

Opportunities and Challenges in the Indo - Pacific Region and Structure to Enhance Maritime Cooperation and Partnership in the Region



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The term Indo-Pacific, has in recent years, moved decisively from its origins in bio-geography to the realms of geopolitics, and today, the Indo-Pacific Region, which is essentially a confluence of two oceans has emerged as the world's economic and strategic centre of gravity in the maritime domain.

India and Sri Lanka are two closest maritime neighbours with a natural outflow towards the seas and the waters around our countries have been the vortex of intense maritime activity over centuries.

India and Sri Lanka have a prominent location in the Indian Ocean Region as the countries sit astride busy sea lines of communication, over which nearly 1,20,000 ships transit every year carrying 66% the world's oil, 50% of the world's container traffic and 33% of the world's cargo traffic. The Indian Ocean is the third largest water body spanning an area of 68.5 million sq km and the countries on the rim of the Indian Ocean are home to nearly one-third of humanity. When we add the 35 countries of the Asia Pacific Rim, then the entire Indo-Pacific Region is home to nearly 60% of the world's population.

Nearly one billion tones oil transit through the Indian Ocean every year and these oil arteries and trade routes lead further East to ASEAN and countries like Japan, South Korea and China. Approximately four trillion US Dollars worth of commercial shipping and energy supplies transit through the South China Sea every year.

As primarily an Island nation, the seas have been an integral part of Sri Lanka's economic growth and indeed its social fabric and the Indo-Pacific Region holds the key to prosperity and well-being of both India and Sri Lanka in the 21st century. India too has vast maritime interests, which have a vital relationship with the nation's economic growth. In recent years, there has been an impetus by the Government to promote cooperation, security and stability in the neighborhood through open, transparent and inclusive capacity building and capability enhancement initiatives.

In addition, the personal interaction at the highest levels of leadership has helped to reinvigorate the relationship between our two countries. The current environment, therefore, provides a window of opportunity to enhance cooperation and partnership across the entire maritime spectrum between India and Sri Lanka.

The seas are no longer a benign medium and globalization has led to vulnerability of the oceans. The threats and challenges on the waters of the Indo-Pacific Region range from persistent asymmetric and non-traditional threats like Piracy and Maritime terrorism to arms trafficking, drug smuggling, human trafficking and poaching.

Another challenge on the waters of the Indo-Pacific is that indiscriminate pollution of the seas has had a detrimental impact of climate change on the oceans. Consequently, a large percentage of extreme climate conditions turn into natural disasters, and this places the Indo-Pacific region virtually in the eye of the storm. Our Navies and Coast Guard have to be ready to provide rapid response for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

The instabilities and turbulence in some parts of the Indo - Pacific Region have the potential to spill over into the maritime domain and the situation can best be described as fragile. Consequently, over 120 warships from nearly 20 navies are always present in the Indian Ocean to safeguard their maritime interests.

India and Sri Lanka have advocated adherence to international law, maintenance and promotion of peace and stability, maritime safety and security, freedom of navigation and overflight in the region. Another aspect of international law, which is a matter of concern, is that high seas, which cover nearly 50% of the Earth's surface, are one of the least protected areas on the planet and there is no internationally binding treaty for legislation of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction.

This lack of legal framework was addressed by the United Nations General Assembly in 2004 and an Adhoc Informal Working Group constituted to address the issue. The Working Group has held several meetings over the years and in the meeting at New York in 2015, it recommended developing an Internationally Legally Binding Instrument (ILBI). The draft text of this ILBI has been submitted to the UN General Assembly in July 2017. At this point, therefore, it can best be described as work in progress.

During his keynote address at the Shangri La Dialogue in June this year, Prime Minister Narendra Modi made three important statements relevant to rules based order and adherence to international law, as outlined in succeeding paragraphs.

First, India believes that there is a need to evolve a common rules based order for the region. This should apply equally to individual nations as well as the Global Commons. Such an order must believe in sovereignty and territorial integrity as well as equality of all nations. These rules and norms should be based on 'consent of all and not the power of a few'. He also conveyed that when nations make international commitments, they must uphold them.

Second, we should all have equal access and rights under the international law and freedom of navigation to the use of common spaces at sea and in the air. We should resort to peaceful settlement of disputes in accordance with international law. When we all agree to live by that code, our sea lanes will be pathways to prosperity and corridors of peace.

Third, India will promote a democratic rules based international order, in which all nations, big and small, thrive as equals. To achieve this, India will engage the world in peace, with respect, through Dialogue and absolute commitment to international law.

The Indian Navy and the Sri Lankan Navy have a vibrant and comprehensive naval cooperation. Our Navy to Navy interaction is firmly anchored on our shared understanding of challenges and opportunities in the Indo-Pacific Region and extensive service to service linkage.

Our bi-lateral naval exercises SLINEX has been expanded both in scope and content and its latest edition was conducted just last month. The Coast Guards of India, Sri Lanka and Maldives regularly conduct Trilateral exercise DOSTI to foster friendship and cooperation.

Realising the potential for shared maritime security in the region, India, Sri Lanka and Maldives signed a tripartite maritime security agreement in 2013 for joint cooperation in EEZ surveillance, maritime SAR, anti-piracy efforts and sharing of white shipping information for developing the Maritime Domain Awareness. This agreement needs to be operationalised to its full potential to ensure effective surveillance and enhancing of Maritime Domain Awareness in our waters.

Sri Lanka Navy is a regular participant along with other navies of the region in the MILAN Series of operational interaction held every two years in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands, to facilitate maritime cooperation among navies.

In 2008, the Indian Navy launched a unique initiative, Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), which today provides an effective template to address common challenges and enhance cooperation among navies of the Indian Ocean Region. The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) is another maritime construct for strengthening maritime cooperation among countries of the Region. India and Sri Lanka have made significant contribution towards promoting maritime cooperation as member of IONS and IORA.

The International Fleet Review conducted by the Indian Navy at Visakhapatnam in February 2016, provided yet another opportunity to promote maritime cooperation. 50 navies of the world, including the Sri Lankan Navy, came together 'to build bridges of friendship' and the theme of the Fleet Review was, that we may be separated by geography but we are certainly 'united through the oceans'.

Speaking at the International Fleet Review, the Hon'ble Prime Minister of India, outlined his vision for the Indian Ocean as SAGAR, which means the 'Ocean' and the acronym stands for 'Security and Growth for all in the Region'. In recent years, there have been significant initiatives

for development in the maritime domain in India, including the quest to harness the Blue Economy. These initiatives, along with the transition from 'Look East' to the 'Act East' policy have opened up avenues for partnerships in the maritime domain with our littoral neighbours in the Bay of Bengal and countries of the ASEAN to harness the Blue Economy.

The Indo-Pacific is a functional region, in which we encounter a heady mix of maritime connectivity, collaboration, cooperation and competition.

In order to promote maritime cooperation across the Indo-Pacific region, there is a need to examine the connectivity options and existing maritime structures. In addition to the Belt and Road initiative, the connectivity options recommended in the Indo-Pacific Region, range from the International North-South Transit corridor (NSTC), the Asia Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC), Project MAUSAM, which is an initiative by the Indian Ministry of Culture for Connectivity between people and cultures of the region, The Free and Open Indo-Pacific Concept and SAGAR, which stands for 'Security and Growth for all in the Region'.

As far as existing maritime structures are concerned in the Indian Ocean, at the conceptual level we have the SAGAR Concept, which is Hon'ble Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi's vision for the Indian Ocean, which is extendable to the Indo-Pacific Region. At the political level we have the IORA, the Indian Ocean Rim Association. At the execution level, we have the IONS, the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium.

In the Asia Pacific Region, at the conceptual level, we have the ASEAN Regional Forum, at the Political level we have the ADDM Plus and East Asia Summit and at the execution level of the navies, we have the Western Pacific Naval Symposium. When we consider the Indo-Pacific as a contiguous maritime space, then the existing maritime structures such as the IONS and the WPNS could provide avenues for examining

common areas of concern and provide synergy to enhance maritime cooperation across the Indo-Pacific Region.

The waters of the Indo-Pacific Region have emerged as global economic highways, and the maritime interests of the countries of the region are linked to unfettered flow of oil and trade.

Another unique feature of the Indian Ocean Region is that 80% of the oil and trade that emanates in the Indian Ocean Region is extra regional in nature. This implies that if there is an impediment to the free flow of oil or trade, it would have a detrimental impact not just on the economies of the region but the global economy as well. Safety, security, and stability on the waters of the Indo-Pacific Region is, therefore, of paramount importance as the security of the global commons is a collective responsibility.

In conclusion I would like to highlight three major take aways.

In order to fully implement the Hon'ble Prime Minister's vision of SAGAR, that is Security and Growth for all in the Region, we need to draw up a detailed road map for maritime security and cooperation, with a whole of Government approach, between India and countries of the region to shape a positive and favourable environment across the Indo-Pacific Region.

The oceans are common heritage of mankind and there is a need to respect the international law and ensure safety, security, and freedom of navigation in the Global commons. Therefore, the current international efforts towards strengthening the ocean Governance and regulating the Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction need to be actively supported. The countries of the region also need to work together to evolve a rules based international order for the Region.

The Indo-Pacific has emerged as a contiguous maritime space with common opportunities and challenges and there is a need for greater maritime cooperation across the regional commons. I would like to recommend greater institutional interaction between IONS and WPNS to address common concerns and challenges and provide synergy for greater maritime cooperation across the Indo-Pacific region.

The seas around us are gaining new found importance as each day goes by and I have no doubt that the current century is the century of the seas. The Indo-Pacific is in the throes of maritime change of an order and magnitude and complexity that no one could have imagined a few decades ago. In order to maintain peace, stability and promote prosperity, networking between navies and partnership for prosperity between countries of the Indo-Pacific Region need to be strengthened in the coming years.