

REASSESSING COOPERATION IN THE INDIAN OCEAN LITTORAL

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Abstract

Of the five oceans the Indian Ocean is the third largest. Four critically important access waterways, the Suez Canal (Egypt), Bab el Mandeb (Djibouti-Yemen), Strait of Hormuz (Iran-Oman), and Strait of Malacca (Indonesia-Malaysia), are cuddled by this ocean. The Indian Ocean provides major sea courses connecting the Middle East, Africa, and East Asia with Europe and the Americas. It carries a particularly heavy traffic of petroleum and petroleum products from the oilfields of the Persian Gulf and Indonesia. An estimated 40% of the world's offshore oil production comes from the Indian Ocean. The increasing strategic as well as economic importance of this ocean brings it into the fore of competition and cooperation as well. This article analyzes the importance of Indian Ocean in the light of greater regional and littoral cooperation, achievements and drawbacks of IOR-ARC, most contentious issues those are obstructing cooperation and, finally, concludes with a proposal of multi-layered approach to move forward. It is identified in this article that regionalism with institutional foundation is the most appropriate policy to have strong economic linkages within the Indian Ocean region.

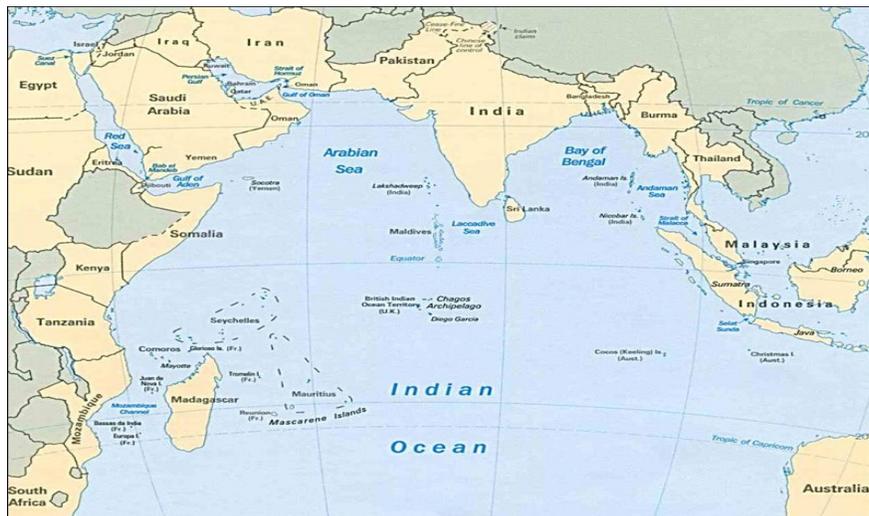
Introduction

Ken Booth and William L. Dowdy argued in 1985 that because of the plenitude of military, economic, religious and racial insecurities and threats, the Indian Ocean "might be dubbed a kaleidoscope of crisis and not merely an 'arc'".¹ On the military level, a plethora of conflicts exist along the all-important SLOCs: from the Bab el-Mandeb and the Straits of Hormuz along the coastline of South Asia to the Straits of Malacca and – by way of geographical extension – to the South China Sea. At the Horn of Africa, consisting of Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, Djibouti and Kenya, the hapless citizens are virtually living in a Hobbesian

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¹ Quoted in Ian W. Porter, "The Indian Ocean Rim," *African Security Review*, Vol. 6, No. 6, 1997, at p. 81.

environment. In the Gulf area, conflicts are far from being settled: Iran is busily obtaining new military muscles with an emphasis of beefing up its naval strength. The geopolitical and geo-economical environment in the Indian Ocean after the end of the superpower conflict is positive and stable. Security problems are posed only by non-state actors like drug traffickers, small arms traffickers and pirates, especially in the Bay of Bengal and the Straits of Malacca. Illicit fishing was also pointed out as a source of conflict, both in the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea.



In the ancient Sanskrit literature the Indian Ocean is known as Ratnakara meaning “the maker (creator) of jewels”. The real relevance of this name is being understood in this twenty-first century, as the strategic value of this vast ocean is making it a theater of maritime dominance among the Asian powers. The Indian Ocean Rim defines a distinctive area in international politics consisting of coastal states bordering the Indian Ocean. It is a region of much diversity, in culture, race, religion, economic development, and strategic interests. The countries vary in the size of their populations, economies, trade, and technological development and in the composition of their GDP. The Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC) is the grouping of the littoral countries to foster joint cooperation and collaboration with respect to issues related to Indian Ocean Rim. Though often criticized as a ‘dead’ one, it can certainly contribute to the development and prosperity for the reason, if all its drawbacks are taken into due consideration. This article analyses the importance of Indian

Ocean from a geopolitical point of view and tries to explore the accomplishments and limitations of IOR-ARC with particular emphasis on promoting regional collaboration mechanism keeping in mind the prevailing challenges. The article concludes by uttering that regionalism with institutional foundation is the most appropriate policy to have strong economic linkages within the Indian Ocean littoral.

Strategic importance of Indian Ocean

"Whoever controls the Indian Ocean dominates Asia. This ocean is the key to the seven seas in the twenty-first century, the destiny of the world will be decided in these waters."

Alfred Thayer Mahan

The Indian Ocean region is the birthplace of maritime civilization. The importance of Indian Ocean is paramount for some of its littoral states, namely India. Acknowledging the significance of Indian Ocean, KM Pannikar wrote in the 1940s:

*"While to other countries, the Indian Ocean is only one of the important oceanic areas, to India it is a vital sea. Her lifelines are concentrated in that area, her freedom is dependent on the freedom of that water surface. No industrial development, no commercial growth, no stable political structure is possible for her unless her shores are protected..."*²

The Indian Ocean is the third largest body of water in the world, covering about 20% of the Earth's water surface. It is nearly 5,400 nm wide and covers an area more than 21 million square nautical miles. With 35 nations, including 6 island nations sharing an Indian Ocean coast line, some of the world's busiest and most important Sea Lines of Communication (or SLOCs) pass through these waters. The Indian Ocean is home to a large number of choke points that literally channel maritime traffic connecting the Middle East, Africa, and East Asia with Europe and the Americas. From West to East, these choke points are Bab el Mandeb, the Straits of Hormuz, Malacca, Sunda, Lombok, and Ombai. For extra-regional powers, the Indian Ocean has for decades fulfilled the role of an important transit corridor: for Russia as a maritime transit between Europe and Eastern Siberia;

² Quoted in Adm. Nirmal Verma, CNS, "India's role in Indian Ocean: Strategic challenges and opportunities in the decades ahead," speech delivered at the Indian Maritime Foundation on December 19, 2010.