

## EVALUATING THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF IORA'S DIALOGUE PARTNERS

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India assumed the chairmanship of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) in November of 2025, inheriting a forum with twelve Dialogue Partners and no systematic account of what any of them has contributed. IORA has admitted partners for over two decades — Japan and Egypt in 1999, China and the United Kingdom in 2000, the United States in 2012, followed by Germany, Italy, South Korea, Turkey, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and the European Union — and every Council of Ministers communiqué has thanked them for their 'valuable contributions'. None has specified what those contributions were.<sup>1</sup>

IORA's Charter establishes that Dialogue Partners are admitted based on "*capacity and interest to contribute*". Beyond that threshold, it imposes no obligations. There is no minimum contribution floor, no review mechanism, and no public disclosure of financial inputs. The IORA Special Fund,<sup>2</sup> through which partners can make financial contributions, publishes no contributor breakdown. The result is that partners who do have specific multi-year programmes are placed in the same formal category as those whose engagement, at least in the publicly available record, does not extend beyond COM attendance.

This article constructs a systematic audit of Dialogue Partner contributions across all twelve partners. It does so across four dimensions — Publicly Documented Financial Contribution (PDFC), Institutional Participation (IP), Technical and Programmatic Contribution (TP), and Thematic Alignment (TA) — and arrives at three findings. First, some of the newest partners are outperforming the longest-tenured ones by a measurable margin in the public record. Second, while several partners have produced episodic documented contributions, none has matched the sustained, institutionally anchored model that Germany and South Korea have established. Third, Germany's direct Secretariat support model and South Korea's annual seminar series together constitute a replicable template that

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<sup>1</sup> Indian Ocean Rim Association. "Dialogue Partners." <https://www.iora.int/dialogue-partners>.

<sup>2</sup> Indian Ocean Rim Association, "IORA Special Fund," <https://www.iora.int/iora-special-fund>

India, as Chair, has both the institutional position and the policy rationale under MAHASAGAR policy to promote.

A caveat applies throughout. Because the Special Fund is not transparent, absence from the public record is not the same as absence of contribution. The article acknowledges this explicitly and applies the caveat consistently. What it *can* claim is that where contribution has been substantive, partners have generally made it visible.

## The Framework Gap

Article 4 of the IORA Charter requires only that a prospective Dialogue Partner demonstrate “*capacity and interest to contribute*” at the moment of admission.<sup>3</sup> That threshold is never revisited. No minimum annual contribution is stipulated; no working group leadership is required, and no performance review exists. In the case of ASEAN, its Dialogue Partner architecture includes specifically named and budgeted cooperation-funds — examples are the Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund, the China-ASEAN Cooperation Fund — each with disclosed commitments and multi-year work plans. IORA, on the other hand, is clearly not ASEAN: it has a smaller Secretariat, a more dispersed membership, and a shorter institutional history. Consequently, it is not this author’s view that the ASEAN practice ought to be taken as a benchmark that IORA should replicate wholesale. The comparative example is cited only to establish that named, budgeted, and openly disclosed Dialogue Partner contributions are a well-established institutional mechanism and not some esoteric or theoretical aspiration.

The prevailing design was, perhaps, appropriate when IORA was establishing itself, and broadening engagement was its primary goal. To persist with this design even after the passage of twenty-five years, on the other hand, produces a structural problem: twelve partners who have been admitted under identical terms, contributing in unmeasured degrees, with no institutional mechanism to distinguish between them or to create incentives for greater engagement. India’s chairmanship constitutes an institutional juncture at which the question of what exactly Dialogue Partners “owe” the Association — and what they have “delivered” — can be formally raised.

The transparency deficit and the contribution deficit are not separate problems. They are actually the same problem but one that is merely being seen from different angles. Because the Special Fund discloses nothing, a dialogue partner who contributes nothing faces no reputational cost for doing so. Because there is no Programme Register, a partner with no IORA-labelled activities is indistinguishable in the institutional record from one with a sustained programme. Because there is no annual engagement report, the gap between a partner’s stated intent at COM meetings and its follow-through in the intervening year is never formally surfaced. Opacity is what makes low contribution costless. Transparency is therefore not merely a procedural reform — it is the

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<sup>3</sup> Indian Ocean Rim Association. Charter of the Indian Ocean Rim Association, as amended 2018. [https://www.un.org/en/ga/sixth/70/docs/iora\\_charter.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/ga/sixth/70/docs/iora_charter.pdf)

mechanism through which contribution incentives would change. The two arguments in this article are not parallel; the first is the condition that enables the second.

The question matters directly for India's chairmanship objectives. IORA faces well-documented resource constraints: its secretariat is small, its special fund is limited, and its ability to implement working group outputs depends heavily on external technical and financial support. Dialogue Partners are formally the primary vehicle for that support — the Charter envisions them providing financial assistance, technical expertise, and sustained programmatic engagement. A more effective Dialogue Partner framework would reduce the burden on member States to carry IORA's institutional weight, expand the association's programmatic capacity in priority areas where India has strategic interests — fisheries management, maritime domain awareness, blue economy — and give India's chairmanship a concrete institutional legacy beyond the two-year tenure. The recommendations are designed with that objective in mind.

## **Methodology**

The four audit dimensions map directly onto what IORA's Charter and Rules of Procedure identify as the core of Dialogue Partner engagement: financial support, technical assistance, and participatory involvement. These produce the first three dimensions — PDFC, IP, and TP. A fourth dimension, "Thematic Alignment", captures whether partner activities address IORA's own priority areas or primarily reflect bilateral strategic interests — a distinction the Charter's admission criteria do not address but one that bears directly on whether Dialogue Partnership serves IORA's regional cooperation mandate.

One methodological choice requires explicit justification. The audit gives weight to named (IORA-labelled) programmes — MoU-based secretariat support, purpose-built annual platforms — rather than to bilateral maritime official development assistance (ODA) or development assistance that flows to IORA member States without IORA attribution. This is not because bilateral engagement is less valuable in absolute terms. It is because Dialogue Partnership is a formal institutional relationship with IORA as an organisation, not with its member States individually. Contributions that are not labelled as "IORA contributions", however substantial they may be in bilateral terms, do not strengthen the Association's institutional capacity, do not appear in the IORA Secretariat's record, and do not accrue to IORA as a regional forum. The question that this audit addresses is specifically what partners have contributed to IORA — not what they have contributed to the Indian Ocean more broadly. This distinction matters most for Japan, the UK, and the USA, all of which have substantial bilateral maritime engagement with IORA member States that this audit does not capture and does not claim to assess.

Alternatives considered but set aside, include working group leadership (captured within IP only where documented), secretariat secondments (no public data available across partners), and training scholarships (indistinguishable from bilateral ODA in the public record). The four chosen

dimensions are those for which evidence is systematically available and comparable across all twelve partners.

Each partner is rated Substantive (S), Moderate (M), Declaratory (D), or Absent/Unverifiable (A). Saudi Arabia, admitted in October 2023, is rated Not Assessed (–) — the 23rd COM communiqué language itself was vague and aspirational: “*We look forward to Saudi Arabia contributing positively*”.<sup>4</sup> All ratings are based on IORA Council of Ministers communiqués (2011–2025), IORA quarterly e-newsletters (2020–2026), development agency project databases, and partner foreign ministry publications.

The PDFC column requires a specific clarification. Because the IORA Special Fund does not disclose contributor amounts or donor lists, the PDFC dimension cannot measure actual financial contribution — it measures *publicly documented* financial contribution. A partner rated D or A on PDFC may well have made substantial undisclosed contributions to the Special Fund. The PDFC column should therefore be read as a “transparency indicator” as much as a “contribution indicator”: it tells us what partners have chosen to make visible, not necessarily what they have given. This limitation is inherent to the source material and cannot be resolved without disclosure reform at the Secretariat level — which is itself one of the article’s recommendations.

**Table 1: Audit Dimensions**

Code	Dimension	Operational Definition
PDFC	<b>Publicly Documented Financial Contribution</b>	Documented, attributable contributions to the IORA Special Fund or named project co-financing in publicly available sources. Bilateral ODA to member States does not count unless explicitly labelled as an IORA contribution. Undisclosed voluntary Special Fund contributions cannot be assessed from the public record.
IP	<b>Institutional Participation</b>	Attendance and active engagement at Council of Ministers (COM), Committee of Senior Officials (CSO), and Working Group sessions. Ministerial-level representation and co-chairing score higher than delegation-level attendance.
TP	<b>Technical &amp; Programmatic Contribution</b>	Named, attributable capacity building programmes, training initiatives, or technical assistance delivered under the IORA framework or explicitly linked to IORA priority areas.
TA	<b>Thematic Alignment</b>	The degree to which the partner’s activities engage with IORA’s own priority areas rather than serving primarily as a vehicle for the partner’s bilateral strategic interests.

<sup>4</sup> Indian Ocean Rim Association, “23rd Council of Ministers Meeting Communiqué.” Colombo, Sri Lanka, 11 October 2023, <https://www.iora.int/sites/default/files/2024-08/Colombo%20Communique%202023.pdf>

## The Audit Matrix

**Table 2: IORA Dialogue Partner Contribution Audit (as of May 2026)**

Key:

<b>S</b>	Substantive — consistent, documented, multi-year contribution
<b>M</b>	Moderate — present but episodic; some documented activity
<b>D</b>	Declaratory — statements of intent; limited follow-through
<b>A</b>	Absent / Unverifiable — no publicly documented contribution
–	Not assessed — admitted too recently for fair evaluation

*PDFC = Publicly Documented Financial Contribution | IP = Institutional Participation | TP = Technical & Programmatic Contribution | TA = Thematic Alignment*

Dialogue Partner	Joined	PDFC	IP	TP	TA	Key Evidence
South Korea	2018	<b>M</b>	<b>S</b>	<b>S</b>	<b>S</b>	6 consecutive annual ROK-IORA Partnership Seminars (2020–2025); MoFA-funded; proposed at 19th COM (2019)
Germany	2015	<b>M</b>	<b>S</b>	<b>S</b>	<b>S</b>	GIZ MoU programme 2018–2023; German Federal Foreign Office funded Max Planck maritime law workshops for IORA member States (2023)
European Union	2024	<b>D</b>	<b>S</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>S</b>	Commissioner Kadis at May 2025 COM; HIPPA project (2024); EEAS page linked to EU Indo-Pacific Strategy
Japan	1999	<b>D</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>M</b>	Hosted ‘International Symposium on IORA and Japan,’ Tokyo, March 2014; attends COMs; no sustained named-programme identified
United Kingdom	2000	<b>D</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>M</b>	Attends COMs; GIZ note suggests UK developing own programme — not confirmed operational as of 2026
United States	2012	<b>D</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>D</b>	Dialogue Partner since 2012; Deputy Secretary Verma met IORA

						SG, May 2023; no standalone US-IORA programme documented
Italy	2019	D	M	D	M	Italy-IORA civil society platform active (iora-italy.org); no Italian government programme confirmed
Egypt	1999	D	D	D	D	No publicly documented programme, working group lead or named initiative identified across 27 years of partnership
Turkey	2018	D	D	M	M	IORA-TIKA Training of Trainers on Disaster Risk Management, Ankara, May 2022; announced at 21st COM (2021)
Russia	2021	A	D	D	A	Russia-IORA Blue Economy workshop hosted Sep 2023; effectively isolated post-Feb 2022; listed at 24th COM (May 2025)
China	2000	D	D	M	M	RCSTT Desalination Coordination Centre MoU, Tianjin, Oct 2014; Qingdao Blue Economy workshop 2016; Shenzhen marine economy forum 2024
Saudi Arabia	2023	–	–	–	–	Admitted Oct 2023; too recently admitted for fair assessment

## What the Evidence Shows

### The Benchmark: Two Models of Substantive Contribution

Germany and South Korea, both admitted after 2014, have between them established the two replicable models of substantive Dialogue Partner engagement. Germany's contribution runs through a formal Memorandum of Understanding between GIZ and the IORA Secretariat — not a bilateral agreement with individual member States, but direct Secretariat support covering disaster risk management, maritime safety, and the blue economy across a five-year programme (2018–2023) with two MoU extensions. Beyond the GIZ programme itself, the German Federal Foreign Office separately funded the Max Planck Foundation's maritime law workshops for IORA member States

in 2023<sup>5</sup> — two dedicated sessions for IORA states on UNCLOS implementation and maritime security cooperation. The MoU structure and the continued funding stream together make Germany’s contribution the most institutionally durable in the Dialogue Partner group.<sup>6</sup>

South Korea’s model is complementary. Since proposing a new Track 1.5 platform at the 19th COM in 2019, Korea has hosted an annual ROK-IORA Partnership Seminar every year without interruption, funded through its Ministry of Foreign Affairs, covering a different IORA priority area each edition. South Korea further deepened this engagement at the 24th Council of Ministers Meeting in May 2025 by announcing the establishment of a dedicated “Republic of Korea Indian Ocean Cooperation Fund”, with an initial allocation of approximately USD 400,000. The Fund provides an institutional mechanism through which Korea can support IORA priorities beyond the annual seminar platform, reinforcing its position as one of the Association’s most substantively engaged Dialogue Partners.<sup>7</sup>

Together, these two models demonstrate that a Dialogue Partner can contribute meaningfully to IORA’s institutional capacity — through direct Secretariat support — and to its policy discourse — through a sustained annual platform — without requiring Charter revision or new institutional structures. The European Union, the most recently admitted partner, has already attended its first COM at Commissioner level and declared alignment with IORA’s priorities across its Indo-Pacific and ocean governance strategies, suggesting it is on a similar trajectory.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Mixed Picture Among Other Partners**

Japan hosted the ‘International Symposium on IORA and Japan’ in Tokyo in March 2014.<sup>9</sup> Turkey ran a named, government-funded programme: the ‘IORA-TIKA Training of Trainers on Disaster Risk Management’, held in Ankara in May 2022, and delivered through TIKa, Turkey’s official development cooperation agency, following a commitment made at the 21st COM in Dhaka.<sup>10</sup> Russia hosted a Blue Economy workshop for IORA member States and Dialogue Partners in

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<sup>5</sup> Max Planck Foundation for International Peace and the Rule of Law, “Maritime Law Workshops for IORA Member States.” 2023, <https://www.mpfpr.de>

<sup>6</sup> GIZ, “Strengthening the Capacities of the Indian Ocean Rim Association with a Focus on Disaster Risk Management, Maritime Safety and the Blue Economy,” 2018–2023, <https://www.giz.de/en/projects/strengthening-capacities-iora>

<sup>7</sup> Republic of Korea Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Press releases, 1st–6th ROK-IORA Partnership Seminars, 2020–2025, <https://www.mofa.go.kr>

<sup>8</sup> European External Action Service, “The European Union and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA),” [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/european-union-and-indian-ocean-rim-association-iora\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/european-union-and-indian-ocean-rim-association-iora_en)

<sup>9</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, “Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA).” [https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/IORA\\_new.pdf](https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/IORA_new.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Indian Ocean Rim Association, “IORA-TIKA Training of Trainers Program for Disaster Risk Management, 16–22 May 2022, Ankara, Turkey,” <https://www.iora.int/iora-tika-training-trainers-program-disaster-risk-management-16-22-may-2022-ankara-turkey>

September of 2023<sup>11</sup> — one documented event, held after the Ukraine invasion, which moves Russia’s Technical Contribution from Absent to Declaratory.

The United States joined IORA as a Dialogue Partner in November 2012 giving it thirteen years of formal engagement.<sup>12</sup> The UK joined in 2000 and Egypt in 1999. Across all three, no sustained named IORA programme has been identified in the public record. Their maritime engagement with Indian Ocean states is substantial bilaterally; what has not materialised is IORA-labelled institutional contribution of the kind that Germany, Korea, and even Turkey have produced within far shorter tenures.

The consistent pattern is not that these governments are disengaged from the Indian Ocean. It is that Dialogue Partner status has not translated into IORA-attributed contribution. The current framework provides no mechanism to change that — which is the structural problem the recommendations address.

### **China’s Engagement Profile**

China joined IORA as a Dialogue Partner in the year 2000. A thorough examination of the public record reveals a more nuanced picture than the framework gap alone might suggest. China established a Coordination Centre on Desalination Technologies in Tianjin through a formal MoU between China’s “State Oceanic Administration Institute” (ISDMU) and IORA’s “Regional Centre for Science and Technology Transfer” (RCSTT), signed in October 2014.<sup>13</sup> It hosted and funded the Second “IORA Blue Economy Core Group Workshop” in Qingdao in July of 2016; and IORA’s Secretary General participated in a China-hosted marine economy forum in Shenzhen in November of 2024.<sup>14</sup>

These are “*documented*” contributions alright, but what they are *not*, are “sustained” ones. China’s contributions are episodic, technically narrow, and channelled through the RCSTT specialised agency rather than through the IORA Secretariat directly. None has the multi-year, institutionally anchored character of Germany’s GIZ programme or Korea’s annual seminar series. China has been a Dialogue Partner for twenty-six years; yet the scale of its documented IORA-specific engagement does not reflect that tenure. The framework’s absence of any contribution requirement or transparency mechanism is what makes this pattern self-sustaining.

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<sup>11</sup> Indian Ocean Rim Association, “Final Report: Russia-IORA Workshop on Blue Economy,” September 2023. [https://iora.int/sites/default/files/2024-04/230915\\_russia-iora-workshop\\_report.pdf](https://iora.int/sites/default/files/2024-04/230915_russia-iora-workshop_report.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> United States Department of State, “Deputy Secretary Verma’s Meeting with IORA Secretary General,” May 2023. <https://2021-2025.state.gov>

<sup>13</sup> IORA Regional Centre for Science and Technology Transfer (RCSTT), “Coordination Centre on Desalination Technologies (CCDT),” Established October 2014, <https://iora-rcstt.org/isdmu-soa-china>

<sup>14</sup> Indian Ocean Rim Association, “IORA–China Partnership: Shenzhen Global Marine Economy Forum,” November 2024. <https://www.iora.int>

## India's Chairmanship: Recommendations

India is well placed to lead reform of the Dialogue Partner framework. Its MAHASAGAR policy, introduced in March 2025, explicitly prioritises strengthening regional institutional architecture and advancing inclusive, rules-based cooperation across the Indian Ocean.<sup>15</sup> A contribution transparency framework is consistent with that agenda: it does not introduce adversarial dynamics into IORA's consensus-based structure, but it does ask whether partners are genuinely contributing to the regional cooperation MAHASAGAR envisions. India's own institutional track record within IORA — the e-office system and Mahatma Gandhi Library introduced during its vice-chairmanship — establishes that it can deliver Secretariat-level improvements without Charter amendment.<sup>16</sup>

Three recommendations follow, each achievable within India's two-year chairmanship and within IORA's existing voluntary framework.

### 1) Replicate the GIZ Model

The most immediately actionable step India can take is to approach willing Dialogue Partners — the EU and Japan are the natural candidates given their existing maritime institutional capacity — and encourage them to establish formal MoU-based Secretariat support programmes modelled on Germany's GIZ approach. India can facilitate this directly as Chair by framing the “ask” at Senior Officials level and offering to co-facilitate the MoU process through the Secretariat. A Japan-IORA Secretariat Support Programme covering, for instance, fisheries management and maritime domain awareness, would fill a concrete programmatic gap and set a precedent that other longer-tenured partners would find difficult to decline. The GIZ template is documented, precedented, and requires no new institutional architecture — only political will and a chair willing to ask the question.

### 2) Annual Dialogue Partner Engagement Report

India should table a proposal at the Committee of Senior Officials level for each Dialogue Partner to submit a voluntary one-page annual engagement report covering the four audit dimensions. No enforcement mechanism is needed — the political cost of a near-empty submission and the reputational benefit of a substantive one together create sufficient incentive. Partners with documented contributions would participate readily; partners without would find the absence of a submission more conspicuous than a brief one. The report should be published on the IORA website alongside each Council of Ministers communiqué.

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<sup>15</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, “PM Modi's Visit to Mauritius: MAHASAGAR Initiative.” March 2025. <https://www.mea.gov.in>

<sup>16</sup> 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/pressreleases.htm?dtl/33312/20th+Meeting+of+Indian+Ocean+Rim+Association+Council+of+Ministers>

### 3) Secretariat-Facilitated Programme Register

India should request that the IORA Secretariat maintain and publish a “Dialogue Partner Programme Register” — a live list of named partner programmes, each with a brief description, thematic focus, duration, and linkage to an IORA priority area. Partners with no named programmes would be identifiable by their absence. The register requires no new institution and no new budget line — only that the Secretariat treat partner-contributions as information worth recording and disclosing publicly.

### Explore a Tiered Participation Structure (Medium Term)

The most structurally ambitious reform — and the one least likely to be achievable within a single chairmanship — is a two-tier Dialogue Partner status: Active Partners, who have demonstrated publicly documented contribution across at least two audit dimensions in the preceding year, could co-chair IORA side events and co-sponsor working group sessions; Associate Partners would attend but not lead. The political obstacle is real and should not be understated: any proposal that visibly differentiates participation rights would require the partners most likely to be downgraded — including major powers — to vote for their own demotion. That will not happen through a direct proposal at the Council of Ministers. The more realistic pathway is incremental: first establish the Annual Engagement Report and Programme Register (Recommendations 1 and 2) so that contribution levels become publicly visible; then allow the reputational dynamics of transparency to build political support for differentiated participation over successive chairmanship cycles. India’s two-year chairmanship is the right moment to begin that process, not to complete it. Saudi Arabia and newly admitted partners would receive a two-year assessment grace period under any such arrangement, and no Charter amendment would be required — a Council of Ministers resolution clarifying participation rights would suffice when the political conditions are ready.

### Conclusion

IORA’s Dialogue Partner framework was not designed to be held to account. Its vague admission threshold, its absence of performance review, and its opaque Special Fund, collectively ensure that the question of what partners have actually contributed has never needs to be formally answered. This article has attempted an answer from the public record, with all the limits that entails. The audit evaluates publicly documented contributions within the IORA framework rather than the broader maritime engagement of Dialogue Partners across the Indian Ocean — a distinction that matters, and that the methodology section applies consistently throughout.

The findings are more nuanced than the framework gap alone might suggest. A small number of partners — Germany and South Korea — have built sustained, institutionally anchored contributions within the IORA framework. The EU has entered IORA with a visible commitment to engagement. Others — Japan, Turkey, Russia, China — have produced a limited number of

episodic documented contributions. The United Kingdom, Egypt, and Italy have the longest or most substantial formal engagements with the thinnest publicly documented IORA-specific footprint. The framework itself is the more proximate explanation: when membership imposes no obligations and access is unconditional, it provides few incentives for partners to make their contributions visible or institutionalised within IORA.

India's chairmanship does not require confronting any partner directly. What it requires is using the institutional levers available to a chair — agenda-setting, secretariat support, ministerial framing — to make contribution transparent and, over time, to make transparency the incentive for engagement that the Charter's admission criteria were never designed to provide. The four recommendations above are that mechanism. Whether India pursues them is the practical test of whether MAHASAGAR's commitment to a stronger regional architecture extends to the institutions that are supposed to deliver it.

### **About the Author**

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