

The importance of public diplomacy in formulating a maritime policy for the Indian Ocean Region

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ABSTRACT

The Indian Ocean covers 20% of the Earth and is ranked as the third largest water body in the world. It has various matters related to maritime affairs which have to be resolved and policies that need to be implemented to ensure maritime safety and security of the littoral countries. In this context, the formulation of a common maritime policy will be beneficial in safeguarding not only the states but also the natural resources in the region. This paper demonstrates that the use of public diplomacy is a beneficial tool in formulating a common maritime policy. It also argues that this tool is useful in influencing public and governments in cooperating towards formulating and implementing policies and strategies that are important for maritime safety and security in the Indian Ocean Region.

KEYWORDS

Public diplomacy; maritime policy; Indian Ocean Region

Introduction

Straddled between the Atlantic Ocean to the west and the Pacific Ocean to the east, the Indian Ocean covers 20% of the Earth and is ranked as the third largest water body in the world. The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) comprises 38 littoral states, 24 ocean territories and 17 landlocked countries covering the continents of Africa, Asia, Australia and Antarctica. The two adjoining seas are connected with the Indian Ocean along with the Arabian Sea and the Red Sea, covering an area of 169,000 square miles.

Due to its expanse and the number of states that use the Indian Ocean, there are many issues related to maritime affairs which are unsolved. This calls for a comprehensive maritime policy that ensures the safety and security of the littoral countries and the users of the Indian Ocean. The formulation of a common maritime policy will be beneficial in safeguarding not only the states but also the natural resources in the region.

Formulation of a maritime policy for an expanse of ocean area that is common to so many actors is not without complications. This paper analyses how public diplomacy can be utilised as a tool to assist in formulating a common maritime policy for the IOR. It further analyses whether the use of public diplomacy will be beneficial in assisting the formulation of a common maritime policy. It also looks at whether the use of this tool is effective in influencing other countries not only to formulate the policy but also

to cooperate in implementing policies and strategies that are important for the common safety of countries in the IOR.

Maritime policy for the Indian Ocean Region

There are various reasons for a common maritime policy for the Indian Ocean. This section will attempt to highlight a few of the salient reasons as to why such a policy is not only required, but almost overdue. A prominent, if not the most significant, reason for such a policy would be due to climate change and energy issues. It is well known that the Indian Ocean and its multitude of seas are abundant in resources, some of which are still unexplored and untapped. Further, as the Indian Ocean serves as the lifeline of a majority of the countries in this region, a common policy that looks into the well-being and security of the ocean's future is essential. This is highlighted by the Maritime Development Plan adopted by the Federal Government of Germany in 2011, which recognised that "Only ecologically intact and healthy seas can be a long-term source of food, growth and employment".¹ As the impact of climate change is creating headlines and causing catastrophes, it is pertinent for the countries of this region to seriously consider adopting a maritime policy that will have significant long-term value in terms of ensuring that the resources of this region are safeguarded. This brings up the second reason why a common policy is required.

As previously mentioned, the Indian Ocean consists of several regional seas and areas. They are the Andaman Sea, the Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal, the Great Australian Bight, the Gulf of Aden, the Gulf of Mannar, the Gulf of Oman, the Laccadive Sea, the Mozambique Channel, the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. Stretching from the Strait of Hormuz to the Strait of Malacca, and from the Strait of Mandeb to the Lombok Strait, the Indian Ocean has been an important location in the strategic calculations of the great powers of the world. This is primarily due to the economic impact of the Indian Ocean on the east-west maritime trade. The economic importance of this region is the second reason why a maritime policy is required. In addition, when travelling across the Indian Ocean there are seven key chokepoints that facilitate and constrain the passage from one sea to another. These chokepoints are Mozambique Channel, the Bab el Mandeb, the Suez Canal, the Strait of Hormuz, the Malacca Straits, the Sunda Strait and the Lombok Strait.² A maritime policy for the region should take these strategic locations into consideration as well.

The waters of this region carry half of the world's container traffic and its ports handle approximately 30% of world trade, thus making it the "economic highway of the world".³ But activities are not limited to trade, and the waters of the Indian Ocean also pave the way for marine research and innovation, fishing and coastal tourism. The fact that the ocean encourages a variety of activities within its waters calls for a multidimensional maritime policy.

Further, a maritime policy for the IOR should consist of a mechanism to strengthen marine science and research, which will provide access to the resources of the oceans. A sound maritime policy will not only provide a framework to use the seas sustainably, but will also provide mechanisms to protect the marine environment and tackle climate change, thus safeguarding the resources for the generations to come. Ensuring maritime safety and security too should be incorporated in the maritime policy which is a crucial

component in light of the threats, such as piracy, in the region. An all-encompassing policy for the IOR will also assist in the protection of coastal regions and their infrastructure. And, through a maritime policy, governments can raise awareness towards the region.

Public diplomacy

The concept of public diplomacy was coined in 1965 by Edmund A. Gullion and has evolved drastically since then. Gullion stated that “by public diplomacy we understand the means by which governments, private groups and individuals influence the attitudes and opinions of other peoples and governments in such a way as to exercise influence on their foreign policy decisions”.⁴ Public diplomacy revolves around informing and influencing the attitudes and opinions of an international audience to forward a country’s foreign policy interests. It also seeks to safeguard the national interest and security of a country, as explained by the definition provided by the Public Diplomacy Alumni Association which states: “Public Diplomacy promote[s] the national interest of [a country] through understanding, informing and influencing foreign audiences”.⁵ Therefore, as a soft-power element, public diplomacy is able to influence the perceptions of the people, leading to a change in their attitudes and opinions.

Public diplomacy is a purely benign aspect of diplomacy, which aims to inform foreign population and citizens about the goals of a country’s foreign policy through the use of information and culture. Thus, this tool can be utilised by governments in convincing its population of the need for a common maritime policy. It will ultimately influence people to agree with a decision, as opposed to forcing them into it. Public diplomacy falls into the category of “soft power” as coined by Joseph S. Nye, Jr. He describes it as the ability of a country to get “others to want the outcomes you want”, which ultimately “co-opts people rather than coerces them” into doing something.⁶ He further states that “soft power rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others”.⁷ Soft power is primarily understood by the significance which it gives to its culture, domestic policies and foreign policy.⁸

Public diplomacy to support policy making

As public diplomacy is about the perception of the masses, it is vital in formulating a common maritime policy for the IOR. There are 38 countries – namely Australia, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Comoros, Djibouti, East Timor, Egypt, Eritrea, India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kenya, Kuwait, Madagascar, Malaysia, Maldives, Mauritius, Mozambique, Myanmar, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Seychelles, Singapore, Somalia, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Tanzania, Thailand, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen – that border this vast oceanic space.⁹ According to Michel and Sticklor, “combined, these countries make up almost 40 percent of the world’s total coastline, dominated in order by Indonesia, Australia, India, Madagascar, Malaysia, Thailand, Somalia, South Africa, and Saudi Arabia”.¹⁰ In 2010, the region was home to 2.49 billion people, which was approximately 35.7% of the world’s population in 2010. It is estimated that by 2030, this population will have risen by more than 27%, adding another 689 million people.¹¹ The fact that this region is rich in human capital is a crucial reason why

public diplomacy is such a strategic tool in creating awareness for convincing the people towards adopting a common maritime policy.

One of the most pressing issues faced by the IOR is that it lacks a proper mechanism to monitor coastal areas and boundaries, which can compromise maritime security. For this reason, history has showcased instances such as state-sponsored and non-state actors utilising the waters and shores of this great expanse to undertake terrorist activities. Instances such as the 2008 Mumbai bombings where armed Pakistani militants used the seas to travel from Karachi to Mumbai to execute preplanned attacks in Mumbai¹² and the use of the seas by the Liberation Tigers for Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to transport weapons and ammunition, as well as for human smuggling during the internal conflict in Sri Lanka, are prime examples. The seas of the region are known to be used by Iran to supply Hamas with weapons via a sea route from the Persian Gulf through Sudan and Egypt.¹³ It is also argued that “cross-border terrorist networks are operating across the [M]iddle-East, Central Asia, South Asia, and South East Asia”.¹⁴ Therefore, creating awareness among people – through public diplomacy – of how the seas can be used for illegal activities will assist in ensuring the safety of waters in this region.

Engaging the public on issues related to maritime safety and security will enable them to be guardians of the seas and to assist governments in protecting them. Public diplomacy can also be utilised in a manner wherein the public can be advised to provide intelligence to governments on illegal activities which they witness at sea. Thus, a close rapport between the intelligence agencies and the coastal people is necessary. If the people of the region do not collectively agree on a policy that safeguards regional interests and address maritime security issues, various transnational threats will continue to haunt them. The Indian Ocean is notorious for piracy, which operates in waters close to Somalia and in the Malacca Straits. Its waters are also known to be a hotspot for “smuggling hashish and other contraband”.¹⁵ Therefore, a maritime policy formulated for this region should definitely incorporate measures to tackle such issues, and public diplomacy can be used as a tool to increase people’s awareness of the use of maritime policy to safeguard their interests. Further, a “lucrative narcotic trade is being conducted originating from the Golden Crescent involving Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran and the Golden Triangle including Myanmar, Thailand and Laos”.¹⁶ Even now, a myriad of security threats face the region which may exceed the international and regional community’s capacity to effectively manage such challenges. Therefore, without policy coherence, creative thinking, longevity of participation, and significant resources, there is a likelihood that the various security threats facing the region will multiply, contributing to the area’s geopolitical fragility.¹⁷ It is therefore important to seek assistance from the general public. This enables the governments to crack down on nefarious activities such as the trafficking of arms, drugs and humans.

Gaining the public’s support will assist greatly in implementing a maritime policy. And, in this regard, creating awareness amongst the public on how to use the seas sustainably in a systematic manner that will assist in their longevity will be not only be effective but long-lasting in nature. This will also assist in protecting marine resources for the use of the future generations. Thus, public diplomacy can be a useful tool in gathering mass support in formulating a maritime policy.

The majority of the people from this region live in the coastal areas of their respective countries. Therefore, engaging them to optimise the quality of life in the coastal regions is

another action that can be taken through a public diplomacy campaign. When the majority of the population of a country lives in coastal areas, this is convenient for trade and other economic activity. Therefore, creating awareness about the seas and the importance which they play in the lives of the people will have to be the underlying theme which is shared with the people. It is equally important to use public diplomatic endeavours to educate the public on the rise of sea level, and how that can affect their lives and what they need to do when coastal belts inundate. For this reason, mass awareness through both old and new means of media is required to create a more accentuated understanding among the public about these future dangers, which would in turn require them to want a maritime policy which addresses this issue.

According to the *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, “more than 80 percent of the world’s seaborne trade in oil transits through the Indian Ocean choke points”.¹⁸ This makes this region a very busy sea lane. The high density of traffic through this route also leads to “pollution of its waters from oil leakage”.¹⁹ In addition to the high possibilities of oil leakage, there is also a vast amount of waste being dumped into this ocean in the form of garbage, sewage systems, unclean water from domestic pipelines, the hospitality sector, major industries, etc. This calls for a maritime policy which addresses water pollution and disposal of waste products at sea. Therefore, a public diplomatic campaign which targets these populations and companies along the coastal region and internal waterways is required to create awareness about the long-term dangers of such pollution.

As Michel and Sticklor point out, “Although sharing the same ocean, the IOR displays tremendous diversity and contrasts in the littoral countries’ politics, culture, economics, and environment”.²⁰ The fact that the IOR is so culturally diverse, with many differences in opinions and cultures, itself indicates an urgent need for a common maritime policy that will safeguard everyone’s interests. Therefore, a maritime policy for this region should incorporate this diversity whilst emphasising the common identity of the users and those from the IOR. In this regard, a public diplomacy endeavour will be very useful to educate the public and to empower them. Such a campaign will unite the entire IOR, enabling authorities to implement a common maritime policy that is endorsed by the people.

In addition to emphasising the possession of a common identity, a maritime policy which will be collectively implemented by all in the region can create comradeship, based on their shared history and heritage. The majority of the countries in the region share similar histories of colonisation by the Portuguese, Dutch and British, and have a heritage deeply rooted in Buddhist, Hindu and Islamic heritage. Therefore this aspect too needs to be taken into account when initiating a common policy which can be channelled through this common bond of cultural values and heritage. Michel and Sticklor state,

For most of the 20th century the region’s role and importance were mostly overshadowed, considered subsidiary to super power rivalries largely enacted elsewhere and across other oceans. Today, however, the IOR has risen to the forefront of world geopolitics. Propelled by the world’s continuing reliance on Persian Gulf hydrocarbon resources, the growing significance of the Indian Ocean’s sea lanes of communication and chokepoints, as well as the turbulent regional socio-political environment (including America’s ongoing military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan), and the rise of China and India as global powers, the region is increasingly considered an area of crucial geostrategic importance. While the IOR now features more prominently in the geopolitical interests and commercial calculations of extra-regional powers

*such as the US, the European Union nations, Japan, and China, regional states and non-state actors also increasingly influence regional and global affairs. Indeed, regional developments now reverberate far beyond the Indian Ocean's shores.*²¹

The IOR, which was for a long duration unrecognised by the world, has now come to attract a lot of attention for various economic and security reasons. As per Robert Kaplan, the IOR will be the “centre of global conflicts” and where the “21st century’s global power dynamics will be revealed”.²² Kaplan gives two reasons for this: one, “because most international business supply will be conducted through this route”; and, two, because “it is in this region the interests and influence of India, China and the United States are beginning to overlap and intersect”.²³ This attention and the large-scale involvement of countries and powers external to the region make it all the more important for the region to formulate a policy that is agreeable to the people of the region, who are the ultimate beneficiaries of such a policy. In this context, public diplomacy can be utilised to influence the masses on why a policy common to the region will be beneficial in overcoming the future challenges in and towards the region.

The Indian Ocean is not only a mode of transport, but a major source of income for communities and countries. It provides communities with access to marine resources. It also supports a vast biodiversity, such as the mangroves, which too are a great source of income for the coastal communities. However, coastal biodiversity would diminish without the salinity of the seas. Therefore, a maritime policy for the IOR should carry a clause on safeguarding marine resources. In this regard, public diplomacy would be extremely useful in educating the public at large on measures that need to be taken to safeguard natural resources, which protects coastal regions from natural disasters such as tsunamis - which was the case in the 2004 tsunami which created havoc in this region - and also prevents coastal erosion. As a majority of the states are situated along coastal regions, it is important to focus on coastal conservation as well. Increasing global temperatures are affecting islands and their coastlines. Sri Lanka, a relatively large island in the IOR,

*too is affected due to changes in the global climatic conditions with predictions indicating that a significant proportion of the island's coastlines would be underwater. A projected rise in sea level of between 0.2–0.6 m would see the inundation of the coastal regions of Negombo, Colombo, Galle etc.*²⁴

This calls for awareness such as workshops and seminars with practical elements on how to react to such situations and to educate the people on various measures that need to be taken to safeguard the coastal regions from degradation.

The South Asian region, which is part of the IOR, is peculiar as its economic integration amongst trade conducted at the individual level is higher in contrast to that of the state level. This demonstrates that people perform much better when left to themselves. Regional trade amongst the countries of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is only 4%.²⁵ On their own, people interact and trade amongst themselves far more widely than governments do. Thus, a maritime policy for the IOR should take the SAARC region into consideration as the countries in the subcontinent are not only located strategically in the centre of the region but also provide access to the greater Central Asian region. A maritime policy should therefore facilitate economic integration by driving its people to engage in trade activities with other countries. For this purpose, governments should facilitate and create business opportunities. Indeed, a

campaign based on public diplomacy by governments promoting and advocating the opportunities present in their countries would assist private companies and individuals interested in investing and engaging in business to take trade relations forward.

One of the most crucial sentiments that need to be underscored in the maritime policy is to find regional solutions for problems faced by the IOR, as opposed to national or a global solutions. The policy should strive to bring members of the region together by advocating for a regional identity. Incidentally, public diplomacy which is aimed at influencing the opinions of the people is extremely useful for this initiative. It can be utilised in a manner that can draw on the region's identity in finding solutions. Public diplomacy is further relevant because a strong public movement is extremely important for the integration of this region. This would not be possible without the consent and the desire of the people living in this region. Therefore, public diplomacy for formulating a maritime policy can be a very useful tool to create both awareness and a desire among the people of the IOR for regional integration.

Further, when formulating a maritime policy for the IOR it will have to take into account the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas within the context of an integrated approach that "the problems of ocean space are closely interrelated and need to be considered as a whole".²⁶ In addition, it needs to be understood that a policy for this region will require

*a legal order for the seas and oceans which will facilitate international communication, and will promote the peaceful uses of the seas and oceans, the equitable and efficient utilization of their resources, the conservation of their living resources, and the study, protection and preservation of the marine environment.*²⁷

In this respect, it is important to educate the public on the legal aspects of using the seas. Thus, public diplomacy will have to be used to create awareness on the Law of the Seas Convention and the responsibilities that accompany it. It is also important for regional maritime policy to consider legal issues, especially by taking into consideration the established convention on the governance of the seas and ocean spaces. It is important for the general public to be aware of the laws contained in it as, in addition to being users of the ocean spaces, their support is required for the governments to implement a policy.

Communicating a message and getting ideas across has become convenient with the advancement of communication technology and with the emergence of social media and networks. Public diplomacy which aims to influence the attitudes and opinions of people via different modes and means of communication benefits greatly from this development. Therefore, a campaign that seeks to motivate people regarding a common maritime policy will require the use of tools such as Facebook, Twitter, blogposts, etc. to facilitate it. For example, the number of Facebook users in Sri Lanka amounts to 2,300,000, which approximates to 11.5% of Sri Lanka's entire population.²⁸ Social media and networks have a wide usage among the general public due to the penetration of mobile phones and devices. Interestingly, 1,300,000 of the Facebook users access it through their mobile devices. This is an astounding 58% of the total Facebook users of Sri Lanka.²⁹ Therefore, the use of social media can also greatly assist in creating awareness among people, especially the youth, on matters maritime. And this phenomenon holds true not only for Sri Lanka but for the entire region and beyond where social media and mobile devices are a part of the lives of the people.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a maritime policy for the Indian Ocean Region is a very relevant and timely requirement. The states that are located in the region or which are the users of this oceanic space need to urgently come together to formulate an all-encompassing policy that will safeguard not only the oceanic space in its entirety, but also its biological and mineral resources. The endeavour has to be a collective effort as it will ultimately benefit all the states and their citizens.

In this regard, seeking the support of the general public is extremely important as ultimately it will be the public that will benefit and help with the implementation of such a policy. The support and acceptance from the public is pertinent in the formulation of a maritime policy as it will cater to a diverse group of individuals. Therefore, in seeking the public's acknowledgement and support, governments will have to make use of communication mechanisms such as public diplomacy to drive public support and to create awareness of the clauses that will be included in the maritime policy. As public diplomacy aims to influence the attitudes and opinions of its target audience, a properly crafted soft-power tool such as a public diplomacy campaign will greatly assist governments in showcasing to their publics why the region requires a maritime policy that is collective in nature and supported by all.

Thus, it can be argued that public diplomacy is a beneficial tool in formulating a common maritime policy. As described in the paper, this tool is useful in influencing the public to readily accept the policy and to influence governments in cooperating towards implementing policies and strategies that are important for the safety of the stakeholders in the Indian Ocean Region. It can thus be concluded that public diplomacy, whilst permitting support from the masses for the formulation of a policy, can equally support the latter's implementation.

Notes

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