

Promoting Maritime Partnerships in the Indo-Pacific

Not a day passes when the electronic and print media inform us about maritime threats and challenges from violent non-state actors. These emerge in the form of piracy and armed robbery, maritime terrorism, gun running, drug smuggling and human trafficking. We also have a fair share of catastrophes from natural phenomenon such as cyclones, typhoons, storm surges and Tsunamis. The threats from oil spills, shore pollutants let into the sea and indiscriminate use of the oceans cause severe impact on the marine environment and ecology. These have wide and deepening impact on the socio-economic development of the society.

Further, a number of scholarly and authoritative studies have argued persuasively that non-traditional security threats and challenges are transnational in nature and cannot be addressed by one country. This has given rise to in a number of bilateral and multilateral engagements at the sub-regional and regional levels and a variety of institutional frameworks for cooperative engagements have mushroomed across the oceans. Their transactions pivot on dialogue, formal agreements and arrangements, naval and maritime enforcement exercises, information sharing and intelligence exchanges among agencies, and joint training.

Concept of Maritime Partnership

Maritime partnership as a concept is not new. There are a number of examples of States converging to form grouping, alliances, coalition of the willing, and strategic partnerships across regions to address a number of contentious issues, and in some cases have even fought wars. The two world wars, the Cold War alliance structures, war on terror and the ongoing counter piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden are good examples, wherein likeminded States have decided to work together to address common security threats and challenges. Interestingly, natural disasters like the Indian Ocean Tsunami resulted in States joining hands to provide assistance to affected States.

In contemporary times, maritime partnerships have become highly globalized with oceans and seas acting as catalysts. The practice of maritime partnership resonates at the politico-diplomatic and military levels across regions and is visible in the tactical and strategic formulations of navies, coast guards and marine enforcement agencies. Further, the importance of multilateral engagements and arrangements among maritime States has encouraged them to address contentious issues through diplomacy; significantly, some States have chosen maritime

partnership as a deliberate policy and decided to invest in sea power and use it for cooperative agendas in order to further their own interests. Therefore, maritime partnership is a tool available to small, medium and major maritime powers who consider using oceans and seas to further national interests.

Understanding the Indo-Pacific

The Indo-Pacific sea space stretches from the western Pacific Ocean through Southeast Asia to the western Indian Ocean along the east coast of Africa. It is a new spatial formulation and blends the established cartographic delimitations of the Indian Ocean with the geographical understanding of the Asia Pacific region which have differing geographical boundaries. The new understandings of the above oceanic spaces is commonly referred to as 'Indo-Pacific', or 'Indo-Asia Pacific', or 'Pacindo'. The Indo-Pacific region represents the world's largest spatial area that encompasses several regional and sub-regional systems that feature economic interdependence and security arrangements.

The Indo-Pacific concept is often used in official statements and speeches by a number of countries in the Asia Pacific and the Indian Ocean. A review of contemporary strategic literature clearly notes the drivers for such conceptualization; these can be broadly divided into at least three categories i.e. economic, geopolitical and strategic. A number of scholars have argued that the Indo-Pacific is a useful geographic concept for analysis, to understand the rise of China and India, particularly in the context of the shift in the global economic centre of gravity to Asia. While others observe that the region is witnessing competing political priorities and changing security perspectives of regional as also of the extra-regional powers that are redefining the geopolitics of Asia. Another argument that is being made is built around the notion of the US 'rebalance' towards Asia and the US' desire to play a larger role in the Asia Pacific region. Further, the US is encouraging its alliance partners to restructure their strategic orientations by playing greater role in regional security. Finally, the concept of 'confluence of the seas', propounded by Japan also merits attention.

Maritime Partnerships in Indo-Pacific

The Indo-Pacific region is witness to a multitude of cooperative organisations, multilateral structures, bilateral and multilateral arrangements. Among these, in the Asia Pacific region, the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) is surely a successful experiment in regional integration; likewise, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asia Summit

(EAS) have attracted the attention of the international community because its members include Asian and Non-Asian countries. The ASEAN Defence Ministers decision to expand their grouping to ADMM Plus and the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF) are noteworthy. These are supported by Track II initiatives such as the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) which has a number of study groups on a host of issues including maritime security.

The Asia Pacific waters are buzzing with naval activity and the Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS) and the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES) offer enormous opportunities to naval commanders and their forces to debate and discuss practical issues. It is also useful to mention the Eyes in the Sky (EIS) initiative by Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore to address the menace of piracy in the Straits of Malacca.

Unlike the Asia Pacific region, the Indian Ocean has few multilateral structures. There are reasons for the absence of ‘alphabet soup bowl’ and can be attributed to geographical realities, preference for sub-regional approach to security, unique security maritime challenges for the countries, as also , till very recently, a lack of interest among the India Ocean littoral countries to address issues of security in the Indian Ocean. The IORA (rechristened from the Indian Ocean Rim –Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC)) and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) are the only specialized multilateral forum to address common security threats and challenges confronting the Indian Ocean. These have, in recent times, worked proactively to enhance co-operation among the regional countries, navies and maritime enforcement agencies. Another major multilateral event in the region is Indian Navy’s ‘Milan’, a gathering of navies from South Asia, Southeast Asia and Australia who gather at Port Blair, A&N Islands to discuss important maritime security issues.

At another level, business stakeholders such as the industry have established multilateral initiatives and developed strategies to counter maritime threats at sea. For instance, the Shared Awareness and Deconfliction (SHADE), the Contact Group for Piracy off the Coast of Somalia (CGPCS) and the Djibouti Code of Conduct (DCoC) facilitate discussions among stakeholders to counter piracy in the Gulf of Aden. At the functional level, escort duties by regional and non-regional navies (China, India, Japan and South Korea) have established the Internationally Recommended Transit Corridor (IRTC) and conduct escort duties to protect international shipping sailing through the Gulf of Aden.

The global defence industry, by its very nature, is designed and mandated to produce military hardware for sale to national and international militaries. It is true that defence industries are driven by market forces and conduct their activities to earn profits. In recent times, the defence industry has been playing a role in maritime security that goes beyond military sales. It has attempted to reach out to the strategic and military community and other relevant actors through maritime exhibitions and seminars such as LIMA: Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace Exhibition; International Defence Exhibition and Conference (IDEX) Abu Dhabi; (c) IMDEX, Singapore, International maritime security Conference, etc.

Harmonizing Strategic Maritime Partnerships

There is ample evidence among countries of both the Asia Pacific and the Indian Ocean region of a culture of working through multilateral institutions and cooperation. The regional countries exhibit a strong sense of working with each other on issues of common interests and concerns and respond to challenges collectively. They are active participants and play vital roles in multilateral arrangements in their respective regions.

It is also argued that multilateral institutions in the Asia Pacific region have done remarkably well to address the political, economic, and diplomatic and security challenges. Significantly, enormous progress has been made to diffuse tensions.

Further, existing structures and arrangements are at the peak of their functional and operational levels and are performing well. There are also a number of limitations of resources to participate and be present at all meetings of these structures. In this context, the ASEAN member countries hosts and participate (working group up to the summit) in nearly 1,500 meetings annually. It is important to note that regional countries are overburdened and may not possess the requisite capacity to ensure efficient functioning of newer institutions. Under the circumstances, it is best to rely on existing institutions such as the EAS, IORA, ADMM Plus and the IONS.

Although the Indian Ocean countries may have few multilateral institutions, these have followed developments in the Asia Pacific region and attempt to develop regional structures to address the challenges confronting the region; for instance, the IONS is a near mirror image of the WPNS. However, by all counts, there is a realization among the Indian Ocean countries that cooperation offers the best opportunity for economic growth and development of the region and the Asia Pacific region offers a good model.

The engagements through a 'pan-maritime Pacific-Asia-Africa' conceptualization such as the Indo-Pacific would require additional diplomatic and human capital. It may lead to 'crowding of conversations' which could undermine existing initiatives in the Asia Pacific region and the Indian Ocean. There are also issues relating to the requirements of a secretariat, leadership role, socialization of existing multilateral institutions under one umbrella, to name a few. It may result in the existing 'thick soup' turning into a 'thin gruel'. Further, it is useful to keep in mind that in a multi polar world, each region and its grouping confront different challenges, but at the same time 'their interests often converge without being allies or diverge without being adversaries'.

To summarize, the existing maritime cooperative initiatives in the Asia Pacific region and the Indian Ocean have played an important role and are successful models of cooperation. There is a realization of the relevance and importance of multinational naval cooperation which is visible in their foreign policy. Common security concerns are being addressed through the prism of maritime partnerships which is a good and successful paradigm for invigorating security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region.

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