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The IONS Initiative and its Prospects for Security Cooperation within the IOR

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> "*I find IONS to be a uniquely consultative and cooperative initiative... one that holds so much promise for the future that it already transcends narrow national moorings and the earlier thinking on security, which used to be limited to military and competitive constructs alone. The IONS is a robust sign of a paradigm shift from competitive security to cooperative security within the maritime domain. It encourages us all to view the oceanic expanses of our region, not as obstacles that isolate, but rather, as bridges that integrate nation-states*".[1]
>
> A.K. Antony
> Indian Minister for Defence

Introduction

The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), a pioneering initiative in the Indian Ocean region (IOR), has been described as the "21st century's very first significant international maritime security initiative".[2] This endeavour is a manifestation of India's desire to assume a proactive role in the Indian Ocean and the Indian Navy's steady progress towards becoming a stabilising maritime power of the region. The IONS initiative can be singled out as the boldest ever step taken by India in its extroversive pursuit of defence diplomacy, thereby crystallising the rhetoric of "helping the IOR

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help itself". The encouraging attendance from the heads of almost 30 navies of the IOR at the inaugural IONS conference in New Delhi (February 14-15, 2008) was, perhaps, indicative of the curiosity prevalent among the maritime nations about this "coming out party", which seeks to address regional maritime security cooperation in the IOR. This paper analyses the rationale that led to the evolution of the IONS concept and its suitability for the IOR. It also attempts to define a model for IONS that can be effective towards achieving its objective of regional security cooperation in the maritime domain. This would, hopefully, lead us to the "practical solutions" that are necessary for the idea to endure and thrive as envisioned.

The Indian Ocean: *Mare Liberum* or *Mare Clausum*?

> "*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*".[3]
>
> Nelson Mandela

The Indian Ocean is unique in many respects; covering almost 20 per cent of the Earth's water expanse, hugging the shores of three continents, it is a home to the highest number of littoral states, that is, 35 countries, including five island/archipelagic nations, and 12 other countries that are not littorals but depend on the Indian Ocean for their trade, communications and other economic activity. The northern Indian Ocean is made up of some very important seas like the Red sea, the Persian Gulf, the Bay of Bengal, the Arabian Sea and the Andaman Sea. The IOR contains one-third of the world's population, 25 per cent of its land mass and 40 per cent of the world's known oil and gas reserves. Measuring almost 74 million sq. km in area, the Indian Ocean is the third largest ocean after the Pacific and the Atlantic. Also, it is the waterway to the maximum share of tonnage of all seaborne trade in the world. Out of the total seaborne trade carried out in the Indian Ocean, only 20 per cent is intra-littoral, the balance is related to countries outside the IOR. Japan, China and even the European Union (EU) are heavily dependent on the waterways and international shipping lanes (ISLs) passing through the Indian Ocean for their seaborne trade. The Indian Ocean can only be accessed through specific choke points: from the West via Cape of

Good Hope; from the North via the Straits of Hormuz at the mouth of the Persian Gulf and the Bab el-Mandeb at the end of the Red Sea; and from the East via the Straits of Malacca, the Sunda and Lombok-Straits and the Ombai-Wetar-Straits.

Since time immemorial, the Indian Ocean has been the maritime highway of trade, commerce, cultural intercourse and colonising conquests. It has been a favourite hunting ground of "extra regional" interests since the Christian era, when various communities of the Asia-Africa littoral traded with the Greeks and the Romans through its waters. Later, after the discovery of sea routes to the East at the dawn of the colonial era, the entire region became a "European Lake". During the colonial period the IOR underwent an intense economic, cultural and political transformation. By their naval superiority on the high seas, gulfs, bays and the choke points, the Europeans, particularly the British, were able to ship home vast resources from the Indian Ocean hinterland during the 18th and 19th centuries. In the first half of the 20th century, resources from this region fuelled the Allied war machine during the two World Wars. It was only after the World War II, in the post-colonial era, that the littoral states of this region realised the idea of the IOR as an ocean-linked entity. However, most of the littorals were newly formed states, trying to carve individual identities after the rapid process of de-colonisation in the mid-20th century. The security vacuum created by the breakdown of the British Empire was quickly filled by the super power bloc formation and neo-colonial influences of the Cold War. Many states in Asia and Africa were directly or obliquely drawn into super power politics. The IOR, thus, became a cluster of dependent economies and quasi-states, some finding refuge in extra-regional "big brother" support. As a result, the IOR nations missed the early opportunities of harmonising their economic growth and security cooperation. Many nations of the region became members of the Non-Allied Movement (NAM). Though this was a courageous and principled choice in the then prevailing world politics, it made them more insular in terms of collaboration over security issues. Moreover, regional rivalries, often instigated by "Great Game" politics effectively precluded any meaningful security cooperation between regional associations, save for the honourable exception of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum (ARF), and to some extent, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

In the post-Cold War period, globalisation has given security an altogether new meaning. The rapid advances in information technology and communications have integrated the world economies like never before. The increased flow of information,

capital, technology and labour is transforming business and commerce across the globe. This has created the concept of "region state", where national economies of a geographical region become inter-dependent and coupled. The EU, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), and ASEAN are prominent examples. The recent economic meltdown in the US and its devastating after-effects across the globe are testimony to the irreversible nature of globalisation and economic inter-dependence of the world. The process of globalisation impacts not only on economic activity but also upon the basic edifice of national structures of states. The resulting alteration in organisational structures bears potential for constructive and destructive consequences. While conflicts generated by terrorism, drug trafficking, human trafficking and piracy pose threat to the entire world, ethnic conflicts, wars of secession, gun running etc., endanger the security of individual nation states and regions. It is clear that today's security challenges include the complex threat of both inter- and intra-state conflicts, which are closely inter-linked with the economic conditions of not just individual nations but whole regions. In contrast to the classical interpretation of security as physical security of the state from external aggression, the prevalent definition includes energy and economic security. The IOR, which shares much of the limelight in the "rise of Asia" story, is both a beneficiary and a victim of this multi-dimensional flux.

The IONS: Filling the Cooperation Vacuum

The IONS initiative has brought the concept of maritime security cooperation to the IOR on the lines of the Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS), operative in the Asia-Pacific. The WPNS was inaugurated in 1988 after the Chiefs of Navy attending the International Sea Power Symposium organised by the US Navy (USN) in 1987 agreed to establish a forum where navies of the western Pacific could meet to discuss cooperative initiatives and identify issues that warrant further consideration.[4] The WPNS has since evolved as an important forum for the sharing of ideas and knowledge pertaining to maritime security. To qualify, member countries must be located geographically in the western Pacific, while observer countries could be located adjacent to the western Pacific. The activities undertaken under the aegis of the WPNS include regular Senior Officers symposia or workshops, a seminar for junior officers titled Seminar for Officers of the Next Generation (SONG), Multilateral Sea Exercise, Multilateral Tactical Training Centre Exercise (MTTCEX), Mine Counter Measures

Exercise (MCMX), Diving Exercise (DIVEX), Maritime Security Information Exchange Seminar (MSIES), and a Sea Rider programme. These fixtures regularly bring the representatives of member and observer navies together to enhance mutual understanding, cooperation and interoperability. The concept of IONS appears to be fashioned on the WPNS format. At its very inception, the initiative had to tread through some scepticism and misunderstanding. In time, the feasibility of the IONS concept in the IOR has been established beyond doubt. Surprisingly, empirical endorsement for the same came neither from the proponents nor from any state in the IOR littoral but from an independent study group comprising international academicians at the University of Heidelberg, Germany in 2002.[5] The study report, based on a research project titled "Panchayati Raj in the Indian Ocean: Towards a Maritime Security Regime" is, perhaps, the most exhaustive and methodical work available in the public domain which explores the feasibility of developing a maritime security system in the IOR. The study has brought out in unequivocal terms that a regional security cooperative architecture is feasible in the IOR on the lines of the WPNS. Prior to exploring how the cooperative solutions could be possible under IONS, let us critically analyse the conditions prevailing in the IOR with regard to the same.

Some have been emphatic in their assertion that the IOR is actually not an entity as such. In a paper presented during the inaugural seminar of IONS at New Delhi on February 14, 2008, India's former Foreign Secretary, Kanwal Sibal stated that

> "*The IOR is extremely diverse in its complexion politically, economically and culturally. It has more pronounced sub-regional personalities than any overarching regional identity. At the sub-regional level several local conflicts exist. No multilateral security organisation encompassing the IOR countries has emerged. This vacuum is filled by the presence of western powers. International terrorism, religious extremism, and drug-trafficking have emerged as geo-strategic problems in the region because of the location of the hub of these international threats here. This is a long-term issue as solutions would require drastic changes in local conditions and external approaches*".[6]

While this argument is sound in bringing out the challenges created by the diversity and disparity in the region, it essentially qualifies the view that the IOR needs to be treated as an entity first if these challenges are to be overcome. If the insecurity in the

IOR has to be reduced, confidence has to replace suspicion; cooperation has to nudge out confrontation and sub-regional economic initiatives have to allow a regional security mechanism to create benign conditions for economic growth. Therefore, the IOR could become a viable cooperative entity if it is deemed to be so by all stakeholders. The stakes are certainly high! Many countries in the IOR are low on the development index, with religious and ethnic conflicts dominating in Africa and extremist political struggles plaguing much of Asia. A large share of these conflicts could be attributed to low levels of education and social security, religious fundamentalism, widespread poverty and disjoint economies. Therefore, the IOR states have no choice but to move closer for mutual benefit. A positive precedent is already in place for economic cooperation in the form of the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC) founded in 1996. The IONS initiative has only taken trust levels one step up by coalescing the confidence of the naval leaders during the first convention in February 2008. The answer to whether this trust can be sustained as a lasting cooperative relationship on maritime security could be found by analysing the sub-regional cooperative developments.

The IOR can be divided into various sub-regions: Southern Africa, Southwest Indian Ocean, the Red Sea region, the Persian Gulf region, South Asia, Southeast Asia and the Bay of Bengal region. There exist cooperative associations for economic, socio-political and cultural purposes in majority of these sub-regions. Some of the important ones are the ASEAN, East Asia Summit (EAS), GCC, South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), Southern African Development Community (SADC), Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), the African Union (AU), Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC), the Arab League and Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC). At a higher level, the Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD) was created in 2002 to promote Asian cooperation at the continental level and to help integrate sub-regional organisations such as ASEAN, SAARC and the GCC. Some see the ACD as a precursor to an "Asian Union". At the pan-IOR level, the IOR-ARC provides a platform for economic cooperation between the member IOR states. Therefore, the stage is already set for meaningful cooperation on a wide range of issues. However, the economic integration of the IOR states is still in its infancy. Though the potential exists for the region to become a common market, the intra-IOR trade is a dismal proportion of total world trade. Some of the initiatives listed above are often

subject to criticism as being ineffectual or underperforming. This could change if trust level is steadily built up within the IOR through security initiatives like IONS. Instead of waiting for trust levels to rise through economic, social and cultural activities only, a convergence of will on security cooperation, albeit of a basic nature, will go a long way in consolidating the gains made on the socio-economic front. The example of ASEAN-ARF, highlighted in the succeeding paragraph, is a case in point.

During the Cold War, the IOR witnessed the formation of collective security alliances such as the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO) and the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), which were primarily structured against the Soviet bloc. These became defunct much before the end of the Cold War. It may be hard to believe today that, in the 1950s, the navies of India and Pakistan (along with the Royal Navy and the Ceylon Navy) would participate each year off Trincomalee, Sri Lanka in an exercise called Joint (Commonwealth) Exercises.[7] All that is now history. Today, the ASEAN alone can be undisputedly singled out as the most successful model of regional cooperation in the IOR. The original sub-region covered by the ASEAN was Southeast Asia, but over the years it has attracted partners and observers from almost all regions of the world. The ASEAN has been functional since 1967, but it took over 25 years for the association to acknowledge the incontrovertible link between collective regional security and economic prosperity. This was formalised with the creation of the ARF, in 1993, with the aim to "foster constructive dialogue and consultation on political and security issues of common interests and concerns; and to make significant contributions towards confidence-building and preventive diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific region".[8]

The level of confidence building achieved by this cooperative venture, which now comprises of 27 participants, can be gauged from the Singapore Declaration adopted by the ministers attending the 15th ARF meeting.[9] Recognising the primacy of security in its role, ASEAN created the ASEAN Security Committee in 2003 as one of the three pillars of the association.[10] The ASEAN-ARF example suggests that cooperation on security should be treated as an integral part of any collective regional venture. Just as the ARF eventually emerged as an offshoot of the ASEAN, the IONS could lead the way to strengthen the IOR-ARC movement through its stated objective of becoming an "all inclusive, consultative forum for maritime security in the IOR". Apart from the ASEAN, the GCC is another example of regional cooperation on security issues. The GCC, comprising of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and United Arab

Emirates (UAE), was formed in 1986. It is a regional common market which takes advantage of the geographic proximity of member countries to pursue free trade economic policies. The GCC model is unique because it provides for security cooperation right since its inception with a provision of an integral defence planning council. The GCC is located in the oil-rich Arabian Gulf region, which sees a constant presence of extra-regional military forces. The military cooperation of the Council has remained largely under the influence of its western partners (often described as the 'Coalition'), particularly so due to the Iran-Iraq War and the Gulf Wars of 1991 and 2003. In the field of maritime security, the GCC has established a credible consultative mechanism under the aegis of the Gulf Naval Commanders' Conference (GNC). The latest one, held on July 2, 2008, featured high-ranking officers from Arabian Gulf countries and coalition partners such as the US, UK and France. Interestingly, the conclusions arrived at the Conference appear to be in tandem with the IONS vision. The Gulf Naval Commanders stressed on cooperative solutions to tackle the challenges of maritime security. On the issue of natural or manmade disasters, the participants emphasised the need for collaborative and cooperative joint, interagency, and multinational solutions.[11] There is, obviously, a convergence of views between the Gulf Naval Commanders and the proponents of IONS, which can be harnessed in the interest of both. In the southern IOR, the relatively young African Union has provided a "peace and security" portfolio for its Commission, whose stated objectives are: conflict prevention, management and resolution, and combating terrorism.[12]

The IONS: The Road Ahead

The IONS initiative appears to be a logical progression in India's efforts to bring about naval cooperation in its neighbourhood. Prior to embarking on this initiative, the IN had set a strong precedent in the form of the *MILAN* series of naval exercises that are held at Port Blair in the Andaman Sea since 1995. The first *MILAN* was followed by similar events in 1997, 2003, 2006 and 2008.[13] The *MILAN* exercises have attracted regular participation from navies of Australia, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Sri Lanka and Thailand. The format of these exercises involves events like senior officers conference, maritime seminar, sports fixtures, food festival, cultural shows and basic PASSEXs between attending ships. The success of *MILAN* in building confidence at a sub-regional level provides some pointers for the IONS model. A few

more regional trends in security are notable. In April 2006 in Southeast Asia, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore jointly established the Malacca Straits Security Initiative (MSSI) and the Eyes in the Sky (EiS) surveillance operations to counter the menace of armed robbery and piracy in the Straits of Malacca.[14] Further increase in incidents of piracy in the recent past in Southeast Asia has led to the establishment of the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP), a multinational government-to-government agreement to enhance the security of regional waters. Till date, the ReCAAP initiative has been ratified by 16 regional countries in Asia.[15] In Oceania, a cooperative endeavour in the maritime field has been pursued by Australia through its Pacific Patrol Boat Programme, under which about 22 patrol boats have been donated to 12 smaller island states in the South Pacific, since 1985.[16]

Having seen some examples of multilateral cooperation in maritime security, let us turn our attention towards identifying practical solutions for IONS. How can the movement be taken ahead? The objectives of IONS have already been defined.[17] They may appear lofty for an initiative as young as IONS but they are not beyond reach. It is important to realise that IONS is a nascent forum and to gain acceptability it will have to start on a 'softer' note and then graduate to 'harder' security issues. Some measures have been traditionally identified, through which credible cooperation is possible. These have been categorised as transparency, confidence and security building measures.[18] Transparency building measures include providing advanced notice of naval exercises and movement of ships. Confidence building measures entail conduct of combined multilateral naval and coast guard exercises, combined naval training, pooling of resources/experiences in ship design and construction, multilateral naval hydrographic operations, joint task force for policing at sea, and an agreement on avoidance of incidence at high sea. Security building measures require the creation of a multilateral Indian Ocean forum for security discussions, an annual conference on maritime cooperation in the Indian Ocean and the creation of a system of checks and balances to prevent hegemonic claims of regional and extra-regional powers.

Though the list mentioned above appears impressive, it contains certain terminology which is reminiscent of the 'confrontationist' or 'competitive' engagement of the Cold War era. For example, the term "confidence building" actually conveys a sense of reconciliation between old foes or estranged neighbours. The term "transparency building" could connote that something is foggy and improper in a relationship, which

needs to be corrected earnestly. These are, therefore, more suitable for bilateral conflict prevention mechanisms and are against the spirit of the IONS. To start on a softer note, in the quest for practical solutions, the choice of terminology also needs to be benign and innovative. The IONS could attempt to progress its objectives in a phased manner starting with friendship and trust building phase and cooperation; and then going on to consolidation.

Friendship and Trust Building Phase

The geo-political attributes of the IOR are more diverse than the Asia-Pacific. We have seen how fissiparous sub-regional conflicts and insecurities had precluded a pan-IOR maritime security regime akin to the WPNS till the launch of the IONS. Moreover, extra-regional presence is deeply entrenched in the region and influences sub-regional policymaking. Therefore, it is important to first create "maritime bonhomie" in the IOR before graduating to challenging areas such as preventive diplomacy, conflict prevention or joint action against maritime threats. The format of *MILAN* could be replicated for the purpose. Several activities could contribute to the friendship and trust building phase.

A biennial meet on the lines of *MILAN* could become a good platform to develop friendships across the Indian Ocean. It could be named either *Majlis* (Arabic for 'meeting') or *Bakhr Jama'a* (Arabic for "sea gathering"). The meet could be centred on the biennial seminar of heads of Navies, which already forms a part of the original proposition. In addition to the seminar, port calls by ships, cultural programmes, sports fixtures, a food festival, a 'friendship' march past (parade), band competition, seamanship competition etc., also could be included. The meet could be planned to coincide with events of national significance for the host state like centenary celebrations, commemorative festivities, a defence exposition, or a large industrial exhibition.

Sports are a great medium to foster friendship across militaries. The success of events such as the World Military Games or the World Military Sailing Championship is a reaffirmation of this reality. To begin with, an IONS Ocean Sailing Expedition could be organised in the Indian Ocean as a joint effort between interested navies. The sail ships could visit a number of ports of IONS members in the IOR. To facilitate wide participation, the crew could be turned around for different legs of the sailing route. On similar lines a Himalayan car rally, an African/desert safari could be organised.

The biennial Heads of Navies Seminar under the IONS construct would essentially cater for exchange of views on broader issues and promotion of high level contacts. However, there is much that can be done at the junior level too. A seminar for junior officers (at Lieutenant Commander/Major level) could become a viable forum for the exchange of professional views and information. A variety of topics bearing implications on maritime matters could form the central theme. Some examples are "Modern Trends in Warship Hull Maintenance", "Emerging Technologies in Patrol Boat Construction", "Leadership Development for Junior Navy Leaders", "Future Challenges for Shipboard Pollution Control Measures", "Best Practises in Naval Inventory Management", "Fisheries Protection: Challenges and Experiences", or "Building the Digital Maritime Picture: Trends and Technologies".

The IONS would do well to harness the networking potential offered via the medium of the internet for sharing useful data among its members. For this, a website could be launched to function as a virtual contact point for members. It could host news, articles, columns and developments related to maritime security matters. It could provide links to the official websites of member navies, navy supported maritime institutes, think-tanks and international organisations related to maritime matters. Its use could be regulated by adopting appropriate information security measures and a "members only" section could be created for restricted use. An IONS online library could also be created for easy reference and retrieval of IONS related documents/ papers. Suitable terms and conditions could be adapted to preclude posting of classified information and discussion on controversial issues outside the ambit of IONS.

The IONS is an initiative which ultimately seeks to contribute towards strengthening maritime security for facilitating economic prosperity in the IOR. Since its agenda affects the people of IOR at large, its message needs to be conveyed far and wide through effective publicity. This could be achieved by creating sample advertisements (print and electronic media), which could be used repetitively by host agencies. The advertisements could be broadcasted across the member countries' popular news channels during the run up to the IONS events. Moreover, symbolism and souvenirs in the form of caps, slogan, anthem and t-shirts could be designed for standard use. The IONS logo is already in place. An example of a slogan which could serve the purpose is "Friendships across the seven seas, Indian Ocean navies for world peace". Effective publicity could also prove helpful in shaping domestic policymaking and economic assistance for promoting the IONS movement.

Cooperation Phase

In the cooperation phase, the IONS could build on the friendships developed during the first phase. The focus now should be on striking working relationships between member countries and making the IONS an 'accepted' idea. Cooperative endeavours could concentrate on areas having universal maritime implications.

Some activities that could be undertaken during the cooperation phase include humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR). Such an issue today finds wide appeal in the maritime community. In fact, the IOR is recognised as a region which witnesses the worst fury of natural disasters, such as, cyclones, earthquakes, floods, tsunami and droughts. *Atlas of the Real World*, a recently released work, mentions that during 1975-2004, 43 per cent of the disasters affected people lived in South Asia, 41 per cent in East Asia and 5 per cent in Southeast Africa.[19] Some member navies of the IONS, like those belonging to Australia, France and India have laudable experience in HADR operations in the region. A workshop on HADR operations could form a part of the regular activities under the aegis of the IONS. Representatives of member navies could share experiences and provide an insight into their national disaster management organisation. This would contribute substantially towards better understanding of each others strengths and shortcomings insofar as HADR capabilities are concerned. Steadily, joint standard operating procedures (SOPs) could be worked out between navies to manage a variety of HADR situations. These could be validated through table-top exercises. A HADR resource page could be created on the IONS website where member navies would be requested to update information such as contact details, decision-making hierarchies, HADR force levels and infrastructure available for use during contingencies.

Exchange of personnel for training is perhaps a sign of trust and acceptability between military organisations. The IONS could promote such exchanges between member navies by identifying core competencies of different navies, coast guards and maritime agencies. Credible training cooperation already exists between some navies in the form of deputation of officers for staff courses, basic or *ab-initio* training and higher command training. The IONS could effectively promote this kind of interaction through mutually agreed study tours and exchange of personnel for courses. Some navies and coast guards have developed vertical expertise in selective aspects of maritime operations due to the peculiar nature of threats and challenges prevalent in their

operational areas. For instance, the navies of Southeast Asia – Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and Thailand – have extensive experience in combating armed robbery on the high seas. This could prove useful to others (like the Indian Navy) who now seek to counter similar challenges elsewhere. Likewise, Australia and Singapore have superior expertise in exploiting state-of-the-art mine countermeasures capabilities. In fact, both these nations have contributed substantially to the promotion of mine countermeasure (MCM) competencies under the WPNS umbrella.[20] The Sri Lankan Navy is, perhaps, the only IOR Navy that fought a long drawn war against sea based terrorism in a sustained manner. The benefits other members could accrue from constructive engagement with the Sri Lankan Navy for training are quite obvious. The GCC navies excel in countering low-intensity maritime threats to off-shore oil exploration platforms just as the coast guards of Mauritius, Seychelles and Maldives have acquired superior skills in maritime environmental protection. The navies from Africa can provide worthy inputs about tackling the scourge of piracy, especially in the wake of the renewed world focus on the coast of Somalia in this context.

A Sea Rider programme could be adopted across the IOR under the IONS construct where trainee officers and even non-officer ratings could be deputed for varying durations up to one month to sail on naval or coast guard ships by consent of the host navy. Navies may specify which nationalities (and number of personnel) they would be willing to host. The programme could be drawn in advance and a tentative schedule could be promulgated for a year to enable timely deputation formalities. By allowing young members to observe and participate in cooperative ventures, the IONS initiative could be taken to the lower rungs of the hierarchy. This would go a long way in enhancing the credibility and reach of the initiative.

There exists substantial potential for cooperation in hydrographical and oceanographic matters among the IOR littorals. Since they share a common maritime environment, joint efforts in these disciplines will be of common benefit. Some navies in the region have well established hydrography organisations, often as an integral component of their navies. On the other hand, smaller navies, coast guards and marine police may not possess these capabilities. Post the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004, the coastal topography and hydrology of some regions, particularly of Southeast Asia and low lying island groups, have undergone a perceptible change. This has resulted in a need for fresh surveys and charting work in the affected areas. Moreover, climate change and environmental degradation has created new avenues for oceanographic scientific research.

As natural resources deplete on land, nations are turning to the oceans and the seas for exploration. The IOR navies could collaborate in these areas for mutual benefit.

Some members of the IONS have instituted dedicated academic bodies or 'think-tanks' to undertake research on maritime security issues. The IONS could benefit substantially from some degree of academic collaboration between the various study centres. Scholars are known to influence governmental policy making. Their importance for IONS cannot be over-emphasised. Some examples of such organisations and forums are the Gulf and Shangri-La Dialogues of the International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS), UK; Maritime Institute of Malaysia (MIMA), Malaysia; S. Rajaratnam Institute of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore; Emirates Centre for Strategic Studies and Research (ECSSR), UAE; National Maritime Foundation (NMF), India; and Collège Interarmées de Défense, France. Interaction between scholars of these study centres would also constitute the track-II approach towards promoting the objectives of the IONS. Again, going back to the example of ARF, the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP), a collaborative think tank has been functioning since 1993 as the track-II counterpart of the ARF.[21] The CSCAP functions as the "sounding board" for confidence building within the ARF.

Maritime agencies have to deal with a plethora of legalities and technicalities like interpretation and implementation of laws such as United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) III, the Suppression of Unlawful Acts Against Safety of Maritime Navigation (the SUA Convention with the 2005 Protocol), the International Ship and Port Facility Security (ISPS) Code, the International Maritime Organisation directives pertaining to Automatic Identification System (AIS) and Long Range Identification and Tracking System (LRITS). Within the IOR, the IONS could facilitate consultancy and referral on these matters between maritime agencies. This optimism is based on the assumption that the rapport generated during the meetings of the Chiefs of Navies and others would create a desire to consult each other on tricky issues. One area of future interest is likely to be submarine rescue and salvage. The proliferation in submarine force levels in the IOR and the lack of comprehensive rescue facilities with the concerned navies have created considerable scope for contingency planning and preparation in this matter. The IONS website could address such issues by becoming a virtual dispensary of advice and information. Alternatively, the multinational friendships generated through IONS events could themselves be compulsive enough to "dial-a-friend" or reach a 'helpline' for consultation and cooperation.

Consolidation Phase

The consolidation phase would be the "pay back time" of the IONS. The aim in this phase would be to harness the professional and personal trust developed during the earlier two phases. In this phase, the IONS would endeavour to achieve meaningful cooperation on maritime security issues in the IOR which would ultimately contribute to safety of human life at sea, maritime trade, marine environment from unauthorised exploitation, and prevention of inter-state conflicts over maritime disputes. Various initiatives could be undertaken in this phase. One possibility is the advance notification of movement of naval and/or coast guard assets or conduct of military exercises and activities in each other's region of interest. This could also include development of a "Code for Un-alerted Encounters at Sea", like the one approved for voluntary adoption by WPNS Chiefs of Navies in 1998.[22] Another is joint policing or patrolling between two or more maritime security agencies in mutually agreed critical areas (for instance the piracy infested waters of the Malacca Straits or the waters off the coast of Somalia). This could also include establishment of knowledge sharing mechanisms with regard to search and rescue (SAR) and anti-piracy operations. Equally possible would be the regular conduct of combined exercises between the IOR navies and/or coast guards on the lines of Rim of the Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC) but lesser in scale and benign (or constabulary) in scope. The MCMX and DIVEX formats of WPNS could also be replicated. Lastly, the IONS could exercise preventive diplomacy to prevent conflicts from arising and escalating. In addition, it could offer consultative and cooperative assistance for conflict resolution, if invited by affected parties with mutual consent.

Conclusion

The path ahead for the IONS is not likely to be easy, as the challenges created by geographical dispersion, economic backwardness, cultural dissimilarities and political sensitivities are daunting. Funding could become an issue when activities start picking up both in scale and scope. The preponderant involvement of a select few navies as organisers would make others mere passengers – passive and inert on the IONS boat. Therefore, all nations need to take turns at the helm to make the participation truly inclusive. Press reports in June 2009 indicated that the UAE is likely to assume the Chairmanship of the IONS next.[23] The issue of financing could be tackled by dovetailing IONS events with other regional conventions or conclaves. Also, small

navies could form syndicates to host events. The possibility of extra-regional interests influencing members' decisions and activities remains overarching. Speaking at the Seventh IISS Asia Security Summit (Shangri-La Dialogue) on May 31, 2008, the US Secretary for Defence, Robert Gates stated the obvious:

> "*I want to convey to you with confidence that any future US administration's Asia security policy is going to be grounded in the fact that the US remains a nation with strong and enduring interests in this region – interests that will endure no matter which political party occupies the White House next... while I cannot predict the specifics of a new President's Asia policy, certain elements can already be discerned above and beyond the time-tested principles of strategic access, freedom of commerce and navigation, and freedom from domination by any hegemonic force or coalition... any speculation in the region about the US losing interest in Asia strikes me as either preposterous, or disingenuous, or both*".[24]

Moreover, how China views this India born initiative also remains to be seen. In this context, India's two former Foreign Secretaries, Shiv Shankar Menon and Shyam Saran recently advocated that India should initiate a discussion on a collective security arrangement between major powers whose bulk of energy and trade flows through the Indian Ocean.[25]

In the long run, the IONS initiative has bright chances of success simply because it is right in its timing and form. It is inclusive in nature and it has come at a time when the world is turning towards Asia and Africa. Mariner warriors can lead the way by displaying the perseverance and patience necessary for making this important "land fall", which could herald a new dawn in intra-IOR security cooperation. It is important for this initiative to succeed because it offers a viable cooperative forum for maritime agencies of IOR without external help or prompting. Maritime forces can contribute substantially to cooperative defence diplomacy through their non-intrusive character and maintenance of good order at sea. The spurt in incidents of piracy off the lawless coast of Somalia in recent times has exposed the vulnerability of seaborne trade in the IOR. Only a safe and secure Indian Ocean can offer conditions for the full realisation of its immense economic potential. As the world comes closer due to globalisation, borders are becoming irrelevant in economic terms. Likewise, after centuries of fragmented existence, the IOR is now coming to terms with its true identity, bound

together, as it is, by a common ocean. This physical divide at sea, too, can be effectively bridged by the benevolent partnerships offered under the auspices of the IONS.

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