

Regional Maritime Issues, Can the Indian Ocean be Collaboratively Managed?



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Can the Indian Ocean be Collaboratively Managed?

- The Hypothesis: Collaboration could not be fully achieved in IOR, as long as there is a great power politics that enhance the geopolitical and geostrategic struggles in the region.
- This is viewed through the lens of neo-realism, where the structural defects would eventually make efforts for collaboration/cooperation impossible.
- In arguing this, we need to understand the features of the IOR and determined factors that would affect the argument.

Background

Geographically :

- Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has unique characteristics compared to other oceanic regions.
- It is the third largest of the world's five oceans, after the Pacific and the Atlantic Ocean.
- It has four critically imperative waterways chokepoints to and from, which are the Suez Canal (Egypt), Bab el Mandeb (Djibouti-Yemen), Strait of Hormuz (Iran-Oman), and Strait of Malacca (Indonesia-Malaysia).

- It covers an area of 68.556 million sq km, which includes amongst others, the Andaman Sea, Arabian Sea, Bay of Bengal, Flores Sea, Great Australian Bight, Gulf of Aden, Gulf of Oman, Java Sea, Mozambique Channel, Persian Gulf, Red Sea, Savu Sea, Strait of Malacca and Timor Sea.
- By comparison, it consists of an area that is almost 7 times the size of the United States. Bordering this ocean and the states around it is the 66,526 km coastlines.
- In a nutshell, it covers 30% of the global ocean area home to 30% of the world's population and 30% of the world's coral reef cover.

Economically:

- This ocean hosts abundant of natural resources of oil and gas fields, fish, shrimp, sand and gravel aggregates, placer deposits and poly-metallic nodules.
- It also provide various major sea routes that connects the Middle East, Africa, and East Asia with Europe and the Americas. A particular heavy traffic that carries petroleum and petroleum products from the oilfields of the Persian Gulf and the eastern Asian states goes through it and its bountiful resources of

seafood has provided its bordering countries with its domestic consumption and export.

- Due to this, fishing fleets especially from Russia, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan have also come in droves to exploit its resources, mainly for shrimp and tuna.
- Besides this, an estimated 40% of the world's offshore oil production comes from the Indian Ocean. Large reserves of hydrocarbons are being tapped in the offshore areas of Saudi Arabia, Iran, India, and western Australia. Beach sands rich in heavy minerals and offshore placer deposits are actively exploited by bordering countries, particularly India, South Africa, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and Thailand.
- A considerable share of the total global marine economic value may be originating from the Indian Ocean.

Feature:

The main governance feature of IOR in relation to its geographic and economic (resources) factors:

- Due to its fluid nature, governance in IOR is difficult.
 - 40 plus states border this ocean region. All of these states with diverse interests and capabilities shared all of these ocean resources.
 - Not all of them however have the same level of technology or expertise when it comes to extraction and utilization of the resources. Moreover, most of these states are in the “developing economies” statuses. It comes as a “catch 22” nature for many of these states when it comes to developments of resources in IOR, let alone enforcement.
 - This calls for aids from the states with “money”, as it would bank in the development whilst domestic resources would roll the day-to-day need.
 - On top of this, the megatrends of socio-economic changes in IOR are pressuring these resource base. Especially on fisheries and

minerals which have been identified to be the most commercially viable industries in IOR. The growing populations in IOR, due to the rising of regional middle class, the increase in regional coastal densities and the extension of cities in the regional states are key factors contributing to this pressure.

- This has resulted in uncontrolled development and unsustainable use of resources around the ocean is rapidly becoming a challenge to be addressed. This also requires help from states with “money” (especially for states that struggles to enforce the law).
- Besides this, the resources of IOR have not just attracts the bordering states, in exploiting the abundant resources that it has, have and also attracted various maritime issues within its neighbouring region and hence internationally.
- This is most evident in the geostrategic struggle at the systemic level in the great power politics.
- It is the most pressing structural issue when it comes to the issue of collaboration in the region. Factor (affecting the feature): Great Power Politics (China Belt and Road Initiative and US’ Indo-Pacific strategy)
- These two grand strategies do not compliment each other, but rather have been perceived (by one another) as having a collision course with each other.
- The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). India fears BRI in the form of CPEC, could has an impact on its margins of both land and maritime Asia. This project has challenged its hypothetical perception that it dominates IOR and has been using it is its economic and military maritime front yard.
- This is the major issue. The perceived status-quo change in the region. Where Pakistan is being perceived as a revisionist by India.
- All is due to the China’s BRI projects that expanded in the region (i.e. Pakistan’s Gwadar Port and Sri Lanka’s Hambantota Port) has

been viewed as initiatives that would bypassed the regional economic maritime dominance of India.

- Due to these great power politics of US and China, the sub-regional struggle between India and Pakistan continued to be enhanced.
- India is investing more in its conventional and strategic military capabilities and starts to “Act East” (which is their current policy), in order to expand its influence further into South China Sea. The US is leveraging on this strategic opportunity, to compete against China’s growing influence in the region. E.g. India is one of the Quad states in their strategic Indo-Pacific plan.
- Pakistan in turn, by continuing CPEC, has chosen the path (with the intention to supersede/ overtake the regional status-quo) to become the regional economic and maritime power. By doing so, this would meant that Pakistan will need a larger naval presence in IOR (it needed more naval assets for the protection of the sea lanes to Gwadar port).
- While China would be in the region to safeguard its own interests, Pakistan, would also need to build its conventional and strategic naval muscle proportionately.

● This sub-regional Thucydides Trap would eventually be the centre of the issue that would deter true collaborations.

- In ensuring the success of BRI, China has already entered into the IOR. Since their first dispatch of flotilla for UNSC-mandated anti piracy operations in GOA in 2008, China has sent 25 escort missions to IOR.
- On top of this, Australia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, South Africa, France and the United Kingdom were all vying for a role to play in the region. Even when it comes in varying degrees, the ocean’s demography will be going to become very crowded. Some will be more active than the others.
- Surrounding states (the ones with varies degree of economic growth) would eventually bandwagon, hedge or balance against/with these great power politics and sub-regional struggle.
- The Balance of Power would subsequently overthrow the rationality for true practical collaboration in the region.
- Consequently, due to the great power politics and sub-regional power struggle, real collaboration in the region between states could not be fully achieved.