoK announced the establishment of the '*RoK Indian Ocean Cooperation Fund*'.¹⁶ This fund has been established as part of the '*Expand*' pillar of the "ITEM" directives and reflects the RoK's broader foreign policy orientation that entails inclusivity, multilateral maritime cooperation and its commitment to contributing to regional stability driven by economic development. With an initial allocation of US\$ 400,000, the fund aims to support cooperative initiatives in key strategic areas. The national statements presented by the Member States and Dialogue Partners of IORA reveals a shared recognition of the need to reorient IORA's operational framework toward greater institutional coherence and outcome-driven collaboration. In particular, there was consensus on the importance of developing more structured mechanisms for engagement between Member States and Dialogue Partners.

Although the operational details of the KICF is yet to be formally disclosed, the RoK has expressed a clear commitment to fostering sustainable port development, advancing the responsible utilisation of marine resources, and promoting cooperative initiatives that are mutually beneficial to the RoK and IORA member States. These are important trajectories along which this fund can be utilised in pursuit of broader regional development priorities, particularly in the maritime domain.

At present, the fund remains largely in conceptual and ideational phase. However, it holds out considerable promise as a strategic and instrumental

mechanism for capacity-building and capability-enhancement within the IORA framework. Drawing parallels with past initiatives, one may consider the ‘*ASEAN-Korea Cooperation Fund (AKCF)*’ to be an illustrative precedent. Established in 1990, the AKCF has supported over 400 projects across diverse domains such as technology transfer, economic development, human resource enhancement, and even people-to-people exchanges.¹⁷ The AKCF has thus played a significant role in strengthening both institutional and developmental linkages between the RoK and ASEAN member States and similar benefits may be anticipated for IORA. However, the success of the KICF will depend on the extent to which it can foster inclusive and participatory governance structures that would lead to capacity and capability development in line with the strategic interests of the other IORA member States.

Leveraging India’s Imminent Assumption of the IORA Chair

The RoK recognises India to be a like-minded partner within the framework of its Indo-Pacific Strategy, particularly in terms of shared democratic values and commitment to a rules-based regional order. However, persistent inertia in managing mutual expectations continues to hinder the realisation of deeper strategic engagement. Within the RoK, India is often perceived primarily as a ‘market’, rather than as a comprehensive strategic partner. Hence a strategic shift needs to be engendered.

The assumption of the Chair of IORA by India for the period 2025-2027 will provide an invaluable moment for New Delhi to underscore India’s enduring commitment to regional cooperation and sustainable development across the IOR. This will also serve as an excellent opportunity for the RoK to establish and proceed with the fund in areas that would not only benefit the IORA member States but also help the RoK itself establish itself as a ‘true’ partner in the region. Within IORA, India has emerged as a champion of the ‘Blue Economy’ through sustainable development of ocean resources, including fisheries, marine biotechnology, and renewable energy. This is in line with the RoK’s own desire to utilise the fund for sustainable development for IORA member States.¹⁸

Further, India’s efforts have focused on the sustainable management of ocean resources, the promotion of innovations in disciplines such as marine biotechnology,

and ensuring that these efforts and endeavours remain aligned with IORA's Action Plan 2017-2021, which includes capacity-building programmes in the sectors of fisheries and renewable energy.¹⁹ Additionally on the utilisation of marine resources and capacity development, the RoK, acting through India, can leverage the IORA Indian Ocean University Network (UNIOR) and meaningfully foster collaboration amongst universities, academics, and think tanks.²⁰

Recommendations

The establishment of the KICF marks a significant milestone, laying a robust foundation for deeper collaboration between India and the RoK. With the fund now in place, both countries need to realise the strong potential that this provides to explore new avenues of partnership across diverse sectors such as technology, infrastructure, energy, innovation, and cultural exchanges. The KICF can serve as a strategic vehicle to support joint ventures, facilitate investment, and promote sustainable development.

Towards this end, the following is recommended:

- **Strengthen Communication.** The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), particularly the Indo-Pacific and IOR Division, needs to initiate structured communication with the Embassy of the Republic of Korea (RoK) in New Delhi to identify potential areas of collaboration that align with the objectives of the IORA framework. The MEA must actively engage the Korean side to explore and articulate concrete proposals, as also project ideas and thematic priorities that would facilitate the effective and timely utilisation of the KICF within IORA.
- **Participate in Track 1.5 Partnership Seminars and Dialogues.** The sixth RoK-IORA Partnership Dialogue, as indicated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea, will focus on the theme of Marine Spatial Planning (MSP). In this context, the RoK needs to be encouraged to engage with policy-oriented institutions and dialogue partners such as the National Maritime Foundation (NMF) in India, which can offer valuable strategic

insights and technical expertise to support evidence-based and regionally relevant policy formulation on MSP.

- **Blue Economy Innovation Hubs.** Establish joint RoK-India Blue Economy Innovation Hubs in select IORA coastal member States to promote collaboration in sustainable fisheries management, port infrastructure development, and marine biotechnology. These hubs should serve as regional centres for capacity-building and capability-enhancement through technology transfers and pilot projects, leveraging Korea's technological expertise and India's regional presence to foster inclusive and sustainable blue growth across the Indian Ocean region.
- **IORA Climate Resilience Taskforce.** India and the RoK should co-chair a dedicated taskforce under IORA, focused on climate adaptation strategies and early warning systems, with the aim of offering targeted technical assistance to vulnerable member States, thereby building capacity and enhancing capability. This taskforce could also serve as a platform for advancing Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) cooperation through regional capacity-consolidation and capability-enhancement, thus enabling timely and coordinated responses to natural disasters and climate-related emergencies across the Indian Ocean Region.
- **Joint R&D Mechanisms.** Promote collaborative research and development (R&D) initiatives between India and the Republic of Korea through co-financing models, with a focus on climate resilience, oceanography, and marine environmental science. These joint projects would facilitate the exchange of knowledge towards building scientific capacity and capability across IORA member States, and generating region-specific solutions to shared climate (and marine) challenges.

Conclusion

The establishment of the KICF does mark a pivotal milestone in the evolving strategic partnership between India and the RoK, offering a robust platform for deepening

bilateral and regional cooperation. As India assumes the chairmanship of IORA, a convergence of this leadership role with the operationalisation of the KICF presents a unique and timely opportunity to synergise efforts for sustainable development and regional integration.

India's Chairmanship of IORA further amplifies the significance of the KICF by aligning its objectives with the broader vision of a free, open, and prosperous Indo-Pacific. Through this alignment, the KICF can be instrumental in fostering regional connectivity, strengthening maritime cooperation, and building resilient supply chains among IORA member States. As such, the fund holds immense promise as a catalyst for not only advancing India-RoK bilateral ties but also for contributing meaningfully to regional peace, stability, and shared prosperity.

30 June 2025

ENDNOTES

- 1 Cho Won Deuk, "Strategic Developments and Maritime Cooperation in the Indian Ocean: Implications for ROK-India Maritime Cooperation," *IFANS Perspective*, 23 January 2024. <https://www.ifans.go.kr/knda/ifans/eng/pblct/PblctView.do?pblctDtaSn=14299&clCode=P19&koreanEngSe=ENG>
- 2 Cho Won Deuk, "South Korea's IORA Dialogue Partnership and its Implications for the New Southern Policy," *IFANS Focus*, 12 November 2018. <https://www.ifans.go.kr/knda/ifans/eng/pblct/PblctView.do?pblctDtaSn=14299&clCode=P19&koreanEngSe=ENG>.
- 3 Rear Admiral Monty Khanna coined the term at the 'Track 1.5 RoK-India-US Dialogue' organised by the ORF and EoK, New Delhi on 29 April 2025.
- 4 Cho Won Deuk, "South Korea's IORA Dialogue".
- 5 Sukjoon Yoon, "Maritime Asia: A South Korean Perspective" in *The Changing Maritime Scene in Asia: Rising Tensions and Future Strategic Stability* ed Till Geoffrey, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).
- 6 Cho Won Deuk, "South Korea's IORA Dialogue Partnership and its Implications for the New Southern Policy," *IFANS Focus*, 12 November 2018. <https://www.ifans.go.kr/knda/ifans/eng/pblct/PblctView.do?pblctDtaSn=14299&clCode=P19&koreanEngSe=ENG>.
- 7 Report of the Tenth Bi-Annual Meeting of the Committee of Senior Officials (CSO), IORA Secretariat, July 2020.

- 8 Anil Sooklal, “The IORA Outlook on the Indo-Pacific: Building Partnerships for Mutual Cooperation and Sustainable Development,” *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, Vol 19, Issue 3, 12 September 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2023.2252189>
- 9 Sukjoon Yoon, “Maritime Asia: A South Korean Perspective.”
- 10 Indian Ocean Rim Association, X Post (Formerly Twitter), April 9, 2025, 3:37 PM, <https://x.com/IORAofficial/status/1909911006769184916>
- 11 Ji Yeon Kim, “Government Presents ITEM as the Direction of the In-Tae Strategy,” *Yonhap News*, 3 December 2024. <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20241203115300504>.
- 12 Ji Yeon Kim, “Government Presents ITEM as the Direction of the In-Tae Strategy”.
- 13 Ji Yeon Kim, “Government Presents ITEM as the Direction of the In-Tae Strategy”.
- 14 Ji Yeon Kim, “Government Presents ITEM as the Direction of the In-Tae Strategy”.
- 15 Ji Yeon Kim, “Government Presents ITEM as the Direction of the In-Tae Strategy”.
- 16 Republic of Korea, “Deputy Foreign Minister attends 24th Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) Ministerial Meeting and announces plans to establish Korea-Indian Ocean Cooperation Fund,” 21 May 2025. https://www.mofa.go.kr/www/brd/m_4080/view.do?seq=376101&page=1&pitem=10&fbclid=IwQ0xDSwKbe7hjbGNrApt7ZmV4dG4DYWVtAjExAAEetRFQnYFOO9J9AlMQidxDrqjOR7BuXs4iLM2kFXt72aFRbnWW-ielsTRW0_aem_deeHOxT6BTgL0vgHSFpSsA.
- 17 ASEAN-Korea Cooperation Fund, “About Us,” last accessed 17 May 2025. www.aseanrokfund.com.
- 18 John J Vachaparambil and Muskan Rai, “IORA at 28: India’s Chairmanship and the Path Forward,” *National Maritime Foundation*, 7 March 2025. <https://maritimeindia.org/iora-at-28-indias-chairmanship-and-the-path-forward/>
- 19 John J Vachaparambil and Muskan Rai, “IORA at 28”
- 20 John J Vachaparambil and Muskan Rai, “IORA at 28”

About the Author

Ms Arijita Sinha-Roy is a Research Associate at the National Maritime Foundation, New Delhi. Her research focuses on the manner in which the maritime geostrategies of India are impacted by those of the Republic of Korea (RoK). She holds a Master’s degree in East Asian Studies, Department of East Asian Studies, University of Delhi. She is also an alumnus of the Yeosu Academy of the Law of the Sea (2024). Arijita can be reached out at irms4.nmf@gmail.com

India's Maritime Capacity-Building and Capability-Enhancement in the Western Indian Ocean

Ms Anum Khan

April 2025 has been a milestone month for India's maritime ambitions, marked by two unprecedented initiatives. On 05 April, while celebrating the 62nd National Maritime Day, the Indian Ocean Ship (IOS) *SAGAR* set sail from the naval facility at Karwar in the Indian state of Karnataka, embarking on a six-week mission to the southwestern Indian Ocean. INS *Sunayna* was designated IOS *SAGAR* and ceremoniously flagged off by Defence Minister Mr Rajnath Singh.¹ This indigenously built Advanced Offshore Patrol Vessel (AOPV) is crewed by a 44-member team composed of personnel from nine Friendly Foreign Nations (FFN) to boost interoperability and greater cooperation. With the deployment of IOS *SAGAR*, the Indian Navy has also launched the maiden edition of Exercise *AIKEYME* (Africa-India Key Maritime Engagement)—meaning “*Unity*” in Sanskrit—with ten eastern African coastal and island nations.

AIKEYME is a multilateral maritime exercise co-hosted by India and the Tanzania People's Defence Force (TPDF). The exercise was inaugurated on 13 April 2025 and ended on 18 April 2025, completing its six-day planned course, which was divided into two phases.² The African phase of this inaugural edition of Exercise *AIKEYME* (it is expected to be held once every two years) began off the coast of Dar-es-Salaam, bringing together the navies and maritime agencies of Comoros, Djibouti, Eritrea, Kenya, Madagascar, Mauritius, Mozambique, Seychelles, and South Africa, along with the co-hosts. The exercise is aimed at enhancing operational interoperability, building collective capacity to address shared security challenges, and strengthening maritime cooperation among the participating nations. *AIKEYME-2025* was conducted in

two phases. The harbour phase included Tabletop- and Command-Post Exercises focusing on anti-piracy responses and information sharing, along with seamanship training and visit, board, search, and seizure (VBSS) drills. The sea phase involved seamanship evolutions, search-and-rescue operations, VBSS exercises, small-arms firing, and helicopter operations. Through these engagements, AIKEYME sought to improve coordination in tackling piracy and illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing (IUUF) while also reinforcing intelligence-sharing mechanisms.

In May of 2025, *IOS SAGAR* successfully completed its mission and returned to Kochi after its month-long deployment. During this period, the vessel made port calls at Dar-es-Salaam (Tanzania), Nacala (Mozambique), Port Louis (Mauritius), Port Victoria (Seychelles), and Malé.³ It was joined by two Indian Navy ships— *INS Chennai* (a guided-missile destroyer) and *INS Kesari* [a Landing Ship Tank (Large)]— for Exercise AIKEYME.⁴ The exercise was hugely successfully, exemplifying the spirit of regional maritime cooperation between India and African States of the Western Indian Ocean (WIO). Prior to the departure of *IOS SAGAR* from Karwar, personnel from these nine FFN underwent a two-week training programme at specialist schools and establishments of the Indian Navy's training command (Southern Naval Command [SNC]), which is headquartered in Kochi, in the Indian state of Kerala. During this period, they received comprehensive instruction in naval communication— covering communication warfare, visual signalling, and Communications and Information Systems (CIS)— at the SNC's Signal School. Additionally, they were trained in damage-control procedures, including shipboard and basic firefighting techniques. This capability-enhancement component of the two initiatives (*IOS SAGAR* and Exercise AIKEYME) enhanced the operational effectiveness of foreign personnel while aboard the Indian warships.

While these key initiatives have been widely praised across India's maritime policy and strategic circles, they also offer a valuable opportunity to reassess India's maritime engagement with African States of the WIO. The WIO has long been a focal point of international security attention due to its persistent and evolving threats that tend to undermine regional stability. A security environment that was once characterised by the singular issue of Somali piracy has transformed into a far more complex and multidimensional security one. The region now faces a spectrum of

non-traditional and transnational threats— ranging from maritime mixed migration in the Mozambique Channel, to drug- and wildlife trafficking, IUUF, and maritime terrorism. These threats are increasingly shaped by land-based dynamics and actors operating within the sovereign jurisdiction of the States comprising coastal eastern Africa, complicating enforcement and governance. The dominance of such illicit activities has elevated non-traditional maritime security threats to a central concern— necessitating a more focused investment in maritime law enforcement capabilities, legal frameworks, and inter-agency coordination mechanisms. Due to the interconnected nature of these challenges, a maritime security threat in one domain can quickly become a shared concern for the entire region. In response, the WIO has witnessed increased international cooperation— both multilateral and bilateral— in maritime capacity-building and capability-enhancement. From counter-piracy assistance that peaked at the height of Somali piracy in 2008, it has since evolved into a network of cooperative initiatives. These include regional frameworks and institutions such as the Djibouti Code of Conduct (Jeddah Amendment) [DCoC (JA)], the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), the European Union Naval Force (EUNAVFOR) Operation ATALANTA, SafeSeas Africa (a continuation of the EU’s MASÉ programme), along with sustained capacity-building support from international partners. Despite this intricate network of maritime cooperation, region maritime security issues have not only persisted but have been evolving. Therefore, a critical question remains: when maritime security challenges are distinct and domain-specific, can capacity-building efforts genuinely follow a standardised template? The experience of the WIO offers valuable insights, demonstrating both notable successes and enduring limitations in these efforts.

The expression “*capacity-building*” as a maritime security practice is frequently misunderstood in its operational application. The interchangeable use of “*capacity-building*” and “*capability-enhancement*” has led to conceptual confusion— a direct result of the terminological inexactitude that pervades much of the wider strategic community. “*Capacity-building*”, which typically encompasses material wherewithal such as infrastructure, platforms, and equipment (e.g., ships, aircraft, submarines, dockyards, workshops, hospital buildings, etc.), is often but wrongly conflated with human skill development and personnel training— components more appropriately

classified under “*capability-enhancement*”.⁵ Ideally, maritime security discourse should treat these practices with analytical precision; regrettably, that clarity is often lacking. Extensive efforts have been undertaken to conceptualise maritime security capacity-building, which typically aims to reform and strengthen a country’s institutional frameworks, governance mechanisms, operational procedures, and management systems across a wide range of maritime sectors.⁶

In the African context, the African Union’s *Africa Integrated Maritime Strategy 2050* (2050 AIMS) places strong emphasis on “*capacity and capability development*”, positioning it as a cornerstone of both regional and sub-regional cooperation. Further, the document suggests establishing ‘Maritime Sector Reform’ (MSR) as a process that involves mapping and assessing existing capabilities and identifying gaps.⁷ This approach is intended to enhance cooperation, capacity-building, capability-enhancement, and coordination among all stakeholders, ultimately contributing to wealth creation within a safe and secure African Maritime Domain (AMD).⁸ The strategy identifies 21 focus areas for maritime capacity-building in which it seeks collaboration with regional and international partners. India has been contributing to capability-enhancement in Africa since 1964 through its Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme, demarcating that even before maritime security gained prominence within India’s national security agenda, it had already been deeply involved in *capacity-building* and *capability-enhancement* initiatives across Africa. ITEC is considered India’s most successful development partnership initiative and has the broadest reach across the African continent. Through the ITEC I, II, and III programmes, India has provided Navy-to-Navy training— either by invitation or upon request— which has included support such as developing staff college curricula for African countries. In addition, India became a member of the Africa Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF) in 2005.⁹ The foundation focuses on enhancing capabilities to promote sustainable development, aligning its efforts with the African Union’s Agenda 2063 and the United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2030.¹⁰

India’s maritime *capacity-building* and *capability-enhancement* initiatives in eastern Africa are most prominently reflected in defence cooperation agreements, asset deliveries, infrastructure development, and joint military patrols. In this sub-

region, India holds a comparative advantage in traditional capacity-building, having supplied coastal radar systems, Offshore Patrol Vessels (OPVs), and a slew of other technologies that empower recipient countries to deploy these assets effectively and efficiently. For instance, India gifted four fast interceptor boats to the Mozambican Navy in 2019 and 2021 and delivered two waterjet-powered fast interceptor boats in 2024 (all examples of *capacity-building*), along with associated training (*capability-enhancement*).¹¹ To Mauritius, India has donated several patrol vessels over the years, including the MCGS *Amar* (a seaward defence patrol craft), nine *Mandovi* Class patrol boats (later replaced by five *Praga* Class patrol craft), and notably, the MCGS *Barracuda*—India’s first-ever exported warship.¹² In the case of Seychelles, India has provided four patrol vessels to date: the PS *Topaz*, PS *Constant*, Patrol Boat *Hermes*, and PS *Zoroaster*, along with a Dornier maritime patrol aircraft.¹³ These are just a few illustrative—although not exhaustive—examples of India’s maritime capacity-building and capability-enhancement efforts across the WIO.

Thanks to its robust and proactive presence in the Indian Ocean, the Indian Navy has been able to respond effectively to capacity needs arising from natural disasters. This preparedness is particularly evident in the WIO, where the Indian Navy has earned the reputation of being the “*first responder in the face of calamity*”. This is largely due to the region’s combination of political volatility and its vulnerability to frequent tropical cyclones. India’s Non-Combatant Evacuation Operations (NCEOs)—including Operation *RAJDOOT*, Operation *BLOSSOM*, Operation *RAHAT*, and most recently, Operation *KAVERI*, during which 3,862 Indian nationals were evacuated from Sudan aboard INS *Sumedha*—exemplify its rapid crisis-response capabilities.¹⁴ India has also been a leading actor in regional Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations. A series of missions—including Operations *SAGAR (I, II, IV, and V)* and *VANILLA*—have been launched in response to the recurrent tropical cyclones impacting the eastern seaboard of Africa, which caused severe disruption in countries such as Mozambique, Comoros, and Madagascar. Following Cyclone *Idai* in March of 2019, the Government of India deployed three naval ships—INS *Sujata*, INS *Shardul*, and ICGS *Sarathi*—drawn from its First Training Squadron, to support rescue operations, deliver relief supplies, and establish medical camps.¹⁵ This pattern of tangible engagement is mirrored in other countries

such as Seychelles, Comoros, Madagascar, Mozambique, and Mauritius, where India has played a pivotal role in bolstering maritime security through the provision of physical assets and collaborative defence frameworks.

India's maritime policy in Africa has not just grown but has evolved. In 2015, the policy of SAGAR was initiated, and its aims have been progressively realised. Prime Minister Modi's recent visit to Mauritius expanded this maritime policy to MAHASAGAR (Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth across Regions), extending India's maritime strategic outlook to the wider Indo-Pacific.¹⁶ This policy amplification underscores a more inclusive and cooperative approach, aimed at addressing a broader range of evolving threats across maritime domain. Clearly, India's capacity-building and capability-enhancement initiatives exhibit a clear maritime orientation but adopting a more tailored, need-based approach to better address the specific requirements of partner countries is the need of the hour. As a sub-region in its own right, the WIO requires enhanced capabilities to detect and respond swiftly to illicit maritime activities. The prevalence of such activities has elevated non-traditional maritime security threats to a central concern—necessitating focused investment in maritime law enforcement, legal frameworks, and inter-agency coordination. India's strategic engagement with the region must, therefore, be grounded in a nuanced understanding of these evolving dynamics to ensure its support is relevant, impactful, and genuinely value-adding.

Over the years, India's maritime initiatives have matured to the extent that it is increasingly viewed as a "*preferred security-partner*" in the WIO. India's growing participation in regional security frameworks such as the Djibouti Code of Conduct [Jeddah Amendment] [DCoC (JA)], Indian Ocean Commission (IOC), Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), and the Contact Group on Illicit Maritime Activities (CGIMA), strongly exemplify the five pillars of India's international cooperation endeavours — (1) information sharing, (2) capacity-building, (3) capability-enhancement, (4) operational coordination, and (5) public messaging.

India's engagement with the DCoC (JA) stands out particularly sharply. As an observer within the DCoC (JA) construct, India has been a committed contributor to the former's capacity-building and capability-enhancement initiatives. Notably,

India recently hosted the first “Maritime Information-Sharing Workshop” for DCoC member States at the Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR).¹⁷ Efforts are currently underway to position the first *multilateral* liaison officer from the DCoC to the IFC-IOR. If realised, this would mark a significant step toward a unified regional voice across the WIO. In a recent development, India’s *point of contact* (POC), who liaises with various DCoC Working Groups, reported that following consistent inputs from the Indian side, the DCoC has agreed to rename its “capacity-building matrix” to “*assistance matrix*”—a subtle yet meaningful shift in nomenclature that reflects India’s influence within the framework.¹⁸ Such developments are noteworthy, reinforcing as they do, India’s credibility within a multilateral setting. That said, much ground still remains to be covered—particularly in terms of strengthening bilateral engagements. Nevertheless, it is worth acknowledging the evolving direction of India’s efforts and the fact that several partner States have concurrently enhanced their own maritime capacities and capabilities.

For the record, the Indian Navy promotes capacity-building and capability-enhancement, principally (albeit not *exclusively*) through the discharge of its diplomatic role. To elaborate more on its capability-enhancing activities, over the years, the Indian Navy has engaged with FFNs to help build regional maritime forces against common threats and to enhance the perception of India as a friendly, supportive, reliable, and trustworthy partner. Maritime exercises are considered coordinated training activities aimed at strengthening maritime security and cooperation. These exercises serve as tools for *capability enhancement*, offering navies—which are long-standing agents of maritime security—opportunities for training and the exchange of knowledge and best practices. Such engagements foster mutual trust and contribute to strengthening collective capabilities. India has gained and given substantial operational exposure through the numerous exercises it conducts or participates in. While Exercise *AIKEYME* is not India’s first outreach to the subregion, it stands out as the most extensive in both scope and focus. Eastern African coastal and island States have actively and inclusively participated in India’s maritime exercises, ranging from Exercise MILAN to the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) Maritime Exercise (IMEX). Notably, the inaugural IMEX-22 was specifically centred upon

Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR)— a domain in which the Indian Navy holds acknowledged strategic expertise.¹⁹ Eastern African coastal and island States have consistently been among the most frequent and favoured recipients of India’s HADR efforts. Additionally, trilateral initiatives such as IBSAMAR (India, Brazil, and South Africa) and IMT TRILAT (India, Mozambique, and Tanzania Trilateral), held biennially and annually respectively, have demonstrated India’s sustained commitment to constructive maritime engagement with eastern Africa.²⁰

Beyond these India-led efforts, the Indian Navy has also participated in multilateral platforms that reflect a spirit of deconfliction and shared responsibility in this mutual area of interest. For instance, India, as an associate partner of the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF)— a US-led multinational maritime security construct— has taken part in a number of CMF initiatives. In September of 2022, INS *Sunayna* participated in Operation SOUTHERN READINESS in and off Seychelles, marking the first time that an Indian Navy ship had joined a CMF exercise.²¹ Such associations also enable India to enhance its own maritime capabilities. In 2024, following its elevation to full membership in the CMF, India participated in operations under Combined Task Force (CTF) 150. In April 2024, the Indian Navy conducted its first successful interdiction of narcotics, resulting in the seizure of 940 kilograms of drugs. As part of this effort, INS *Talwar* took part in Operation CRIMSON BARRACUDA, which focused on countering terrorist and transnational criminal networks.²²

These international engagements show India’s unwavering commitment towards building collective strength of the WIO. However, to be able to sustain this particular string of maritime engagement its efforts need to evolve to suit the present needs of coastal and islandic Africa. A project undertaken by *SafeSeas* to examine maritime security capacity-building in the WIO led to the development of a best-practice toolkit manual titled *Mastering Maritime Security: Reflexive Capacity Building and the Western Indian Ocean Experience*. This document advocates a model in which capacity building and capability-enhancement are locally owned and led by recipient countries. It emphasises the principle of “reflexivity” in maritime capacity building— encouraging maritime security practitioners to critically examine their own assumptions and to engage with the inherent tensions and complexities of

maritime security as a cross-jurisdictional, multi-agency endeavour. The document prescribes three necessary pathways to be adopted by donor capacity builders:

- Develop a comprehensive understanding of the political environments in which recipient countries operate, in order to clearly identify their specific needs, limitations, and constraints.
- Capacity builders (and capability-enhancers) should actively seek local knowledge to better understand how systems function in practice. This includes identifying available human and institutional resources, as well as accessing local technical expertise.
- The capacity provided and capabilities instilled should not be redundant. Given the constantly evolving nature of maritime security challenges, the solutions offered must be equally adaptive. Capacity-building and capability-enhancement programmes should be designed with flexibility to respond to changing circumstances. Additionally, the time gap between the planning and implementation phases must be minimised. Donor countries must recognise the time-sensitive nature of training and operational needs, and ensure their support remains aligned with the real-time requirements of recipient countries.²³

While these proposed pathways provide a solid starting point for India— or any country aiming to engage with WIO— it is equally crucial to understand the region’s immediate capacity and capability needs. A fundamental gap among WIO States lies in their ability to obtain and generate vital information on the maritime crimes plaguing their territorial seas.

Regionally, two prominent bodies— the Regional Maritime Information Fusion Centre (RMIFC) and the Regional Coordination and Operations Centre (RCOC)— are based in Madagascar and Seychelles, respectively. The RMIFC was established in 2016, while the RCOC became operational in 2018, following the signing of two regional agreements aimed at enhancing information-sharing and coordinating maritime operations. The RMIFC gathers, processes, stores, and shares information received from member States, while the RCOC utilises the information

provided by Madagascar's fusion centre. Typically, the RMIFC detects a vessel of interest and sends the information to the RCOC for further action. For instance, a vessel carrying narcotics may be interdicted using resources from Seychelles and Mauritius. Captain Sam Gontier, Director RCOC, has elaborated on operations conducted by regional States to deter illegal activities. India, too, has recognised the importance of these centres.²⁴ On 21 February 2023, the Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) signed an MoU with RCOC to develop a shared maritime understanding aimed at countering non-traditional maritime security threats.²⁵ However, despite their centrality to the WIO's regional maritime security architecture, there remain capacity gaps and constraints in information sharing among member States. Another issue is the lack of coordination between neighbouring States in terms of information sharing, and maritime operations. It needs to be borne in mind that maritime situational awareness at the national level serves as the foundation for sub-regional and regional information-sharing frameworks. Consequently, it is absolutely essential that individual States strengthen their respective maritime *situational* awareness (MSA) and thence their maritime *domain* awareness (MDA)— and, in this process of strengthening MSA and MDA, they are effectively assisted by India. This includes developing robust capabilities for collecting and disseminating information and intelligence so that local knowledge can be effectively channelled into regional systems like RMIFC.

Secondly, WIO coastal and island States do not possess uniform national structures for ensuring maritime security. While navies have traditionally served as the primary agents of maritime security in these States, it is coast guards that are entrusted with maritime policing and enforcement duties. States across Africa tend to allocate limited human resources to their maritime security services. Across the entire eastern African coast, only in Mauritius and Seychelles do maritime security personnel constitute more than 30 per cent of the overall security personnel, compared to the regional average of 13.5 per cent.²⁶ Additionally, the lack of infrastructure and resources further hinders the effectiveness of maritime enforcement efforts.

Thirdly, the absence of national maritime-security strategies (NMSS) has hobbled the ability of these States to fully realise their maritime respective potential. Such strategies are essential for coordinating and harmonising the implementation

of maritime security measures. By identifying capability gaps, they also serve as critical tools for guiding capacity-building efforts— such as training, resource allocation, and international support. A well-defined maritime strategy enables a State to map relevant stakeholders and assess their capacities, establish a unified approach to maritime defence, and develop awareness of its own strengths and limitations. In the WIO, there is a need not only for States to develop NMSS, but also for Regional Economic Communities (RECs) such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the East African Community (EAC), and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) to formulate compatible plans for an Integrated Maritime Security Strategy (IMSS). Both SADC and IGAD have IMSS frameworks in place, but these need to be shaped by the actual maritime requirements of their coastal members rather than imposed as prescriptive plans of action.

Despite these lags, WIO States have significantly enhanced their maritime security capabilities in response to evolving threats and strategic interests. Out of nine WIO States, at least five or six have meaningfully heightened their maritime security posture, albeit to varying degrees and with external support. However, there is a reverse trend that has been noticed in the national maritime strengths of these nations. Countries that earlier used to have strong maritime capabilities have got weakened over time. For example, South Africa, once home to one of the strongest navies in sub-Saharan Africa, is now facing significant challenges due to years of budgetary constraints. Prolonged financial tightening has forced the navy to forgo essential maintenance and recruitment.²⁷ Currently, South Africa's defence spending stands at less than one per cent of its GDP. In the 2020–2021 financial year, the total defence budget was R 52.4 billion, of which the South African Navy received R 4.9 billion— approximately 9 per cent of the total allocation. The fiscal erosion of South Africa's naval capabilities has significantly undermined its ability to conduct offshore patrols and renew maintenance contracts for its existing vessels. Budget constraints have also prevented the execution of long-range patrols under Operation COPPER, due to the unavailability of key mission-equipment. Initially conceived as a sub-regional initiative to counter the southward spread of Somali piracy into the Mozambique Channel, the operation has seen renewed political commitment.

President Cyril Ramaphosa has extended its maritime security deployment through 2025–2026, reaffirming SADC’s maritime security mandate along the East African coast. Additionally, South Africa is amongst the first African nations to have envisioned the establishment of National Maritime Information Sharing Centres (NMISC), although these eventually could not materialise due to a lack of political will.

While South Africa continues to address its own capacity challenges, Kenya has been particularly active in enhancing information-sharing towards better MSA/MDA, law enforcement, and regional cooperation. Kenya recently established the National Maritime Security Committee—a central, multi-agency body tasked with coordinating maritime security governance across the country’s maritime domain. This committee also participated in USALAMA BAHARINI ’24, a joint initiative involving EUNAVFOR ATALANTA, the International Maritime Organisation (IMO), and Kenya’s State Department for Shipping and Maritime Affairs.²⁸ This collaborative effort stands out for demonstrating how multiple domestic agencies can work together effectively to build maritime security capabilities and improve information sharing, coordination, and interoperability. This committee has also been involved in actualising the National Maritime Security Risk Register (NMSRR), an IMO-led effort to assess threats, vulnerabilities, and potential impacts on Kenya’s maritime interests. This risk register informs the creation of Kenya’s National Maritime Security Strategy, outlining the country’s long-term vision for safeguarding its maritime domain. Specialised agencies such as the IMO have been pivotal in delivering to the most immediate maritime enforcement needs of African States. The IMO, DCoC-JA and like organisations and frameworks have done some much-needed capacity-building and capability-enhancement by understanding the institutional gaps in maritime enforcement of these States.

Table 1 below outlines the national maritime security apparatus of selected WIO States, illustrating the progress they have made over the years. While not exhaustive, the data provides sufficient insight to assess how countries such as India can more effectively forge maritime cooperative partnerships with these States.

It is evident that these States have made significant strides in advancing their

Table 1: National Maritime Security Apparatus

Ser	Country	Maritime Security Governance Tools			
		Maritime Security Strategy	Maritime Coordination Committee	Maritime Law Enforcement Entities	Active Maritime Law Enforcement Agencies
1.	Somalia	Somali Maritime Resource and Security Strategy (SMRSS) (2013), facilitated by Kampala Process and agreed upon by the Federal Government of Somalia, Galmudug, Puntland, and Somaliland	Present: The United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM), has supported the Federal Government of Somalia in the formation of the National Maritime Coordination Committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre: Inaugurated on 05 December 2024 with the support of EUCAP Somalia and the EU's civilian crisis management mission SOMSEA Community Area: An online national community using the EU's IORIS platform 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Somalia Maritime Authority Somaliland Coast Guard Puntland Maritime Police Force (PMPF)
2.	Seychelles	Strategy under development (as announced by President Danny Faure in 2018) ²⁹	There is no overall coordination committee, but Seychelles has a National Information Sharing Coordination Centre	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seychelles Regional Fusion and Law Enforcement Centre for Safety and Security at Sea (REFLECS3) Regional Coordination of Operations Centre (RCOC) National Information Sharing Coordination Centre (NISCC) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seychelles Coast Guard (maritime, military, multi-mission service) Anti-Narcotics Bureau Marine Police Unit Seychelles Maritime Safety Authority Seychelles Port Authority
3.	Mauritius	Nil	In Planning Phase: India has offered help in building a National Maritime Information Sharing Centre	The IMO has helped Mauritius to create an effective National Oil Spill Contingency Plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> National Coast Guard (NCG)
4.	Kenya	Under development (with the help of the IMO, Kenya is first developing a National Maritime Security Risk Register (NMSRR))	National Maritime Security Committee (NMSC)	Directorate of Enforcement and Emergency Response (DEER)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Kenya Coast Guard Service (KCGS)
5.	South Africa	Under development: South Africa is preparing an NMSS with the help of the SADC	Maritime Security Coordination Centre (MSCC)	South Africa Search and Rescue Organisation (SASAR)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> South Africa Maritime Safety Authority (SAMSA) No dedicated Coast Guard present

Source: Author

maritime security capabilities. However, their inherent resource constraints mean they will continue to rely on international partnerships. The following recommendations are offered for India to enhance its role as an effective partner in capacity building and capability enhancement in the WIO.

Action and Policy-Driven Recommendations for India

1. **India-led Maritime Risk Assessment.** The maritime threat landscape in the WIO is complex—marked by intersecting, intermingling, and cascading risks. While forging maritime security partnerships is essential, they must be grounded in comprehensive risk assessments tailored to the specific conditions of each country. In this regard, India should assist WIO nations in developing their own maritime risk profiles. These profiles serve as a strategic stocktaking of region-wide threats that manifest differently depending on each country's economic and socio-political context. For instance, Kenya's Maritime Security Risk Register (MSRR) represents a foundational tool that can guide decision-making at various levels. This process should not be prescriptive; rather, it must empower recipient States to identify and assess their own risks—with India playing a facilitative role in helping them establish a robust, locally driven framework.
2. **Upgrading Maritime Bilateral Engagements.** India must move beyond its conventional approach to capacity-building and capability-enhancement. While acknowledging the utility of White Shipping Agreements, Hydrographic Surveys, and the donation of equipment have bolstered coastal surveillance capabilities in these States, it is now imperative to develop more targeted and strategic engagement plans. India's strategic partnerships with coastal African nations must adopt a stronger maritime focus. A noteworthy example is the India-Kenya Joint Vision Statement on Maritime Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), titled 'BAHARI', signed in 2023. This initiative marked a significant shift, as it was the first to explicitly highlight the need for 'operational coordination' at sea—thereby broadening the scope of maritime collaboration.

3. **National Level Coordination.** Leading by example is often the most effective approach. With the appointment of a National Maritime Security Coordinator (NMSC), India has established a top-tier institution to bridge the gap between the civilian and military maritime sectors. The NMSC operates under the National Security Council Secretariat (NSCS) and reports directly to the National Security Adviser. Its primary mandate is to serve as the nodal authority for fostering a unified and integrated approach to maritime security among the diverse stakeholders—spanning both central and state levels, and across military and civilian agencies. Following India’s lead at the sub-regional level, Kenya has formed a National Maritime Security Committee, which coordinates efforts across multiple entities, including the Coast Guard, maritime agencies, port authority, Navy, national intelligence, wildlife service, and prosecutorial authorities. India needs to actively share its institutional experience with Kenya and encourage the replication of such structural reforms across the WIO.

4. **Information Sharing and Nodal National Information Sharing Centres.** The critical importance of MSA and MDA has prompted several countries to pursue the establishment of National Maritime Information Sharing Centres (NMISCs). Comoros and Kenya are actively working towards creating such national centres. However, their respective plans of action need to be accelerated. Setting up these centres is resource-intensive and requires significant technical expertise. As demonstrated through the partnership between India and Mauritius, India must extend similar support to other WIO States in establishing NMISCs. To enhance coordination with regional and international stakeholders, it is essential that a formal national maritime information-sharing structure is put in place. Further, the Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) must mandatorily include International Liaison Officers (ILOs) from all WIO States in order to improve interoperability and communication. Information is key— but only when it is analysed and transformed into actionable intelligence. The entire WIO region must work toward standardising information-sharing protocols and harmonising procedures at national, regional, and international levels. At the

national level, personnel should be trained in standard operating procedures (SOPs) for first-level reporting and evidence collection. Such training can significantly reduce delays in data gathering during interdiction of suspect vessels. In addition, India must assist WIO States in developing or acquiring terrestrial technologies to enhance the maritime situational picture and improve capabilities for tracking ‘dark’ or non-cooperative vessels.

5. **Training to suit the needs.** While combined maritime exercises are valuable training tools, these countries also require focused law enforcement training to effectively combat maritime crime— particularly those involving suspicious vessels, most of which operate under the guise of fishing.
6. **Legal Finish and Prosecution of Maritime Crimes.** In 2022, India enacted the Maritime Anti-Piracy Act, which criminalises maritime piracy and provides a legal framework for prosecution. In the WIO region, however, significant legal and logistical challenges remain in prosecuting maritime crimes— particularly concerning evidence collection, chain of custody, mutual legal assistance, and extradition. The WIO requires a burden-sharing arrangement, especially as countries like Kenya and Seychelles have been handling the prosecution of captured pirates, while Somali prisons remain overburdened. To achieve a comprehensive ‘legal finish,’ national laws across the region must incorporate clear provisions for penalising maritime offenders. As India continues to internalise its own legal and institutional reforms in this domain, there is ample scope for mutual learning and collaboration with WIO States.

23 July 2025

ENDNOTES

- 1 “IOS Sagar Flag-off Ceremony by Indian Navy”, YouTube Video, 34:54, “Indian Navy,” 05 April 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5v1HMAzEmno&t=546s>.
- 2 The Hindu Bureau, “Inaugural India, Africa Maritime Engagement Exercise Begins in Tanzania,” *The Hindu*, 13 April 2025, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/inaugural-india-africa-maritime-engagement-exercise-begins-in-tanzania/article69446598.ece>.

- 3 Government of India, Press Information Bureau, “INS Sunayna (IOS SAGAR) Returns to Kochi on Successful Completion of Month-long Deployment”, Ministry of Defence, Press Release, 08 May 2025. <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2127730>.
- 4 Government of India, Press Information Bureau, “IOS SAGAR makes first call at Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania”, Ministry of Defence Press Release, 13 April 2025. <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=2121381>.
- 5 Vice Admiral Pradeep Chauhan, “Pervasive Intangible Challenges for the Indian Navy”, *Bharat Shakti* website, <https://bharatshakti.in/pervasive-intangible-challenges-for-the-indian-navy/>.

See Also: Vice Admiral Pradeep Chauhan, “Defence Capacity and Capability: Not A Conjurer’s Trick”, *South Asia Defence and Strategic Review Vol 14, Issue 2, May-June 2020*, https://www.defstrat.com/magazine_issues/vol-14-issue-02-may-jun-2020/.
- 6 Christian Bueger and Timothy Edmunds, “Mastering Maritime Security: Reflexive Capacity Building and the Western Indian Ocean Experience-A Best Practice Toolkit,” *Safeseas*, 2018. <https://www.safeseas.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Mastering-Maritime-Security-final.pdf>.
- 7 African Union, “Africa’s Integrated Maritime Security Strategy (2050 AIMS),” 2012, https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/30929-doc-2050_aim_strategy_eng_0.pdf
- 8 African Union, “2050 AIMS,” 29.
- 9 Ruchita Beri and Rajeev Kumar, eds., “India and Africa: Deepening the Security Engagement”, New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2024.
- 10 ACBF Website, “About ACBF”, Accessed 10 April 2025, <https://www.theacbf.org/index.php/who-we-are/about-us>.
- 11 Ekene Lionel, “Mozambican Navy Receives Two Fast Interceptor Boats from India”, *Military Africa*, 31 July 2019, <https://www.military.africa/2019/07/mozambican-navy-receives-two-fast-interceptor-boats-from-india/>

See Also: Government of India, Press Information Bureau, “Handing Over Two Interceptors to Mozambique at Nacala”, Ministry of Defence Press Release, 09 November 2024, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2072061>.
- 12 Blog Post, “40 Years of the Maritime Wing of the Mauritius Police Force (1974-2014)”, *Mauritius Philatelic Club*, 12 July 2015, <http://mauritianphilatelicblog.blogspot.com/2015/07/40-years-of-maritime-wing-of-mauritius.html>

See Also: Government of India, Press Information Bureau, “Text of the PM’s Remarks on the Commissioning of Coast Ship Barracuda”, Prime Minister’s Office Press Release, 12 March 2015, <https://www.pib.gov.in/newsite/printrelease.aspx?relid=116881>.

- 13 PTI, “India Gifts Second Fast Attack Craft INS Tarasa to the Seychelles Coast Guard”, *The Economic Times*, 08 November 2014, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/india-gifts-second-fast-attack-craft-ins-tarasa-to-the-seychelles-coast-guard/articleshow/45082936.cms?from=mdr>.
- 14 PTI, “Operation Kaveri Wraps up with 3,862 Indians Now Home from Sudan”, *The Hindu*, 06 May 2023, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/17-iaf-flights-five-sorties-of-navy-ships-rescue-3862-indians-from-sudan/article66817960.ece>
- 15 Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs Media Centre Brief, “India-Madagascar Unclassified Bilateral Brief”, *Ministry of External Affairs*, October 2023, https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Unclassified_brief_Madagascar_October_2023.pdf.
- 16 Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs Media Centre Brief “Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi Announced Vision MAHASAGAR- “Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions” for the Global South in Mauritius”, 12 March 2025, <https://www.mea.gov.in/newsdetail1.htm?13355/>.
- 17 Government of India, Press Information Bureau, “Maritime Information Sharing Workshop 2023”, Ministry of Defence Press Release, 12 September 2023, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1956612>.
- 18 Dialogue with the Director (DISA Division), Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India.
- 19 Government of India, Press Information Bureau, “IONS Maritime Exercise 2022 (IMEX 22)”, Ministry of Defence Press Release, 30 March 2022, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1811590>.
- 20 PTI, “Exercise IBSAMAR’ between India, South Africa, Brazil Begins Tomorrow”, *The Economic times*, 12 July 2018, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/exercise-ibsamam-between-india-south-africa-brazil-begins-tomorrow/articleshow/51046402.cms?from=mdr>

See Also: Government of India, Press Information Bureau, “India – Mozambique –Tanzania Trilateral (IMT TRILAT 24) Exercise Concludes at Nacala, Mozambique”, Ministry of Defence Press Release, 29 March 2024, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=2016626>.

- 21 Dinaker Peri, “Indian Navy Participates in Maiden Exercise with CMF as Associate Partner,” *The Hindu*, 30 September 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/indian-navy-participates-in-maiden-exercise-with-cmf/article65947101.ece>.
- 22 Combined Maritime Forces Public Affairs, “Indian Navy Carries Out First Drug Interdiction as CMF Member,” *Combined Maritime Forces*, 16 April 2024, <https://combinedmaritimeforces.com/2024/04/16/indian-navy-carries-out-first-drug-interdiction-as-cmf-member/>.
- 23 Bueger, *Mastering Maritime Security*, 29.
- 24 Presentation given at ANU-NMF workshop in April 2024.
- 25 Government of India, Press Information Bureau, “Maritime Security: Memorandum Of Understanding (MoU) between the Information Fusion Centre - Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) and Regional Coordination Operations Centre (RCOC)”, Ministry of Defence Press Release, 22 February 2023, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1901371>.
- 26 Kelly Moss and Maisie Pigeon, “Stable Seas: Western Indian Ocean”, *One Earth Futures*, March 2022, <https://www.stableseas.org/post/stable-seas-western-indian-ocean>.
- 27 Daily News, “Years of Budget Cuts Leave South Africa’s Navy Struggling to Stay Afloat,” *Africa Defence Forum*, 31 October 2024, <https://adf-magazine.com/2024/10/years-of-budget-cuts-leave-south-africas-navy-struggling-to-stay-afloat/>.
- 28 Media News, “Multi-agency exercise tackles piracy, illicit maritime activities in Kenya”, *International Maritime Authority*, 29 May 2024, <https://www.imo.org/en/MediaCentre/Pages/WhatsNew-2083.aspx>.
- 29 Archive-Seychelles, “National Maritime Security Strategy for Seychelles”, *Seychelles Nations*, 01 March 2018, <https://www.nation.sc/archive/257868/national-maritime-security-strategy-for-seychelles->.

About the Author

Ms Anum Khan is an Associate Fellow at the National Maritime Foundation. Her research is centred upon the multiple maritime facets of the eastern African littoral, about which she is deeply passionate. She may be contacted at amgs2.nmf@gmail.com

*Translating Vision into Action:
IONS Comes of Age*

Revitalising IONS: India at the Helm

Ms Sruthylacshmi B Bhat

The inception of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) in February 2008 in New Delhi was hailed as a landmark achievement by the Indian Navy, aimed at fostering inclusive maritime cooperation across the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) to counter emerging maritime security threats. After more than a decade and a half, India is set to assume the Chair of IONS for the 2025–2027 term. It is in the interest of both India and IONS that the nation proactively reflects on the forum’s challenges and opportunities and takes measures to revitalise it before the bicentennial of its inception approaches. As a prelude to such deliberations, this chapter examines the rationale behind the establishment of IONS, traces its evolution by assessing its achievements and shortcomings, analyses how it has diverged from its original vision, and proposes pathways for reinvigoration.

As a navy-to-navy initiative, IONS was conceived to address issues of shared concern, particularly those related to maritime security challenges and the growing influence of extra-regional powers in the IOR. Unlike the Navy’s traditional emphasis on hard security, IONS embraces a broader and more inclusive approach to maritime security, encompassing both conventional and non-traditional dimensions. This comprehensive understanding of maritime security was succinctly captured by former Prime Minister of India, Dr Manmohan Singh, in his inaugural address at the first IONS seminar, where he defined it as “*freedom from threats arising either in or from the sea.*”¹ In South Asia, the maritime threats are numerous and interconnected. Piracy and armed robbery—particularly along sea lanes approaching the Arabian Sea and off the Somali coast—remain enduring concerns. For example, in December 2023, the Indian Navy recaptured the cargo vessel *MV Ruen*, hijacked by Somali pirates, demonstrating the persistent vulnerability of sea routes.² Maritime

terrorism, another serious threat, is endangering offshore infrastructure and coastal zones. Illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing is often cited as one of the gravest non-traditional threats—undermining coastal livelihoods, food security, and marine ecosystems.³ Southern littoral States are also grappling with drug trafficking and human smuggling via maritime routes, especially across the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea.⁴ Due to the vastness of the sea, weak surveillance capacities, governance gaps, and the transboundary nature of these threats, no single State can respond adequately on its own, as yet. It is precisely this strategic void that IONS was meant to fill—and it is against this benchmark that its mandate must be reassessed and revitalised.⁵

The birth of IONS hinges on a concept rooted in ‘*cooperative*’, and ‘*comprehensive security*’ rather than ‘*competitive*’ or ‘*military*’.⁶ By upholding ‘*cooperative*’ security, the construct indulges in discussions and activities that cordially approach common security problems persisting in the region, and, in that process, prioritises the collective effort—not of one, but all the Indian Ocean littorals. By encouraging coordination over competition, this objective prevents regional countries from undertaking parallel or conflicting initiatives, ensuring more efficient and unified security efforts. This shift also allows IONS to adopt a holistic security approach, by conducting maritime exercises and operational interactions, building capacity through non-operational planning exercises, and enhancing capabilities by improving maritime safety and preparedness.

Furthermore, as a maritime-exclusive forum, IONS bridges the institutional silos that characterise other regional constructs. Many of these either lack a pan-Indian Ocean scope or do not focus specifically on maritime issues—such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)—while others, like the Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS), address maritime concerns but exclude several Indian Ocean countries. The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), though an active political and economic platform since its inception, largely refrained from engaging with maritime security until 2013, when it formally identified six priority areas—chief among them *maritime safety and security*. The establishment of IONS thus filled a critical institutional gap. It sought to attract broad-based participation—which

it successfully achieved with the involvement of around thirty-five member states⁷ — and created a common, open, and inclusive platform for constructive maritime engagement across the Indian Ocean Region.

A few key aspects about IONS and its functioning warrants attention.

Maritime Agencies and Representation in IONS. Although the term “navy” is formally used in all IONS forums and documents, it primarily addresses the principal maritime security agencies of the participating nations. Hence, in the highest-level functioning of IONS, the ‘Conclave-of-Chiefs’, met once every two years, with the respective rotation of chairmanship, a Commander from the Seychelles Coast Guard, for instance, may represent the littoral along with other countries’ navy counterparts.

Chairmanship Rotation and Associated Activities. As an inclusive initiative, it rotates its chairmanship across countries in the sub-regions every two years, the first to assume being the Chief of the Naval Staff of India, followed by UAE, South Africa, Australia, Bangladesh, Iran, France, and the current chair, Thailand. Following the Conclave-of-Chiefs, an IONS seminar and affiliated activities, like the IONS Essay Competition, are conducted. According to the IONS Charter of Business, which came into effect in 2014, its objectives include enhancing shared understanding of maritime issues, boosting naval capabilities, establishing multilateral maritime cooperative mechanisms, and advancing interoperability to boost HADR efforts⁸.

Preparatory Workshops and Working Groups. In the years in between the Conclaves, an IONS Preparatory Workshop (IPW) is organised, which discusses the agenda for the successive term. IONS hosts three working groups: (a) Maritime Security IONS Working Group (MARSEC IWG), co-chaired by India and Iran, (b) Information Sharing and Interoperability Working Group (IS&I IWG), co-chaired by Australia and France, and (c) HADR Working Group (HADR IWG), co-chaired by India and Iran.

Unique Membership Structure and Observer Status. One has to bear in mind that IONS stands apart in the IOR with a structure uniquely of its own, distinct from conventional security constructs. The observer status in the IONS is granted based on the existence of littorals in the region, which implies that the principal maritime

agency of all the IOR countries is, by default, a member of the IONS. This translates to thirty-eight countries that have territories in the region (including France and the UK), which would be invited to all the meetings and programmes hosted by IONS. To be a member, however, the observer has to sign the IONS Charter of Business, which grants them an additional privilege—the right to vote.⁹ An extra-regional country seeking observer status must undergo a review at the Conclave-of-Chiefs and secure unanimous approval—a high bar that has, notably, kept even the United States from joining as an observer. Currently, IONS comprises 25 member nations and eight extra-regional observer States (see Table 1).

Table 1: Participating Nations in the IONS

West Asian Littorals		East African Littoral		South Asian Littoral		South-East Asian & Australian Littoral	
	Bahrain		Comoros		Bangladesh		Australia
	Iran		Djibouti		India		Indonesia
	Iraq		Egypt		Maldives		Malaysia
	Israel		Eritrea		Pakistan		Myanmar
	Jordan		France		Sri Lanka		Singapore
	Kuwait		Kenya		UK		Thailand
	Oman		Madagascar				Timor-Leste
	Qatar		Mauritius				
	Saudi Arabia		Mozambique	EXTRA REGIONAL OBSERVERS			
	UAE		Seychelles		China		Netherland
	Yemen		Somalia		Germany		Republic of Korea
			South Africa		Italy		Russia
			Sudan		Japan		Spain
			Tanzania				
Colour Key:							
Member							
Observer				No Shading			

Source: Collated by the author from various sources¹⁰

Major Initiatives and Milestones. In the 17 years that it has been functioning, IONS has undertaken several initiatives. The IONS journal, entitled “Ionsphere”, was published from 2013 to 2016.¹¹ In 2017, Bangladesh hosted the first IONS

Multilateral Maritime Search and Rescue Exercise (IMMAREX),¹² and in December the same year, “*IONS Guidelines for HADR*” was released.¹³ Further, “*the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES)*”, originally from WPNS,¹⁴ was adopted. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Indian Navy shared guidelines for respective naval resources and other medical information with IONS members.¹⁵ In 2022, the IONS Maritime Exercise (IMEX 2022) was conducted,¹⁶ and in 2023, the IONS Flag was officially adopted, designed by India.¹⁷

Overcoming Fragmentation: Barriers to Maritime Unity

Over time, IONS struggled to garner the attention it deserved, with its intention often overlooked by both mainstream media and academia. This raises a critical question: How did IONS stray away from its initial zeal and founding ambition? The possible answers to this could be derived by studying:

- (a) the challenges in regional security cooperation
- (b) constraints specific to maritime security cooperation in the IOR, and
- (c) their implications for IONS.

At the regional level, barriers to regional security cooperation include divergent threat perception, absence of a common security outlook, fear of dominance by the major power, historical mistrust, overlapping memberships, economic disparities, and political incompatibility.¹⁸

Captain Himadri Das further outlines the constraints in pursuing maritime security cooperation in the IOR.¹⁹ He illustrates that there is a trust deficit in the region due to strained inter-State relations, that the wide disparity in force levels and technology between partners, linguistic and cultural barriers and financial constraints become challenges in cooperation, along with the geographical vastness of the region impeding the pursuit. Furthermore, the balance between ‘blue-water’ and ‘brown-water’ responsibilities, the continental mindset of security constructs and the impact of budgetary impediments on force levels adds to the complexity of the matter.

Implications for IONS

Structural Fault Lines Within and Without. Implications of these challenges on IONS are reflected externally, in that it is criticised for being too vast and diverse with limited membership, hampered by a consensus deadlock, with a lack of resources to build maritime capability²⁰ and littoral States possessing dissimilar capacities and capabilities.²¹ Internally, IONS is viewed as lacking political top cover, it has no permanent secretariat, suffers from a loosely defined organisational structure,²² and a lack of secure communication mechanisms.²³

A few more problems also plague IONS, which affect its potential growth. IONS faces challenges that hinder its growth, notably an outdated and poorly maintained official website. Key sections like 'Ionsphere' editions, IWGs, events, and essay competition results are either missing or repetitive, reflecting a lack of timely updates. The 'observer' section further misrepresents IONS' unique observer structure, confusing representatives. Over time, the clear distinction between regional littoral and extra-regional observers has blurred, exemplified by only Madagascar being listed as an observer despite being a littoral state. This ambiguity undermines IONS' conceptual clarity and calls for a more precise and consistent representation of its membership framework.²⁴

Inclusion and Engagement Gaps. Prominently, IONS failed to garner the attention of all the IOR littorals, thereby failing to persuade them to join the mechanism (See table 1). Despite their observer status, many countries do not participate in IONS activities.²⁵ It is also unclear whether they are invited at all. Six West Asian and eight East African countries remain outside the IONS framework, including strategically pivotal States positioned near critical chokepoints such as Somalia. The internal conflicts in Somalia, which have resulted in multiple maritime security agencies operating concurrently, complicate the legitimacy of incorporating any security bodies from conflict-affected littoral states.²⁶ This situation significantly impedes IONS' capacity to formulate a cohesive and coordinated strategy against piracy in the Gulf of Aden.

Moreover, persistent intra-regional tensions pose a substantial risk to the platform's long-term viability, evoking parallels with the stagnation observed in SAARC. An escalation in India-Pakistan hostilities, accompanied by a potential

boycott from either party, could severely undermine the initiative's perceived unity and diplomatic credibility.²⁷

Structural and Operational Hurdles. In 2008, Sam Bateman had commented that, despite being based on the WPNS model, unlike WPNS membership, which was either from navies or defence forces, the presence of the coast guard (sometimes only the coast guard) may impact the functioning of IONS.²⁸ For instance, Seychelles only possesses a Coast Guard for overseeing its vast EEZ, which is more than double its land area²⁹. This reveals two interconnected challenges: island states with expansive EEZs often possess limited naval or coast guard capacity, while larger navies among IONS members, who themselves are developing States, frequently face operational or structural constraints that limit their contribution to the initiative. Furthermore, Captain Sawan notes that the staff representing navies are transient in their presence in the IONS, quite similar to the non-uniform level of staff engagement,³⁰ often leading to discontinuity in discussions.

IONS, in the long-run, was originally envisioned to develop close collaboration with the IORA to bring about political-executive layer coordination in the Indian Ocean region and eventually establish interoperability with the WPNS, fostering seamless regional coordination across the Indo-Pacific.³¹ However, neither of the stated objectives have materialised as yet. According to three levels of cooperation elaborated by Vice Admiral Pradeep Chauhan, at the topmost conceptual level lie the maritime policies like MAHASAGAR, on the next level, the political level, lie politically represented organisations like IORA, and on the third layer, the executive level, lie security constructs like IONS. The role of IONS would not be to supersede IORA but to replenish and complement its policy initiatives.³² IONS has more member nations to its credit than IORA, and the latter has some countries that are not IONS members.³³ Mutual cooperation can benefit the constructs and the region positively through membership addition and collaborative action.

Forging Paths: Towards Cohesive Cooperation

With the challenges confronting regional maritime frameworks now established, it is imperative to chart a forward-looking course. Any proposed solutions must begin

with an understanding that IONS — by virtue of its structure, naval representation, overarching security framework, and inclusivity—differentiates itself from other multilateral constructs in the IOR. As the international order increasingly gravitates towards *minilateralism* and as non-traditional security concerns gain prominence, the way forward lies not in resisting regionalism but in fostering region-to-region cooperation. Regional frameworks such as IONS should therefore be leveraged as instruments to enhance maritime connectivity, build trust, and promote collective well-being. For such efforts to succeed, the objectives of various regional maritime constructs must be aligned and streamlined toward common, achievable goals. For instance, the Indian Ocean hosts a range of regional Maritime Domain Awareness/Maritime Situational Awareness (MDA/MSA) and information-sharing structures, which could be streamlined through IONS for increasing transparency. In particular, the efforts of IFC-IOR (India) and IFC (Singapore) could be synchronised through projects undertaken by the IS&I IWG.³⁴ Creation of an IONS Maritime Security Reporting Mechanism (IMSRM) for reporting piracy, terrorism, and illegal activities could further help in increasing transparency and accountability.

Similarly, IONS countries must also work in tandem with each other, fulfilling the ‘security’ and ‘defence’ aspects of the IOR ‘political-level’ mechanisms, as mentioned above. Significantly, IONS must also consider working alongside the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF), some of whose members figure as ‘observers’ of IONS³⁵. Additionally, IONS could also network with the Heads of Asian Coast Guard Agencies Meeting (HACGAM), especially to identify best practices in counter piracy and SAR activities.³⁶

The criticism that IONS remains an “all talk, no bite” entity is based on preconceived notions about the construct, which are fallacious. IONS is, inherently, a consultative forum, which is not limited to discourse, but paves the way for actionable outcomes. The process of discussions that IONS in itself acts as a confidence-building measure amongst navies of the Indian Ocean, thereby, augmenting navy-to-navy and nation-to-nation goodwill and trust, and hence ensuring regional security.³⁷ IONS provides a platform to help furnish lessons from unique individual experiences, rather than letting countries settle for hearsay measures and retrofitting foreign approaches.

Sharing best practices for developing a common code of conduct and plan of action cannot be achieved by shortcuts, but through coherent and robust discussions.³⁸

Towards the same end, of enhancing the inter-personal relations and camaraderie during seminars, respective Chairs could facilitate diverse cultural engagements—ranging from sports events such as golf tournaments to food festivals, seamanship competitions, band competitions, and exhibitions of naval history.³⁹ During its chairmanship, India must utilise the platform to familiarise the countries to India's naval and maritime heritage by arranging visits for representatives to experience naval museums and heritage sites. The IONS Ocean Sailing Expedition, once proposed by Yogesh V Athawale, finding tangible form in the IOS *Sagar* is an encouraging prospect.⁴⁰ It is, therefore, also suggested that, following the model of IOS Sagar, IONS should regularly undertake thematic exercises and programs under its banner to enhance visibility, foster engagement, and manage regional perceptions effectively.

The IONS Working Groups may be detailed and their objectives defined or refined in the upcoming conclaves. It is imperative that IONS maintains its presence in the virtual medium, as it will be easier for partner countries and stakeholders in the Indian Ocean to keep track of its activities. Steps towards more online engagement include having a presence across multiple social media applications, uploading the chairman's interviews on the progress of IONS during their term and publishing the summary of proceedings and activities undertaken. This will promote transparency, invite accurate analyses, valid criticisms, and studied recommendations.

While IONS may have limits as a navy-level and not political-level body, its executive role gives weight to its recommendations. Such views are reinforced by the fact that practitioner insights often inform policy more effectively than those of researchers. For instance, Admiral Dhowan had suggested that the Government of India's *Swachh Bharat* initiative could be extended to give a maritime connotation, *Swachh Sagar*.⁴¹ When India assumes chairmanship in 2025, IONS could be the platform to propose this thought.

Moreover, it is in the interest of maritime security in the region that IONS coordinates the 'Indian Ocean Maritime Cooperative Forum', a Track 1.5 framework that cushions the research efforts of IONS by being permanent knowledge-partners,

as suggested by the former Chief of the Naval Staff, Admiral Arun Prakash, during the IONS Inaugural Seminar.⁴² Time has unveiled that the suggestions and such initiatives carry weight, as such networks were initiated outside of the construct. In the first China-IOR Forum by the China-Indian Ocean Forum on (Blue Economy) Development Cooperation, established in 2018, at least sixteen Indian Ocean littorals participated.⁴³ By 2022, China had proposed the establishment of a *Blue Economy Think Tank Network*, and by 2023, its joint statements outlined several new initiatives, including a *Maritime Cooperation and Training Centre*, a *Blue Talent Programme*, and a *Disaster Prevention and Mitigation Alliance*, among others. The growing prominence of such maritime and regional security frameworks led by extra-regional powers presents a strategic challenge for IONS. This evolving landscape underscores the need for IONS to adopt a more proactive, adaptive, and forward-looking approach in defining its agenda and asserting its relevance in the Indian Ocean Region.

India must calibrate and renew IONS' objectives, to make the platform engaging and to truly reach its aim of “*attaining mutually beneficial maritime security outcomes within the Indian Ocean*”.⁴⁴ It is high time that these outcomes are well-defined, incorporated into objectives to ensure continuity of activities. Towards achieving tangible outcomes, IONS could constitute allied institutions such as a network of IONS Maritime Centre for Excellence (IMCE), specialising in areas from environmental security to shipbuilding. Further, an IONS Maritime Security Agency on Blue Economy and Climate Change could track environmental impacts and support MDA/MSA efforts in the IOR.

Further, granular focus may also be allocated to tasks towards overcoming the issues between IONS member States. For instance, Small Island Developing States (SIDS) may be supported with resources in the manner of medicine diplomacy carried out by the Indian Navy during the COVID-19 pandemic. IONS Hospital Ships could cater to the needs of SIDS, with countries with capabilities participating on a rotation basis. Common solutions for capacity inadequacy may be sought by IONS through funding common service vessels, such as research vessels, to support the IMCEs. Other measures include providing the capability to and taking initiative for the reconstruction of the Somali Coast Guard, an IOR littoral, before extra-

regional powers could meddle in,⁴⁵ and distributing capacities for water security in SIDS. Thematic “Checkpoint Exercises” could contain models of surveillance and reconnaissance patrols, escort and protection drills, scenario-building on anti-piracy and anti-smuggling, interoperability in disaster relief management and legal workshops. The purpose of illustrating these examples is to simply to underscore the vast potential for a rejuvenated IONS. While discussions should be pursued, this time around, actionable outcomes must follow.

Finally, to reiterate, under India’s chairmanship in 2025, the focus must strictly be on synergising the efforts of multilateral constructs working at the conceptual, political, and executive levels to avoid duplication and facilitate tangible outcomes. Maritime security agencies working in silos must coalesce, to avoid duplication of efforts, and to be time- and cost-efficient. The discussion on the need for coordination has not been a peripheral concern within the IONS framework. Indeed, it has been a subject of deliberate engagement, as reflected in the essay competition topics posed in 2015 and 2014, respectively:⁴⁶

- (a) “Given the disparity in maritime forces in the Indian Ocean, what practical steps might be taken to assist marine police, coastguards and navies to cooperate together”
and
- (b) “How can information sharing between IONS members support the aims of maritime forces’ cooperation envisaged in the IONS vision and objectives?”⁴⁷

These propositions demonstrate that the challenges in maritime cooperation were recognised and formally articulated. It is, therefore, reasonable to reflect on whether the slow progress of IONS is attributable to a combination of systemic inertia, a lack of sustained interest and structural challenges, each reinforcing the other and impeding collective action, as detailed. As the mantle of leadership transitions, the future of IONS will rest not only on principled and pragmatic leadership, but on the sheer commitment, clarity and resolve of those entrusted to steer it –toward cooperation, resilience, common interest and shared maritime security.

30 April 2025

ENDNOTES

- 1 “PM Inaugurates Indian Ocean Naval Symposium Seminar – 2008”, *Former Prime Minister of India Dr Manmohan Singh*, 14 February 2008, <https://archivepmo.nic.in/drmanmohansingh/speech-details.php?nodeid=633>.
- 2 Hannah Ellis-Petersen, “India Recaptures Somali Pirate Ship and Frees Crew,” *The Guardian*, March 17, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/mar/17/india-recaptures-somali-pirate-ship-and-frees-crew>.
- 3 “IUU Fishing: The Most Significant Maritime Security Threat, Report Says,” *Safety4Sea*, accessed October 8, 2025, <https://safety4sea.com/iuu-fishing-the-most-significant-maritime-security-threat-report-says/>.
- 4 Constantino Xavier and Anit Mukherjee, “Promoting Maritime Security in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea,” *Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP)*, August 2023, <https://csep.org/reports/promoting-maritime-security-in-the-bay-of-bengal-and-andaman-sea/>.
- 5 VAdm Pradeep Chauhan, “The Criticality of the IONS Maritime Security Construct”, *Centre for International Maritime Security*, 25 May 2016, <https://cimsec.org/criticality-ions-maritime-security-construct/>.
- 6 Chauhan, 2016.
- 7 Captain Ranendra Singh Sawan, “Problems and prospects of maritime security cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region: a case study of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS)”, *Seapower Soundings*, Issue 15, 2020, https://seapower.navy.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-02/Soundings_No_15.pdf.
- 8 “Charter of Business Version 2.0 13 January 2016”, IONS Website, <https://www.ions.global/sites/default/files/IONS-Charter-Version-2.0.pdf>.
- 9 Vice Admiral Pradeep Chauhan, “IONS Ver. 2.0 — A Time for Rejuvenation”, 16 October 2018, *National Maritime Foundation*, <https://maritimeindia.org/3988-2/>.
- 10 Vice Admiral Pradeep Chauhan, 2018. Modified accordingly.
- 11 Sawan, p 19.
- 12 Sawan, p 18.
- 13 “IONS Guidelines for HADR Version 3.1”, IONS Website, December 2017, <https://www.ions.global/sites/default/files/Guidelines%20IONS%20on%20HADR%20Version.pdf>.
- 14 “Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea Version 1.0”, Western Pacific Naval Symposium, 22 April 2014, <https://www.ions.global/sites/default/files/CUES-10-Approvedat-the-14th-WPNS-2014422.pdf>.

- 15 “COVID-19 Guidelines- from Indian Navy”, IONS Website, <https://ions.global/covid-19-guidelines-indian-navy>.
- 16 “IONS Maritime Exercise 2022 (IMEX 22)”, *PIB Delhi*, 30 March 2022, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1811590>.
- 17 “India took over as the co-Chair of IONS Working Groups on Maritime Security and HADR”, *PIB Delhi*, 22 December 2023, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1989652>.
- 18 Luis Bitencourt, “Security Issues and Challenges to Regional Security Cooperation”, in “Perspectives from Argentina, Brazil and Colombia”, ed. by Pedro Villagra Delgado et al, *Strategic Studies Institute*, US Army War College, 2003, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep12048.6.pdf> and Alyson J K Bailes and Andrew Cottey, “Regional Security Cooperation in the Early 21st Century”, *SIPRI Yearbook 2006: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security*, 2005, pp 195-223, <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/YB06ch04.pdf>.

See Also: Sam Bateman, “The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium: Will the Navies of the Indian Ocean Region Unite?”, *RSIS Commentaries*, 17 March 2008.
- 19 Captain Himadri Das collates the challenges to maritime security cooperation from various sources in his book. Captain Himadri Das, *Building Partnerships: India and International Cooperation for Maritime Security*, National Maritime Foundation, Pentagon Press: New Delhi, 2024.
- 20 Sawan, p 21
- 21 P K Ghosh, “Indian Ocean Naval Symposium: Uniting the Maritime Indian Ocean Region”, *Strategic Analysis*, vol 36, no 3, 352-357, 08 May 2012.
- 22 Sam Bateman and Sawan p 21-24.
- 23 Captain Himadri Das, p79.
- 24 “IONS Working Groups”, IONS Website, <https://www.ions.global/ions-working-groups>.
- 25 In the 8th IONS Conclave-of-Chiefs hosted by Thailand in December 2023, Chiefs of Navies or delegates from only 27 members/observers in total participated, “India took over as the co-Chair of IONS Working Groups on Maritime Security and HADR”, 2023.
- 26 Somalia’s conflicted breakaway region Somaliland has its own Coast Guard as the maritime law enforcement agency. Puntland, a self-proclaimed autonomous territory of Somalia, has its own maritime police force which operates off the coast of the region. The Somali Navy Force is termed as ‘virtually inactive’ by unverified sources.
- 27 As recently as from 21 to 22 April 2025, the Pakistan Navy hosted the IONS Preparatory Workshop in Karachi, which was attended by delegates from 42 countries from 23 IONS

- member nations and 6 countries, including India and UAE, joining virtually. See, “PN hosts Indian Ocean naval symposium preparatory workshop”, *Daily Times*, 23 April 2025, <https://dailytimes.com.pk/1290872/pn-hosts-indian-ocean-naval-symposium-preparatory-workshop/>.
- 28 Sam Bateman, 2008.
- 29 The area of Seychelles is 445 square kilometres and its coastline is about 600 kilometres. Meanwhile, its EEZ spans more than 1.3 million square kilometres. “Background Information about this Site”, <https://unfccc.int/resource/ccsites/seychell/backgrnd/index.htm>.
- 30 Sawan, p 25.
- 31 Retrieved from archives of the excerpts of an interview given by Vice Admiral Pradeep Chauhan to Force Magazine in 2008.
- 32 Lectures of Vice Admiral Pradeep Chauhan, Director General, NMF.
- 33 Countries like France, Pakistan, the UK, Timor-Leste, Myanmar and Saudi Arabia are members of IONS but not IORA. Contrarily, IORA member nations like Yemen, Comoros, Madagascar and Somalia are not members of IONS. Additionally, Bahrain, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea and Sudan are not members of either of the constructs.
- 34 Captain Sawan, 2020, p 34.
- 35 “Major Sectoral Bodies/Committees”, *ASEAN*, <https://asean.org/our-communities/asean-political-security-community/peaceful-secure-and-stable-region/maritime-cooperation/>.
- 36 Captain Sawan, 2020, p 30.
- 37 In his article, entitled “Confidence Building Measures in the Indian Ocean”, Vice Admiral Pradeep Chauhan defines CBMs and describes political, social, economic, cultural and environmental CBMs.
- 38 P K Ghosh, 2012, p 355-356.
- 39 Yogesh V Athawale, “The IONS Initiative and its Prospects for Security Cooperation within the IOR”, *Maritime Affairs*, vol 6, no 1, Summer 2010, pp 98 to 115.
- 40 Athawale, 2010, p 110 and “INS Sunayna- Mission IOS Sagar”, *Indian Navy*, <https://indiannavy.gov.in/content/ins-sunayna-mission-ios-sagar>.
- 41 As recommended by Admiral Rabinder “Robin” Kumar Dhowan, former Chief of the Naval Staff, IN, at Admiral R D Katari Memorial Lecture at Manekshaw Centre, New Delhi on 25 April 2025.

- 42 Speech given by Admiral Arun Prakash, former CNS, IN, at the inaugural IONS seminar in February 2008 and later reiterated by P K Ghosh. Admiral had called for an initiative that could act as a ‘counterpart’ to IONS to work in tandem with it, with broader objectives. P K Ghosh, 2012, 356.
- 43 According to the 2022 Joint Statement, high-level representatives of 19 countries, and representatives of three international organizations, including Indonesia, Pakistan, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Maldives, Nepal, Afghanistan, Iran, Oman, South Africa, Kenya, Mozambique, Tanzania, Seychelles, Madagascar, Mauritius, Djibouti, Australia. (Maldives and Australia denied official participation). However, the third China-IOR Forum on Blue Economy Development Cooperation, conducted on 16 December 2024, was co-hosted by the Maldives Ministry of Fisheries and Ocean Resources alongside CIDCA, Yunnan Government, and Barbados’ Ministry of Environment and National Beautification, Green and Blue Economy. See, Dr. Sanjeev Kumar, “Second China-Indian Ocean Region Forum: Agenda and Outcome”, *Indian Council of World Affairs*, 21 December 2023, https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=10303&lid=6571, and Zhang Han, “China-Indian Ocean forum held, launching joint project, training center”, *Global Times*, 16 December 2024, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202412/1325180.shtml>.
- 44 “Charter of Business Version 2.0 13 January 2016”.
- 45 Kiran Baez, “Turkey signed two major deals with Somalia. Will it be able to implement them?”, *Atlantic Council*, 18 July 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/turkeysource/turkey-signed-two-major-deals-with-somalia-will-it-be-able-to-implement-them/>.
- 46 “About”, IONS Website, <https://www.ions.global/about-ions>.
- 47 “About”, IONS Website.

About the Author

Ms Sruthylacshmi B Bhat is a Research Associate in the Indian and Regional Maritime Security cluster at the National Maritime Foundation. She holds a Master’s degree in International Relations (South Asian Studies) from Pondicherry University and a Bachelor’s degree in English Language and Literature from CMS College, Kottayam. Her current research examines the multilateral constructs in the Indian Ocean Region, including IONS, IORA and BIMSTEC. She can be reached at irms2.nmf@gmail.com.

Maritime Geostrategies of the IONS Participating Nations and Implications for India's Chairmanship 2025-27 (West Asian Littoral)

Ms Sruthylacshmi B Bhat

Seas for a civilisation are chances to improve and use their profits by utilising all potentials.¹

India's maritime vision has entered a new phase—one shaped by constructive engagement, multilateral cooperation, and regional connectivity. The Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) reflects this approach, placing the West Asian littorals at the heart of India's broader maritime strategy. Within this framework, the Indo-Pacific serves as the central focus, and IONS provides an inclusive and cooperative platform to strengthen overall maritime security.² Reflecting the region's importance, West Asian countries such as Iran, Qatar, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates have joined IONS as member states, highlighting the forum's growing reach and relevance across the Indian Ocean.³

Subsequently, the Western segment of the Indian Ocean, abundant in its resources and in accruing non-traditional security issues, is as crucial to the IONS and global maritime security as it is for India's trade and economy. The region is surrounded by three chokepoints in the Indian Ocean – the Strait of Hormuz, Bab el-Mandeb, and the Suez Canal. On average, the Suez Canal witnesses the passage of 9. per cent of global seaborne oil (about 9.2 million barrels per day in early 2023) and 8 per cent of liquefied natural gas (LNG).⁴ For India, this critical artery brings the majority of its oil supply, with about 80 per cent of oil being imported to India via the Strait of Hormuz alone.⁵

India's engagements with these countries are driven by the need for energy security, the diaspora linkages, and the requirement to maintain collective maritime security by countering illicit activities. The human bridge between India and the Gulf is equally robust: over nine million Indian citizens reside across the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) States, contributing not only to economic productivity but also over 38 per cent of total annual remittances in the financial year 2024.⁶ The Gulf and Arabian Sea have become hotspots for piracy, armed robbery, narcotics and arms trafficking, IUU fishing, and the threat of maritime terrorism. As coastal stakeholders of vital sea lanes, both India and the West Asian littorals share a mutual interest in upholding the sanctity of the maritime commons. IONS represents a valuable mechanism to translate bilateral goodwill into multilateral action, enabling coordinated patrols, naval dialogues, and domain awareness sharing. In recent times, as the unruly weaponisation of trade impacts global trade, it is to India's credit and solace that not only has the country maintained a balanced relation with the West Asian littoral, but that the majority of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member countries have joined as members to IONS.⁷ Additionally, China's expanding Maritime Silk Route and the Belt and Road Initiative, its strategic strong point in Djibouti, and trilateral drills along with Iran and Russia in 2022 are altering the maritime equilibrium.⁸ With the interest of establishing their influence in the region, the US, as well as European powers, have ensured their presence through mechanisms like the International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC), Operation AGÉNOR, and the Coordinated Maritime Presence (CMP).⁹ With the strategic landscape so dense and competitive, India must ensure its maritime role remains distinctive—non-intrusive, capability-focused, and outcome-driven.

Additionally, as West Asia itself evolves from insular security thinking to cooperative regionalism, India, through IONS, can serve as a crucible for trust-building, especially given the persistent political balancing between actors such as Iran and Qatar on one hand and Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain on the other. The far-reaching global impacts of the constant intra-regional conflicts (which often proliferated faster due to the involvement of extra-regional affairs) meant that the region was under-resourced to protect the maritime spaces surrounding it, which often collided with SLOCs. Citing these challenges and considering that the country

is the next IONS Chair, India must anchor structured cooperation with West Asian littorals through enduring frameworks for capacity-building, domain awareness, and collective maritime security.

Mapping the National Maritime Security Priorities of the West Asian Littoral

The evolution and priority areas of maritime security strategy of the five West Asian littorals are studied in this section, chronologically.

In 2019, Khamenei summarised the core idea of Iran's defence policy and military strategy: "*We must not limit ourselves within our own borders. It is our duty to recognise and confront threats that lie beyond our walls.*"¹⁰ Iran started projecting power, stepping away from its traditional theatres, especially into the Persian Gulf and the Northern Indian Ocean, due to weakened proxy networks, the need to overstep sanctions, economic hurdles, logistical setbacks in the Levant, and promoting its geostrategy. For stretching the "long arm" strategy,¹¹ it actively pursued frequent military exercises, developed a ready-to-counter maritime posture, invested heavily in energy, tourism and coastal city infrastructures and established a permanent deployment plan near maritime chokepoints.¹² Bandar Abbas's naval strategy is hybrid in nature, blending conventional and asymmetric warfare, increasingly confrontational to challenge extra-regional actors like the US and the EU. However, under the realisation that their assets may be overstated in their countering capacities, Iran has started to invest in blue-water ports of Chabahar and Jask, stressing indigenisation, with efforts to strengthen diplomatic ties with Oman, Russia, India, and China in place.¹³

Oman, situated directly south of the Strait of Hormuz, recently reiterated their commitment to actively protecting regional and international maritime security at the UN, underlining its commitments to energy security, legal adherence and humanitarian interests.¹⁴ They reiterated their core pillar, including sustaining regional and global stability, freedom of navigation and world trade and bolstering energy security and sustainable development, as well as the need for countering transnational threats through well-postulated collective responses. Notably, they also recently hosted the 8th Indian Ocean Conference.¹⁵ Oman's maritime foreign

policy upholds the principles of peaceful coexistence, respect for sovereignty and commitment to international law. Demonstrating its involvement as a maritime actor, Oman intends to be a vital player in safeguarding the security and stability of maritime routes and advancing cooperative multilateral approaches to address complex challenges in the domain.¹⁶

In the second decade of the century, Qatar pivoted towards reworking its naval programme across three pillars, focusing on advancing a blue-water navy- acquiring advanced warships for modernisation, enhancing naval combat capabilities and extending shore-based infrastructure to support the fleet growth.¹⁷ Towards this, Qatar had collaborated with Turkey and Italy to set up the Doha International Maritime Defence Exhibition and Conference (DIMDEX), established the Buroq Special Marine Operations Training Center and entered into an agreement with the Italian company Leonardo for infrastructural security post the inauguration of its newly functional bases in Al Daayen and Umm Al Houf.¹⁸ With these modernisation and advancement efforts, the Qatari Emiri Navy (QEN) could be termed as one of the Gulf's most modern navies, albeit its size being limited.¹⁹ With its energy economy dependent on the safe trade of LNG, the need to protect its energy assets becomes crucial. This factor, coupled with geographic positioning, dependence on foreign countries that deploy their defence forces in Oman, lack of trust in the US and the GCC members, and a desire to progress its independent interests, drives Qatar's investments in its Navy.²⁰ Further, with its ambition to expand its energy economy, as the largest LNG exporter, reliance on energy resilience and the capacity to counter efforts of disruption becomes key.

Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 underlines the core objectives of diversifying its economy and aligning the maritime sector with sustainable development.²¹ Key efforts boosting this are the National Transport and Logistics Strategy,²² which underscored the desire of the country to elevate the standards of its maritime forces to a global level. It also extended to providing specialised personnel expertise in the maritime field, resulting of which is the fleet record of 6.4 % increase in gross tonnage in 2024, as compared to 2023.²³ Saudi Arabia's ambitions are aimed at the indigenisation of shipbuilding, diversification of defence equipment production, boosting the renewable energy sector and localising the renewable

energy supply chain.²⁴ Aimed at reducing its dependence on the oil economy, the Vision statement drives the goal of diversification of trade, extended to enhancing partnerships nationally and internationally.²⁵ Subsequently, it has heavily invested in port development, streamlining logistics efforts, adapting modern technologies, boosting eco-tourism and rebranding shipping services, collaborating with foreign stakeholders. Furthermore, its engagements also extend with that of the US via the GCC as they work on Integrated Air and Missile Defence and Maritime Security.²⁶ Additionally, Saudi Arabia cooperates with Western powers like the US and the UK. It participates in exercises like the Nautical Defender in the Arabian Sea.

Post-2015, the neutral position that the United Arab Emirates (UAE) had adhered to was transformed into a foreign policy that preferred regional structures, a boost in militarisation, soft power engagements, and interference in regional conflicts.²⁷ By heavily investing in DP World, along with the Abu Dhabi Ports group, the UAE asserted its presence in the maritime domain as well as in other developing countries, especially investing in countries at the chokepoints. Earmarked in its progress to be a foremost maritime hub are the efforts of sustainable shipping, economic development, public-private partnership and digital transformations. Abu Dhabi's progress in 2024 alone features investment in ship-repair yards and new vessels as well as a rise in allied maritime activities, such as maritime law, bunker supply and insurance companies.²⁸ In its strategy, it aims to be a forerunner in sustainable shipping, other than the recent achievements of ranking top in transport services trade, Bunker Supply Index, competitive maritime hub and in volume container handling.²⁹ It has also been elected to the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) Council multiple times. The UAE launched the Dubai Marine Transport Plan 2030 in 2023 to almost double the maritime transport network and connectivity, aimed at the development of the national maritime sector.³⁰ Further, Abu Dhabi's regional commitments are evident from its presence in the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) and the France-India-UAE trilateral.³¹

The strategic trajectories of these West Asian littoral states demonstrate a clear focus on expanding maritime capabilities beyond traditional confines in response to shifting geopolitical and economic pressures. Iran's emphasis on extending influence through asymmetric and conventional means contrasts with Oman's commitment to legal frameworks and regional stability. Qatar's naval modernisation reflects its energy

security priorities, while Saudi Arabia integrates maritime growth with economic diversification and international cooperation. The UAE combines infrastructure investment with sustainability and regional engagement. Together, these approaches form a complex maritime security landscape, laying a purposeful foundation for their participation and collaboration within the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium.

Engagements in IONS by these Member States

An active participant in the IONS, Iran chaired the 6th Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) for 2018-19 and hosted the Conclave of Chiefs at Tehran from 23 to 25 April 2018, followed by an Exhibition of Technical Capabilities of Maritime Defence.³² During the Maritime Security IONS Working Group meeting in February 2019, the zero draft Maritime Security Guidelines were prepared by the Islamic Republic of Iran Navy (IRIN) was hugely discussed³³ and in October 2022, during the IWG meeting in Tehran, an international maritime security centre was inaugurated in the third Iranian Navy's district in the presence of IONS delegation.³⁴ In the IONS 2024 Joint Naval Exercise (IMEX 2024) organised by the Iranian Navy in its southern maritime territory, the Iranian destroyer *Jamaran* participated, alongside India, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and others.³⁵

Oman shares 70 years of diplomatic relations with India and engages in a similar fashion in the IONS. At the 10th anniversary celebrations of IONS, an Omani yacht, *Zinat Al Bihaar*, had set its course with *INS Tarangini* and *INS Sudarshini*, in 'tall ship sail-together' from Kochi to Muscat in November 2018.³⁶ In October of the following year, an IONS Preparatory Workshop was organised by the Oman Maritime Security Centre and the Royal Navy of Oman in Muscat, briefing IRIN's programmes during its chair.³⁷

Qatar, the newest member from the region, was welcomed as a member to IONS in 2021.³⁸ Prior to its joining as a member, Qatar was invited by Iran to participate in the IONS war game in December 2019, reflective of the depth of integration and cooperation between the countries and of Qatar's interest in pursuing meaningful engagement in the construct.³⁹ It has since participated in many events organised by the respective chairs of the IONS.

Through its participation in the programmes conducted as part of the IONS, Saudi Arabia has marked its presence, denoting its willingness to work multilaterally. Notably, in 2019, Saudi-Arabia and India had publicised the joint statement after the Crown Prince's visit, which stated that the countries would work together with other Indian Ocean Rim Countries to boost maritime security, for overall prosperity and to maintain a safe and secure trade passage.⁴⁰ Its entry as a dialogue partner in the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the election of Saudi Arabia as the chair of IONS attest to its commitment. During the 8th IONS annual event in Bangkok on "Blue economy: ways forward for sustainable development of IONS member states," Saudi Arabia was elected as the chair of the IONS for the 2027-2029 term.⁴¹

The UAE was the chair of the IONS for the period 2010-12, on the theme "*Together for the Reinforcement of Maritime Security in the Indian Ocean*".⁴² Its chairmanship in the IONS was a crucial one, as it helped in nullifying Pakistan's narrative that the construct is harbouring anti-Islam sentiments.⁴³ UAE is a continued participant in all the symposiums hosted by IONS, including the 10th anniversary celebrations, IMEX 2022, and the working groups of IONS.

Divergent Interests, Geopolitical Challenges and Arenas for Cooperation

In the case of Iran, its evolution attests that it is tilted towards a neutral and diplomatic approach in the maritime arena, prioritising bilateral and trilateral cooperations and an increased role in regional constructs.⁴⁴ Further, in an event where recent internal instabilities, assumed to be infuriated by the US to target the Kurdish opposition groups in Iraq, heighten, possibilities point towards Iran confronting belligerents in the maritime front.⁴⁵ It is a platform like the IONS that can mitigate the impacts of such conflicts as a cooperative navy-to-navy dialogue platform.

Various complicated institutional and geopolitical considerations also warrant attention. For instance, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN), which operates in the Gulf and shares maritime operations in the Strait of Hormuz with the conventional IRIN, has been branded as a terrorist organisation by many countries, such as Saudi Arabia and the US.⁴⁶ Working with whom may

be an impossible or arduous task for the IONS. These also impact the maritime projects, coupled with challenges posed by international sanctions, bureaucratic inefficiencies, lack of political will and lack of trust from foreign investors.⁴⁷ However, in an optimistic note, during the closing ceremony of the 6th IONS, Rear Admiral Habibollah Sayyari provided various suggestions for IONS, including initiating regional training practices for combating piracy in Chabahar and forming information centres, martial and rescue groups, and arranging maritime and aerial excursions, to share technical know-how and develop links between commanders in the Indian Ocean.⁴⁸ During its tenure as the chair, Iran had prepared the Guideline for Maritime Security IONS Working Group, details of which need to be refloated and refurbished in coordination with India.⁴⁹ Further, it was also noted by a naval practitioner that IRIN would be actively pursuing partner nations to complement its efforts to enhance blue-navy capabilities, especially in the shipbuilding sector, interoperability, and operational engagement and explore new horizons of maritime security.⁵⁰

Oman was branded as one of the high-alert zones of piracy activity by the International Maritime Bureau in 2012. Oman has since then adhered to and implemented various measures to counter and suppress piracy.⁵¹ The latest Quarterly Maritime Security Update by the IFC-IOR (Q1/25) confirms that no incidents of piracy were reported in the Gulf of Oman, as well as the West Asian region as a whole.⁵² Indeed, the region carried one of the lowest crime and incident rates among the others. Further, should any maritime occurrence force an obstruction in the Strait of Hormuz, it would violate the integrity of the Omani territorial sea, disturb its economy and impact the energy trade.⁵³ Although the al-Duqm port was developed to overcome this vulnerability, maritime incidents were reported near the area, too.⁵⁴ As the port seeks more investments for modernisation, it is of consequence that Oman engages in collaborative maritime security activities. Ambassador Omar Kathiri of Oman,⁵⁵ stated the country's interest in advancing capacity-building in developing nations, focusing on maritime surveillance, information-sharing, emergency response, infrastructure protection and countering organised crime. He stresses the utility of structured collective initiatives, effective partnerships and the use of advanced technology to enhance Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA).⁵⁶ Oman's

political will to boost maritime connectivity and cooperation is evident through its engagements on various platforms.⁵⁷ As a country with balanced relations—as it has signed naval intelligence agreements with GCC allies, India, Pakistan, France, Britain, and the US, shares a pipeline from Fujairah to Habshan in Abu Dhabi with the UAE, has signed maritime transport cooperation with the Saudi Arabia, and aim to establish a joint Maritime Security Centre with Iran and Pakistan,⁵⁸—Oman's posture in the IONS would greatly benefit in admitting new West Asian littorals of the Indian Ocean.

The Qatari Navy, despite its huge maritime assets, is a predominantly brown-water Navy limited to its territorial sea, with efforts to transform into a blue-water Navy progressing.⁵⁹ With its engagements with the US, and the labour force for the navy sourced from other countries such as Poland, Pakistan, the Philippines and India, the QEN not only balances anti-US countries in IONS,⁶⁰ but actively seeks capability enhancement. While its modern capabilities could be an asset to IONS, the prospect of interoperability will be greatly welcomed by the country. Additionally, Mazzucco notes a deficiency in a maintenance and repair culture in the country.⁶¹ India, hence, along with supplying sailors to fill the labour scarcity, must also find ways to provide them training, especially in properly maintaining maritime assets and in using military equipment, using IONS as a platform or on the sidelines of it. With common membership in Qatar's DIMDEX and IONS (except for Turkey), the IONS platform can be leveraged to link the two, sharing technological advancements.

Qatar's future maritime strategy rests on industrial localisation, knowledge transfer, and sustained investment in naval infrastructure and fleet modernisation. Central to this vision, along with the development of a blue-water navy to safeguard offshore assets, is the projection of national power, supported by a new naval base and enhanced surveillance and deterrence capabilities. Marine conservation, through a National Biodiversity Strategy, also features prominently. India can leverage Qatar's expanding maritime ambitions within IONS by fostering interoperability, co-developing MDA and infrastructure, and aligning environmental and security priorities for a stronger regional maritime architecture and maintaining holistic maritime security.

Saudi Arabia hosts the Saudi International Maritime Forum, in partnership with the Royal Saudi Naval Forces and the Ministry of Defence, aimed at discoursing on maritime security threats and other regional and international concerns with all the maritime stakeholders, which illustrates the Saudi Navy's political willingness, to translate which on a regional level operationally, IONS could be the best platform to receive the inputs. The commonality between India and Saudi Arabia, evident in the latter's Vision 2030 and the former's Maritime Vision 2030, involvement in MILAN exercise and the DCOC/JA and their commitments to sustainability through Riyadh's entry into India's International Solar Alliance in 2019, are significant for India to streamline efforts in the IONS.

Saudi Arabia's oil facilities were under attack several times, notably in September 2019 at Khurais and Abaqaiq, the largest oil supply wasted in a day in history, accounting for a total loss of 5.7 million barrels per day.⁶² Coupled with its strained relations with Iran, the unrest caused by the Houthis' attacks threatens its maritime safety and security. Other concerns include the fact that Riyadh is not a member but a dialogue partner in the IORA, the political layer of maritime constructs in the Indian Ocean Region. This could give rise to possible bottleneck issues once the efforts of IORA and IONS are integrated. India's effort should, then, also be laid on admitting Saudi Arabia as a member in the IORA, as it must be on working with the subsequent chair of IONS to maintain continuity of action.

While a strong maritime presence, the UAE is criticised to be pursuing neo-colonial tendencies in the developing East African and West Asian countries, with its footprint extending to South Asia and the rest of the Indo-Pacific, especially in Egypt, Pakistan, India, Seychelles and Indonesia.⁶³ Its presence near most of the major chokepoints in the Indo-Pacific elevates its role in the geostrategic considerations. On the other hand, it is yet to explore its political and diplomatic options in the international arena, which has been limited in nature so far. Its unexpected withdrawal from the US's CTF, non-responsiveness during the Red Sea conflict, non-attachment to any western military exercise and a void in pursuing its national maritime outreach all leave scope for speculation, as well as opportunity to be tapped into.⁶⁴ While political will is at its minimum, UAE boasts the capacity to boost maritime infrastructures of struggling countries, especially Small Island Developing States (SIDS), whose concerns also collide with that of sustainability.

Conclusion

Core to revitalising IONS would be harnessing the potential that the West Asian countries possess. The indubitable significance of the region anchored by the choke points, energy flows, troubled waters and geostrategic interests mandates that they remain stable and protected. As India assumes the next IONS chair, almost two decades later, the changing and increasingly maritime nature of the region is inferred. Despite divergent threat perceptions and national priorities, there remains a robust foundation for cooperation in capacity-building, joint exercises, and information sharing. India's strategic opportunity, therefore, lies in shaping IONS into a more purposeful platform that complements existing regional constructs. This requires pragmatic diplomacy, inclusive security frameworks, and a calibrated balance that accommodates sensitivities between rival states such as Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Moreover, it is in the interest of the efficiency and effectiveness of IONS that Bahrain, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait and Yemen are invited to the construct to leverage their potential in maintaining peace and security in the region. Finally, India must avoid overextending its maritime footprint in a Gulf region already saturated by U.S. and EU naval presence, where even their coordination remains limited. A prudent approach would involve positioning IONS as a platform for structured capability-enhancement through clear, long-term frameworks — potentially by inviting the GCC, EU, and the U.S. as extra-regional observers — to streamline efforts, prevent duplication, and strategically offset China's expanding influence without antagonising regional sensitivities, especially those of Iran. In doing so, it will not only reinforce its own strategic footprint but also ensure the collective resilience of the Indian Ocean Region.

29 May 2025

ENDNOTES

- 1 “RADM Sayyari: A base must be formed to tackle piracy in Chabahar”, 25 April 2018, https://www.ionsirannavy.ir/news_1077.html.
- 2 As per the five approaches of India's endeavour for constructive engagement illustrated in an in-house presentation by Vice Admiral Pradeep Chauhan at the NMF. The other approaches identified include minilaterals and the Quad.

- 3 “Participating Nations”, *Indian Ocean Naval Symposium*, <https://www.ions.global/ions-working-groups>.
- 4 “The Geopolitics of Trade: Security Threats in the Strait of Hormuz and Likely Strategies”, RANE 08 April 2025. <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/geopolitics-trade-security-threats-strait-hormuz-and-likely-strategies>, and Racha Helwa and Perrihan Al-Riffai, “A lifeline under threat: Why the Suez Canal’s security matters for the world”, *Atlantic Council*, 20 March 2025, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/a-lifeline-under-threat-why-the-suez-canals-security-matters-for-the-world/>.

See Also: Jun Qiao, Yitong Li and Mingxuan Huang, “The Geopolitical Importance of Bab el-Mandeb Strait: A Strategic Gateway to Global Trade”, *Middle East Political and Economic Institute*. <https://mepei.com/the-geopolitical-importance-of-bab-el-mandeb-strait-a-strategic-gateway-to-global-trade/>.
- 5 Aritra Banerjee, “Strategic Choke Points: Why India’s Access To The Malacca And Hormuz Straits Matters – Analysis”, *Eurasia Review*, 11 November 2024, <https://www.eurasiareview.com/11112024-strategic-choke-points-why-indias-access-to-the-malacca-and-hormuz-straits-matters-analysis/>.
- 6 Abhijit Lele, “US, UK, Singapore lead as India’s top remittance hubs; overtake GCC nations”, *Business Standard*, 19 March 2025, https://www.business-standard.com/economy/news/remittances-into-india-advanced-economies-overtake-gcc-in-2023-24-125031901367_1.html.
- 7 Except for Bahrain and Kuwait, the others have joined the IONS. As the fastest growing economies with resource reserves, India has maintained strategic cooperation with the GCC construct and its member countries bilaterally. See, “Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)”, *Ministry of External Affairs*, February 2013, https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Gulf_Cooperation_Council_MEA_Website.pdf.
- 8 Amnah Mosly, “Enhancing Cooperation on Maritime Security in the Gulf”, *Gulf Research Center*, 10 January 2023, <https://www.grc.net/single-commentary/76>.
- 9 Amnah Mosly, <https://www.grc.net/single-commentary/76>.
- 10 Oral Toĝa, “Iran’s Forward Defense Doctrine and the Evolution of Its “Long Arm” Strategy”, *IRAM Centre for Iranian Studies*, 07 March 2025, https://iramcenter.org/en/irans-forward-defense-doctrine-and-the-evolution-of-its-long-arm-strategy_en-2600.
- 11 The strategy intended to forward Iran’s military coverage beyond the expanse of the Persian Gulf, in the open waters and maritime zones through deploying naval assets in the open seas to decipher and predict challenges before they presented to sharpen preparedness.

- 12 Oral Toğra, https://iramcenter.org/en/irans-forward-defense-doctrine-and-the-evolution-of-its-long-arm-strategy_en-2600.
- 13 Leonardo Jacopo Maria Mazzucco, “Iranian Naval Strategy: The Strengths and Weaknesses of Confrontationalism”, *Gulf International Forum*, <https://gulffif.org/iranian-naval-strategy-the-strengths-and-weaknesses-of-confrontationalism/>.
- 14 “Oman Reiterates Commitment to Regional, Global Maritime Security”, *Oman News Agency*, 21 May 2025, <https://omannews.gov.om/topics/en/79/show/122431>.
- 15 “8th Indian Ocean Conference- 2025: Voyage to New Horizons of Maritime Partnership”, *India Foundation and the Foreign Ministry, Sultanate of Oman*, <https://indianocean.indiafoundation.in/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/indianocean-8con.pdf>.
- 16 Oman Reiterates Commitment to Regional, Global Maritime Security”, <https://omannews.gov.om/topics/en/79/show/122431>.
- 17 Leonardo Jacopo Maria Mazzucco, “Qatar Builds a Blue-Water Force to Safeguard National Security and Energy Interests”, *Gulf International Forum*, <https://gulffif.org/qatar-builds-a-blue-water-force-to-safeguard-national-security-and-energy-interests>.
- 18 Agnes Helou, “Qatar signs deal with Leonardo for first ever Navy Operations Center”, *Breaking Defense* 23 March 2022, <https://breakingdefense.com/2022/03/qatar-signs-deal-with-leonardo-for-first-ever-navy-operation-center/>.
- 19 Leonardo Mazzucco, <https://gulffif.org/qatar-builds-a-blue-water-force-to-safeguard-national-security-and-energy-interests>.
- 20 Leonardo Mazzucco, <https://gulffif.org/qatar-builds-a-blue-water-force-to-safeguard-national-security-and-energy-interests>.
- 21 “Saudi Vision 2030”, <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/en>.
- 22 “National Transport and Logistics Strategy” *Saudipedia*, <https://saudipedia.com/en/article/2876/government-and-politics/transport/national-transport-and-logistics-strategy>.
- 23 “Saudi Arabia Strengthens Its Maritime Leadership by Leading the Region in Gross Tonnage for 2024”, *Saudi Press Agency*, 27 January 2025, <https://www.spa.gov.sa/en/N2250875>.
- 24 “Saudi Vision 2030”, 47 and 49.
- 25 Mohammed Al-Kinani, “Saudi maritime industry spurring global trade shift”, *Arab News*, 29 March 2025, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2595302/business-economy>.
- 26 Amnah Mosly, <https://www.grc.net/single-commentary/76>.

- 27 Mawadda Iskandar, “UAE’s sub-imperial project: Erecting a covert empire across the Red Sea”, *The Cradle*, 27 May 2025, <https://thecradle.co/articles-id/31040>.
- 28 “UAE Leads the way to maritime”, *The Standard Maritime*, vol 09, 2024/25, https://www.smm-hamburg.com/fileadmin/smm/2024/pdf/media-lounge/the_maritimstandard.pdf.
- 29 “UAE demonstrates its maritime contributions and competencies at IMO”, *Seatrade Maritime News*, 30 November 2023, <https://www.seatrade-maritime.com/regulations/uae-demonstrates-its-maritime-contributions-and-competencies-at-imo>.
- 30 “Dubai Marine Transport Master Plan- 2030”, *Government of UAE*, <https://u.ae/en/about-the-uae/strategies-initiatives-and-awards/strategies-plans-and-visions/transport-and-infrastructure/dubai-marine-transport-master-plan>.
- 31 Rushali Saha, “Can UAE Become an Indo-Pacific Sea Power?”, *Institute for Security and Development Policy*, 08 March 2024, <https://isdpeu.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Brief-Rushali-Mar-8-2024.pdf>.
- 32 “Admiral Sunil Lanba, Chief of the Naval Staff visits Tehran, Iran for Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) – 2018”, *Ministry of Defence*, 22 April 2018, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleaseDetail.aspx?PRID=1529870>.
- 33 “Maritime Security IONS Working Group Meeting Held in Bandar Abbas, Iran”, *IONS Iran Navy*, 19 February 2019, https://www.ionsirannavy.ir/news_1414.html.
- 34 Amin Mohammadzadegan Khoiyi, “Iran’s powerful Navy guarantees security”, *Tehran Times*, 28 November 2022, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/479130/Iran-s-powerful-Navy-guarantees-security>.
- 35 “2024 IONS Maritime Exercise concludes in Iran’s southern waters”, *Tehran Times*, 20 October 2024, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/505229/2024-IONS-Maritime-Exercise-concludes-in-Iran-s-southern-waters>.
- 36 “Two Indian Navy tall ships to sail with Omani yacht to Muscat”, *The Week*, 13 November 2018, <https://www.theweek.in/news/india/2018/11/13/two-navy-tall-ships-to-sail-with-omani-yacht-to-muscat.html>.
- 37 “Sultanate of Oman holds IONS Preparatory Workshop”, *IONS Iran Navy*, 14 October 2019, https://www.ionsirannavy.ir/news_1600.html.
- 38 “Qatar gets full membership of Indian Ocean Naval Symposium”, *Qatar Tribune*, 07 February 2021, <https://www.qatar-tribune.com/article/215954/NATION/Qatar-gets-full-membership-of-Indian-Ocean-Naval-Symposium>.

- 39 “Iran Invites Qatar Navy to Attend IONS War Game in Indian Ocean”, *Al Manar TV*, 12 December 2019, <https://english.almanar.com.lb/887955>.
- 40 “India-Saudi Arabia Joint Statement during the State Visit of His Royal Highness the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia to India”, *Embassy of India Riyadh, Saudi Arabia*, 20 February 2019, <https://www.eoiriyadh.gov.in/page/joint-statement-during-the-state-visit-of-his-royal-highness-the-crown-prince-of-saudi-arabia-to-india/>.
- 41 “Saudi Arabia set to hold presidency of Indian Ocean Naval Symposium from 2027 to 2029”, *Saudi Gazette*, 24 December 2023, <https://saudigazette.com.sa/article/639003/SAUDI-ARABIA/Saudi-Arabia-set-to-hold-presidency-of-Indian-Ocean-Naval-Symposium-from-2027-to-2029>.
- 42 “Indian Ocean Naval Symposium 2010 Hosted by UAE Navy”, *IONS*, <https://www.ions.global/sites/default/files/8.pdf>.
- 43 Ritu Sharma, “UAE will be Next Chairman of Indian Ocean Naval Symposium”, *Dajjiworld*, 01 June 2009, <https://www.dajjiworld.com/index.php/news/newsDisplay?newsID=60611>.
- 44 An example of this is that Iran initiated a joint Iran- Oman- Pakistan Maritime Security Centre.
- See Also:** “Iran, Oman, Pakistan to jointly form Maritime Security Center”, 03 October 2022, <https://en.mehrnews.com/news/192068/Iran-Oman-Pakistan-to-jointly-form-Maritime-Security-Center>.
- 45 Recent internal security threats, include the likes of the Mahsa Amini’s death and the protests thereafter; and the helicopter crash in which President Ebrahim Raisi was killed in May 2024, which also had global reactions and implications.
- See Also:** David Gritten, “Iran protests: Supreme leader blames unrest on US and Israel”, *BBC News*, 04 October 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-63118637>.
- Bhaswar Kumar, “Why President Ebrahim Raisi’s death comes at a sensitive time for Iran”, *Business Standard*, 21 May 2024, https://www.business-standard.com/external-affairs-defence-security/news/why-president-ebrahim-raisi-s-death-comes-at-a-sensitive-time-for-iran-124052001331_1.html.
- 46 Nicole Gaouette, “Trump designates elite Iranian military force as a terrorist organization”, *CNN Politics*, 08 April 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/04/08/politics/iran-us-irgc-designation/index.html>.
- Reuters, “Saudi, Bahrain add Iran’s IRGC to terror lists - SPA”, *Euro News*, 23 October 2018, <https://www.euronews.com/2018/10/23/saudi-bahrain-add-irans-irgc-to-terror-lists-spa>.

- 47 Oral Toğa, https://iramcenter.org/en/irans-forward-defense-doctrine-and-the-evolution-of-its-long-arm-strategy_en-2600.
- 48 “RADM Sayyari: A base must be formed to tackle piracy in Chabahar”, https://www.ionsirannavy.ir/news_1077.html.
- 49 “Sultanate of Oman holds IONS Preparatory Workshop”, https://www.ionsirannavy.ir/news_1600.html.
- 50 Vice Admiral John Miller, “Iranian Maritime Improvements: Challenges and Opportunities”, *The International Institute for Strategic Studies*, <https://www.iiss.org/globalassets/media-library--content--migration/images/comment/analysis/2017/december/4-miller2125.pdf>.
- 51 “Prevention and Repression of Piracy and Armed Robbery at Sea”, *United Nations*, 16 May 2023, https://legal.un.org/ilc/sessions/74/pdfs/english/piracy_oman.pdf.
- 52 “Quarterly Maritime Security Update”, Q1 2025, *Information Fusion Centre- Indian Ocean Region*, https://ifcior.indiannavy.gov.in/sites/default/files/2025-05/Final%20QMSU%20Mar%2025_compressed.pdf.
- 53 Sigurd Neubauer, “Oman’s Neutral Approach to Maritime Security”, *Middle East Institute*, 18 June 2013, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/omans-neutral-approach-maritime-security>.
- 54 “Incident: Attack on the Liberian Flagged MT Mercer Street”, *Break Bulk News*, 30 July 2021, <https://breakbulk.news/incident-attack-on-the-liberian-flagged-mt-mercers-streetimo9539585/>.
- 55 Ambassador Omar Said Al Kathiri is Oman’s Permanent Representative to the United Nations (UN), who gave the statement during the high-level session of the UN Security Council on “Enhancing Maritime Navigation Security through International Cooperation for Global Stability.” See, “Oman Reiterates Commitment to Regional, Global Maritime Security”, <https://omannews.gov.om/topics/en/79/show/122431>.
- 56 “Oman Reiterates Commitment to Regional, Global Maritime Security”, <https://omannews.gov.om/topics/en/79/show/122431>.
- 57 “Oman to host Indian Ocean Conference from Sunday”, *Foreign Ministry of Oman*, 14 February 2025, <https://www.fm.gov.om/oman-to-host-indian-ocean-conference-from-sunday/>.
- 58 Sigurd Neubauer, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/omans-neutral-approach-maritime-security>, and Amnah Mosly, <https://www.grc.net/single-commentary/76>.

- 59 Agnes Helou, “Qatari navy’s new amphibious ship to help fulfil nation’s ‘unique’ needs”, *Breaking Defense*, 02 February 2023, <https://breakingdefense.com/2023/02/qatari-navys-new-amphibious-ship-to-help-fulfil-nations-unique-needs/>.
- 60 “US officially designates Qatar as a major non-NATO ally”, *Al Jazeera*, 10 March 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/10/us-officially-designates-qatar-as-a-major-non-nato-ally>.
- 61 Leonardo Mazzuco, <https://gulfif.org/qatar-builds-a-blue-water-force-to-safeguard-national-security-and-energy-interests>.
- 62 Summer Said, Jared Malsin and Jessica Donati, “U.S. Blames Iran for Attack on Saudi Oil Facilities”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 14 September 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/drone-strikes-spark-fires-at-saudi-oil-facilities-11568443375>.
- 63 Mawadda Iskandar, <https://thecradle.co/articles-id/31040> and Rushali Saha, <https://isdpeu/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Brief-Rushali-Mar-8-2024.pdf>.
- 64 Rushali Saha, <https://isdpeu/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Brief-Rushali-Mar-8-2024.pdf>, 4.

About the Author

Ms Sruthylacshmi B Bhat is a Research Associate in the Indian and Regional Maritime Security cluster at the National Maritime Foundation. She holds a Master’s degree in International Relations (South Asian Studies) from Pondicherry University and a Bachelor’s degree in English Language and Literature from CMS College, Kottayam. Her current research examines the multilateral constructs in the Indian Ocean Region, including IONS, IORA and BIMSTEC. She can be reached at irms2.nmf@gmail.com.

Maritime Geostrategies of the IONS Participating Nations and Implications for India's Chairmanship 2025-27 (South Asian Littoral)

Ms Sruthylacshmi B Bhat

As India prepares to assume the chairmanship of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) in 2025, an underutilised yet strategically vital region demands greater attention: South Asia. The South Asian littorals — Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bangladesh, and to a limited extent, Pakistan — represent not only India's closest maritime partners but also a critical testing ground for transforming IONS from a dialogue forum into an operationally relevant security architecture. Yet, their participation in IONS remains ad hoc, their capabilities under-integrated, and their priorities often overlooked in multilateral planning.

To consider the region, India's immediate maritime neighbourhood, South Asia, is characterised by constant inter-State and intra-State geo-political turbulence, testing bilateral relations and regional cohesion among the littorals. It becomes essential to remember that India's pursuit of maritime relations with South Asian countries is shaped by various geopolitical realities. It is quite admirable that India has resolved all maritime delimitation issues with its neighbouring countries, except the contentious issue with Pakistan in Sir Creek.¹ Notwithstanding this apparent peace in the legal front, the constant political turmoil, such as the domestic unrest in Bangladesh,² the brewing terrorism in Pakistan and its strained relations with India,³ and the sporadic nature of India-Maldives relations,⁴ generates distress among

the States, then impacting cohesiveness at a regional level. Despite the hurdles in pursuing a common maritime regional security impetus, India has extended bilateral relations to each of these countries, except Pakistan.

The admission of Pakistan, the first country to have been sent an invitation to join IONS after its conception, represents the core tenets of the navy-to-navy construct — “*an open and inclusive forum for discussion of regionally relevant maritime issues.*”⁵ IONS was launched at a time when the significance of cooperative maritime security was gaining momentum in India and its relations with Pakistan was undergoing rapprochement. Due to India’s strained relations with Pakistan’s, diplomatic and economic relations between the countries were cut off since 2019.⁶ While such a move has led to a pushstop of India’s active involvement in regional constructs that the country shares with Pakistan, the following reasons drive India’s engagements within IONS, despite the inimical relations with Pakistan. (i) IONS emphasises cooperative security rather than competitive security, and therefore, excluding or alienating Pakistan may set a precedent of politicisation that undermines the forum’s consultative and non-binding nature. (ii) Maritime security is not a one-State but a regional effort, and, hence, a collaborative approach is mandated. Strategic engagement — no matter how limited — preserves the possibility of future convergence on shared maritime challenges such as piracy, environmental threats, and SAR operations, where cooperation may be in both countries’ interest. (iii) India’s continued engagement helps in preventing extra-regional actors from exploiting Pakistan’s discontent to dilute IONS’s regional character or redirect its focus. (iv) Finally, much like how Khalil Gibran describes the parent-child bond, it is significant to remember that IONS came through India, yet it does not belong to India.⁷

Strategic Mapping: South Asian Navies in the IONS Framework

To operationalise the chairmanship, India must first evaluate the current maritime strategies, naval capacities, IONS roles, and the bilateral leverage it holds with each South Asian country. Table 1 presents a comparative analysis of these facets.

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of various facets of South Asian Navies

Country	Title	Maritime Strategy	Naval Capacity	IONS Engagement	India's Bilateral Leverage	Policy Potential
Sri Lanka ⁸	Proposal: NAVSTRAT-2030	Rules-based Good Order at Sea, naval modernisation and diversification, increasing Navy-Coast Guard collaboration, boosting bilateral and multilateral maritime ties, protecting marine ecosystems, and SAR and HADR efforts.	Limited blue-water capability, strong coast guard and increasing fleet modernisation	Hosted IONS 2018; active in HADR WG; hosted many events, including operational workshops.	MoU on logistics, SLINEX, Dornier gifted, personnel training	Co-lead HADR SOP development and regional climate security dialogues, collaboration in healthcare facilities, awareness of maritime affairs among the general public, high high-quality training and retention of the best men and women, cyber-security initiatives, boost information-sharing and SAR partnership agreements.
Maldives ⁹	The Capstone Doctrine	Climate security, EEZ monitoring, protection of natural resources, drug trafficking, illegal fishing, extremism and terrorism, boosting air defence capabilities	Dependent on India/US for platforms; effective coast guard; emerging radar network	Member; regularly attends workshops and events	Comprehensive Economic and Maritime Security Partnership, DOSTI (trilateral), CG assistance, radar network integration, infrastructure support,	Lead IONS Climate-Maritime Nexus Initiative; initiate EEZ surveillance WG;
Bangladesh ¹⁰		Modernisation, regional collaboration, international peacekeeping operations, HADR, humanitarian aid, fisheries management and EEZ protection.	Expanding naval fleet under Forces Goal 2030; modernising C4ISR; MDA developing	Participates actively; was chair from 2016-18, hosted IONS events, including IWG meetings and workshops; conducted IMMSAREX in 2017.	Navy training, IN-BN exercises, technical exchanges, hydrographic cooperation	Co-host MDA-focused working group; draft SOPs for disaster resilience and for fisheries management; cybersecurity training
Pakistan ¹¹	Maritime Doctrine of Pakistan (MDP) and National Maritime Policy (NMP)	Strategic port access (Gwadar), sea denial, power projection in the Arabian Sea, blue economy, and countering maritime crimes	Regionally strong fleet; close China cooperation; maintains sea denial focus	Passive member, though has held Preparatory Workshops; political hesitance; minimal IONS role	Negligible due to geopolitical tensions	Not viable for strategic coordination; focus elsewhere

Source: Author

The assessments drawn from Table 1 are explained in the subsequent paragraphs.

Sri Lanka's "NAVSTRAT-2030", for example, outlines a comprehensive maritime vision centred on rules-based order, fleet modernisation, Navy–Coast Guard coordination, SAR and HADR enhancement, and marine ecosystem protection. With limited blue-water capacity but an active operational posture, it has hosted IONS and contributed meaningfully to its HADR track.¹² India's ongoing support—via SLINEX, logistics agreements, and technical aid — offers a strong platform to co-develop HADR SOPs, enhance SAR protocols, and initiate cybersecurity and public maritime awareness initiatives under IONS.¹³

The UN's Capstone Doctrine emphasises EEZ protection, climate security, and countering transnational maritime threats such as drug trafficking and extremism. Operational capacity remains modest, but Indian assistance — particularly through radar coverage, infrastructure support, and the DOSTI trilateral—has significantly enhanced maritime awareness.¹⁴ IONS is a platform through which such standards can be disseminated across the region, utilising the opportunity to find best practices through discussions and practical workshops. For small island nations like the Maldives, which is a regular participant in IONS workshops, India can extend support during its leadership, for instance, by launching an IONS Climate-Maritime Nexus initiative and facilitating the creation of an EEZ Surveillance Working Group aligned with Maldivian strategic priorities.

Another neighbouring State, Bangladesh, prioritises naval modernisation, disaster resilience, regional collaboration, and sustainable fisheries management under its Forces Goal 2030.¹⁵ With expanding MDA and ISR capabilities, it has shown consistent IONS engagement, including as former chair (2016–18) and host of IMMSAREX.¹⁶ India–Bangladesh cooperation is extensive in training, hydrography, and technical domains. India can leverage this to co-establish an IONS MDA Working Group, draft regionally relevant policy frameworks for HADR and fisheries governance, and advance cooperative cyber-maritime frameworks. Bangladesh, however, is criticised for not having a comprehensive maritime security policy.

In the case of Pakistan, its maritime doctrine focuses on sea denial, Gwadar's strategic utility, and blue economy ambitions¹⁷. Despite strong fleet capabilities

and Chinese support, political constraints and strategic divergence limit its IONS engagement. Given the lack of bilateral leverage, India's IONS strategy should deprioritise active engagement with Pakistan while maintaining professional-level contact. An example in these lines was India's refusal to attend the IONS Preparatory Workshop hosted by Pakistan physically, yet, joining virtually to showcase solidarity to the cause.¹⁸

This matrix reveals key patterns: Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are ripe for structured capacity-building and capability-enhancement under India's leadership in IONS, the Maldives is a willing but under-resourced partner, and Pakistan remains a non-starter. India's comparative advantage lies in its ability to convert bilateral initiatives into regional norms and multilateral frameworks.

Bridging Bilateral Gains to Multilateral Architecture

India's bilateral maritime diplomacy with the South Asian states has been robust: regular joint exercises, capacity-building efforts, information sharing via the IFC-IOR, and material support in the form of platforms and training. These include the *Bongosagar* annual bilateral exercise with Bangladesh¹⁹ and the India-Maldives-Sri Lanka trilateral coast guard exercise, *Dosti*.²⁰ Similarly, India's training of regional naval personnel and the integration of partner states as liaison officers into the Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) exemplify its sustained commitment to regional capability-enhancement and maritime situational awareness.²¹ However, these bilateral and multilateral successes have not been systematically channelled into IONS, which remains institutionally thin and often dominated by extra-regional voices. India's chairmanship offers an opportunity to anchor IONS more firmly in the realities and aspirations of the South Asian subregion.

Under this light, India is presented with a unique opportunity to internalise these bilateral gains within a multilateral framework, for which recognising gaps becomes essential. Three critical gaps presently inhibit the translation of India's bilateral maritime diplomacy into IONS-wide action.

First, there is a lack of institutionalised issue-specific leadership from South Asian states within IONS. While countries like Sri Lanka and Bangladesh have demonstrated past leadership—hosting IONS events, workshops, and even chairing the forum—the absence of structured thematic stewardship, such as in MDA, SAR coordination, or fisheries governance, results in episodic rather than sustained regional engagement.

Second, there exists a lack of shared Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) tailored to the operational realities of South Asian navies. While India has individually supported Sri Lanka’s SAR capabilities, the Maldives’ EEZ monitoring, and Bangladesh’s disaster resilience, these efforts have not culminated in coherent and regionally endorsed SOPs for joint HADR missions, anti-piracy operations, or maritime environmental response under IONS. IONS has previously adopted the Code of Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES)²² from the Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS). Although the IONS Guidelines for HADR were prepared, it was criticised to have been lacking objectivity, “*belabouring aspects of mere theoretical nature and often stating the obvious or what may not be relevant.*”²³

Third, the island countries in the region face existential risks from sea-level rise and saltwater intrusion. Bangladesh endures recurring coastal erosion, storm surges, and flooding. Despite having a working group on HADR, IONS has not evolved into a platform for addressing the climate-maritime security nexus. It has neither hosted dedicated climate-maritime dialogues, created climate-resilience guidelines, nor supported coordinated early-warning systems tailored to small island or low-lying coastal states.

Policy Opportunities During India’s Chairmanship

Sub-regional issues must be recognised and discussed, so that solutions are sought collectively and regional security is maintained more effectively. Such initiatives will not only overcome the limitation of not prioritising sub-region-specific difficulties, it would also cater to allocation of resources efficiently. This would entail that the common challenges present in South Asia find a place in the agenda of the larger landscape of IONS, to accurately address them, at both sub-regional and regional levels.

Based on the strategic mapping and identified gaps, four focused and implementable policy actions are proposed:

Establish a South Asia Maritime Working Group (SA-MWG). India should propose the creation of a dedicated South Asia working group within IONS, focused on region-specific concerns such as IUU fishing, coastal resilience, EEZ monitoring, and regional MDA integration. Co-chairing the group with Sri Lanka or Bangladesh would promote shared ownership and ensure regional legitimacy. This group could release an annual South Asia Maritime Outlook as a flagship publication.

Institutionalise Capacity-Building Mechanisms within IONS. India should institutionalise its extensive naval training programs by offering them under an IONS Capacity-Building Charter. For example, ten fellowships per year could be allocated to officers from Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Bangladesh. A Maritime Training Protocol may be introduced, tailored to the specific needs of each navy—ranging from HADR logistics to cyber-maritime security.

Develop Joint SOPs and Interoperability Frameworks. IONS lacks regionally endorsed operating procedures for HADR, fisheries protection, or maritime law enforcement. India can lead the drafting of modular SOPs, co-developed with Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, and pilot them through annual regional workshops and simulation exercises hosted under IONS.

Leverage Disaster Management efforts in the Bay of Bengal. India, in collaboration with the BIMSTEC, can initiate an IONS Disaster Management Dialogue Series to address climate-induced maritime risks—an area currently neglected despite its regional urgency. This is even more pertinent as Bangladesh and Sri Lanka actively participate in BIMSTEC, and such collaboration can facilitate the sharing of best practices.

Conclusion

India's chairmanship of IONS must not be a ceremonial tenure. It is a rare strategic moment to realign the forum's priorities with regional realities. South Asia, by virtue of geography and maritime vulnerability, is the geographical core of IONS. Yet, without deliberate scaffolding, its role will remain peripheral.

It is plausible that the broader strain in India–Pakistan relations may continue to cast a shadow over the functioning of IONS. Historically, Pakistan’s posture toward the forum has been marked by ambivalence and, at times, obstruction. In its formative years, Islamabad was criticised for introducing avoidable friction within the grouping.²⁴ In 2018, it openly accused India of undermining the spirit of the forum during a contentious episode.²⁵ However, such divergences must be viewed in light of IONS’s core ethos. As a consultative platform, IONS is inherently designed to foster dialogue, encourage transparency, and build consensus on shared maritime security challenges. Its primary function is not to resolve bilateral tensions, as its Charter specifies, but to promote regional cooperation on non-traditional maritime threats, information-sharing, and collective capacity-building. Preserving this spirit of multilateralism, even amid bilateral discord, is essential to safeguarding the forum’s long-term credibility and utility.

India’s existing naval diplomacy has created a soft power base. The next step is institutional translation: formalise, share, and multilateralise these efforts. An IONS-centric approach will not only inspire South Asia but also reinforce India’s leadership as a net provider of security rooted in trust, capacity, and regional empathy. If New Delhi can use its chairmanship to anchor South Asia more deeply within IONS’ operational, institutional, and agenda-setting structures, it will leave behind a legacy far greater than protocols: it will leave behind a precedent for maritime leadership rooted in regional solidarity.

30 June 2025

ENDNOTES

- 1 Sabrina Hassan, “An Analysis of the Maritime Boundary Delimitation between Bangladesh and India: Legal, Geopolitical and Economic Implications,” *Indian Journal of Integrated Research in Law*, IV, no V, 2024, <https://ijirl.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/AN-ANALYSIS-OF-THE-MARITIME-BOUNDARY-DELIMITATION-BETWEEN-BANGLADESH-AND-INDIA-LEGAL-GEOPOLITICAL-AND-ECONOMIC-IMPLICATIONS.pdf>.

See Also: Cmde SL Deshmukh NM (Retd) and Dr R Srinivasan, “Maritime Boundaries and Sir Creek Dispute: Re-Appraising India’s Options,” *EJSS*, 2, no 1, 2021, https://www.ejsss.net.in/article_html.php?did=9317&issueno=0.

- 2 Priyadarshi Dutta, “Why democracy deficit in Bangladesh has been worrisome for India,” *Firstpost*, 03 February 2025, <https://www.firstpost.com/opinion/why-democracy-deficit-in-bangladesh-has-been-worrisome-for-india-13859150.html>.
 - 3 “At UNSC, India exposes Pakistan’s ‘gross hypocrisy’ over terror and child rights abuses,” *DD News*, 26 June 2025, <https://ddnews.gov.in/en/at-unscc-india-exposes-pakistans-gross-hypocrisy-over-terror-and-child-rights-abuses/>.
 - 4 Rishabh Yadav, “The Maldives presses reset on ties with India,” *East Asia Forum*, 26 November 2024.
 - 5 “IONS Charter Version 2.0,” *Indian Ocean Naval Symposium*, 13 January <https://eastasiaforum.org/2024/11/26/the-maldives-presses-reset-on-ties-with-india/>.2016, <https://www.ions.global/sites/default/files/IONS-Charter-Version-2.0.pdf>.
 - 6 “Bilateral Brief: India-Pakistan Relations,” *High Commission of India, Islamabad, Pakistan*, <https://www.india.org.pk/pages.php?id=16>.
 - 7 Khalil Gibran, *The Prophet*, Penguin Books: Sivakasi, 2021, 13.
 - 8 “Proposal for Sri Lanka Navy’s Strategy 2030 and Beyond (NAVSTRAT 2030)”, *Sri Lanka Navy*, 01 March 2024, https://www.navy.lk/assets/img/doctrine/strategy_2030.pdf.
 - 9 Maldives National Defence Force, “Capstone Document,” <https://www.mndf.gov.mv/mndf/downloads/mndf-capstone-doctrine-Eng.pdf>.
- See Also:** Lt Col Ahmed Jameel, “Tailoring Maritime Security in Maldives: Beyond Dependency,” *The Maldives National University*, 18 June 2025, <https://mnu.edu.mv/tailoring-maritime-security-in-maldives-beyond-dependency/>.
- 10 <https://securityworldbd.com/details-page/259>.
 - 11 Muhammad Azam Khan, “Maritime Doctrine of Pakistan: Setting the Record Right,” *CISS*, 22 December 2023, <https://ciss.org.pk/microsoft-co-founder-bill-gates-visits-eu-steers-clean-energy-talks/>.
- See Also:** Shahzad Ali Gili, “Analysing Pakistan’s National Maritime Policy in Bolstering Maritime Security: Challenges and the Way Forward,” Powerpoint Presentation on the public domain, https://www.marseccoe.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/20240627_P2_2.pdf.
- 12 “NAVSTRAT 2030,” 76-82.
 - 13 “Brief on India-Sri Lanka Bilateral Relations,” *High Commission of India, Colombo, Sri Lanka*, <https://www.hccolombo.gov.in/page/india-sri-lanka-bilateral-relations/>.

- 14 “Capstone Doctrine,” 29, 41, 66.
- 15 Iqram Hossain Mahboob, “Forces Goal 2030: Geopolitical Significance for Bangladesh and the Region,” *BIPSS Commentary*, <https://bipss.org.bd/pdf/Forces%20Goal%202030-%20Geopolitical%20Significance%20for%20Bangladesh%20and%20the%20region.pdf>.
- 16 Ranendra Sawan.
- 17 Muhammad Khan.
- 18 “Pakistan Navy Hosts Indian Ocean Naval Symposium Preparatory Workshop (Ipw) 2025 At Karachi,” *Director General Public Relations - Navy (Pakistan Navy)*, Facebook Post, 22 April 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/DgprNavy/posts/pakistan-navy-hosts-indian-ocean-naval-symposium-preparatory-workshop-ipw-2025-a/1203981931094526/>.
- 19 Rajat Pandit, “India-Bangladesh Conduct Naval Exercise amid Diplomatic Chill,” *Times of India*, 13 March 2025, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-bangladesh-conduct-naval-exercise-amid-diplomatic-chill/articleshow/118980068.cms>.
- 20 Press Trust of India, “India, Maldives and Sri Lanka’s ‘Dosti’ in Indian Ocean Region near Male,” *Indian Express*, 23 February 2024, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-bangladesh-conduct-naval-exercise-amid-diplomatic-chill/articleshow/118980068.cms>.
- 21 “About us”, *Information Fusion Centre- Indian Ocean Region*, https://ifcior.indiannavy.gov.in/about_us.
- 22 “Resources” *IONS*, <https://www.ions.global/>.
- 23 Captain Ranendra Singh Sawan, “Problems and prospects of maritime security cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region: a case study of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS)”, *Seapower Soundings*, Issue 15, 2020, https://seapower.navy.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-02/Soundings_No_15.pdf.
- 24 Captain Ranendra Singh Sawan, “Problems and prospects of maritime security.....”
- 25 Sachin Parashar, “India keeps Pakistan out of 10-year Celebration of Naval Symposium,” *Times of India*, 16 November 2018, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-keeps-pakistan-out-of-maritime-security-meet/articleshow/66642512.cms>.

About the Author

Ms Sruthylacshmi B Bhat is a Research Associate in the Indian and Regional Maritime Security cluster at the National Maritime Foundation. She holds a Master's degree in International Relations (South Asian Studies) from Pondicherry University and a Bachelor's degree in English Language and Literature from CMS College, Kottayam. Her current research develops policy-options relevant to the research being undertaken by "Indian and Regional Maritime Security" (IRMS) cluster, contextualised to India's various maritime geostrategies within the Indo-Pacific in general and BIMSTEC, IORA, and IONS in particular. She can be reached at irms2.nmf@gmail.com.

