

Solving Maritime Disputes to Establish Partnerships: the Case of the Western Indian Ocean

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Good day. Let me express my thanks to the Vice Admiral and the Sri Lankan Navy for the honor of being invited to this Dialogue. It is a privilege to be able to join so many distinguished colleagues and hear your thoughts on advancing maritime security in the Indian Ocean Region. I am Jeffrey Payne of the Near East South Asia (NESAs) Center for Strategic Studies located in Washington, DC. As a research institution for the United States Department of Defense, the NESAs Center focuses on a wide and diverse area that ranges from Morocco in the west to Bangladesh in the east. My colleagues and I at the NESAs Center spend considerable time looking at the security challenges facing the littoral states of the Indian Ocean Region and working with our regional colleagues to develop effective solutions to these challenges. In the spirit of this year's theme – Fostering Strategic Maritime Partnerships – I will discuss lessons from the western Indian Ocean Region that I believe are of relevance to our aims. Specifically, I want to discuss the western straits of the Indian Ocean and how the security dynamics of this maritime area provides means by which partnerships can emerge to counter shared threats and even overcome maritime disputes.

In our interconnected world, threats are no longer “local”. More so than ever, events that transpire half a world away can have an immediate impact upon our security. If you add in the complexities of cyber security, the unforeseen results of technological innovation, climate change, rapid urbanization, and energy and natural resource scarcity, it then becomes clear that the best option we all have for finding solutions to pressing problems is cooperative action. Those whose business is maritime security have an advantage though. The maritime domain, by its very nature as the global commons, offers help for finding commonality, developing coordination, and, eventually, achieving true and lasting cooperation. The coastlines that lead to the blue waters of the oceans have long provided us sustenance, economic opportunity, and greater ease in transport. Our maritime traditions have long codified the provision of aid to those in danger on the seas. We have developed methodologies and institutions to assist our neighbors in time of crisis through the provision of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. In

¹ The views expressed in these remarks are solely of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the NESAs Center, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.

other words, cooperation is a central feature of maritime life and a prominent tradition among many of the world's navies.

Yet, we must go further. Two particularly worrisome threats that exist in today's world are the direct and indirect impacts of illicit networks and violent extremism, both of which are threats posed most often by non-state actors. Illicit networks, which encompass a variety of criminal enterprises connected by a type of social network, operate without respect for or adherence to internal or international boundaries. Smuggling, human trafficking, illegal arms, and piracy are expressions for such networks. These criminal enterprises exploit the ungoverned regions of our planet to complicate the work of security forces. Violent extremism, while often using illicit networks to achieve aims, is a distinct type of threat that emerges through political messaging, perceptions of hopelessness, a lack of trust in government institutions, and various forms of social push/pull factors. Violent extremism is a recognized and ongoing threat throughout the world. On the waters of the western Indian Ocean, a pattern of cooperation exists that is optimally positioned to help counter the dangers of illicit networks and violent extremism. I argue that what can be an effective model in this part of the Indian Ocean can serve as a model elsewhere.

The Strategic Space and Security Challenges

The Indian Ocean is one of the world's great commercial pathways. Over 50% of all maritime trade flows through it, including a substantial percentage of global supplies of liquefied natural gas, petroleum, and machined parts, among others. The Indian Ocean remains the most efficient connector for rising economies of East Asia to reach the established markets of Europe. States in Africa, South Asia, and elsewhere are quickly becoming promising economic engines in their own right through natural resource development, technology, and manufacturing. For those of us who work on security issues, the economic importance of a region translates into strategic importance. Adding in that parts of Indian Ocean littoral are seized by conflict, at risk to climate and natural disasters, and are home to a rising percentage of humanity, it becomes clear that events in this region will impact the world in notable ways.

There are more naval vessels in these waters than ever before. Non-regional powers have likewise developed deeper footprints throughout the region than in years past. In short, there is global recognition of this region's value and to ignore the events that take place here is to remain disconnected from a region on the rise. As a reflection of this process, the waters of the Indian Ocean are regularly tied to

the waters of the western Pacific Ocean in what is called the Indo-Asia Pacific. This concept recognizes that the future of maritime Asia is tied together through commerce, but also that an increasing share of global political power is held among the Asian states. The Indo-Pacific is in part a reflection of both the rise of India and of China as major global actors. It is recognition of the geostrategic importance of states like Australia, Singapore, Djibouti, Oman, Iran, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines.

In this strategically important region there exist a range of security concerns created by non-state actors that we all must confront. These threats are both immediate and what we can call “over the horizon” concerns. Some that should be specifically mentioned include:

- Piracy: of particular concern near straits and amidst waters where vessels congregate. Often tied to other elements of organized crime, piracy constitutes a commonly seen component of illicit networks.
- Smuggling: a continuous concern of all states and international organizations, but the impact is most severely felt and most destabilizing inside economically weakened territories where smugglers can undercut legitimate economic enterprise. As with piracy, smuggling can be classified as a feature of illicit networks.
- Illegal Arms: of concern in areas within or in proximity to active conflict zones. In the context of the Indian Ocean, this is a particular pernicious problem in North Africa and throughout the Levant. A node of illicit networks.
- Drug Trafficking: narcotics and other illegal substances create the most friction near state borders, where transport contributes to corruption and undermines trust between states. Drug trafficking is a rising problem throughout North Africa and a lingering problem South and Central Asia.
- Violent Extremism: a global concern, but an imminent problem throughout South Asia, North Africa, East Africa, and the Levant. Violent extremism refers to a range of violent acts intended to alter a political order, including terrorism, sectarianism, and ethnic conflict, among others.

Due to the complex legal, political, and territorial issues that non-state actors impact, the best recourse for addressing the threats presented by such groups is found in multilateral cooperative action. Maritime cooperation has without a doubt matured over the past several decades, but there is still a great deal of work left. Humanitarian assistance/disaster relief has been a hallmark of successful cooperative effort, especially within the Indian Ocean Region. Joint exercises and multilateral engagements focusing on maritime law enforcement, human trafficking, and counterpiracy are further successful examples. Yet, there remain numerous conditions that do undercut cooperative action.

It is no secret that interregional trade remains a persistent problem throughout South Asia, serving to reinforce a lack of political trust amongst the region's states. In the western Asia-Pacific, longstanding regional security concerns and intensified territorial disputes have led to a noticeable uptick in tensions. In the waters of the western Indian Ocean, regional rivalry and the emergence of ungoverned spaces has created barriers for mutual trust and stretched the security capacity of many states. The Indian Ocean Region is amidst a period of change and change inevitably brings with it some elements of instability and even conflict. Cooperation is challenging in such an environment.

It is my view that the waters of the western Indian Ocean should be a target for enhancing multilateral cooperation precisely because the region is changing. Fewer political barriers exist there than in other parts of maritime Asia. With a list of rising economies and much of the world's energy supply emerging from or being transported through this region, stability becomes essential to us all. Furthermore, there are concentrations of illicit networks and incidents of violent extremism present within the Horn of Africa, Arabian Peninsula, Levant, and North Africa/Maghreb. Such actors are widely seen as threats and encourage us to act.

The Challenges in the Western Indian Ocean

Instability and conflict inevitably attract bad actors. This is unfortunately proven true among several of the littoral states of the western Indian Ocean. Somalia remains besieged by substantial challenges that began 25 years ago during the start of the country's civil war. Violent factionalism remains, legitimate economic activity continues to be challenging for many communities, and illicit networks remain active, particularly in coastal communities. Al-Shabaab, the al-Qaeda affiliated terrorist organization, emerged out of the civil conflict to become a major

source of instability and a leading cause of radicalization throughout the Horn region.

The ongoing conflict between government-aligned forces and Houthi forces in Yemen has impacted both the Arabian Peninsula and maritime security in the Red Sea. The war has devastated the country and drawn in other regional powers, making the war in Yemen part of larger regional competitions. The cessation of government authority of any form in much of the country's southeastern reaches has allowed al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) to become larger and gain control over greater swaths of territory. The lack of government control along the coasts has facilitated illicit networks. Smuggling has expanded considerably, attacks at sea by violent extremists are occurring, and incidents of piracy are increasing.

ISIS, or Daesh, took advantage of the Syrian civil war and ongoing sectarian political divisions in Iraq to fuel its expansion and become a substantial security threat for the entirety of the Levant. Territory controlled by Daesh also facilitated the growth of smuggling. While Daesh is suffering consistent territorial losses from its high point in 2015, the dangers it represents has led to the establishment of a 60-nation strong coalition to counter Daesh, increased concerns over border security throughout the Levant, and worries over the prospect of radical returnees.

There are further examples that I could mention, but each of these three cases has measurable, negative impacts on maritime security that are sometimes overlooked. The emergence of Somalia piracy became a global issue that in turn inspired several multilateral efforts to counter the threat. By any measure, that threat is considerably less a concern today than it was 7 or 8 years ago. Yet, maritime concerns continue due to the existence of illicit networks that use ungoverned territorial waters to engage in activities and the continued power of Al-Shabaab. The October 2016 attempted missile strikes against the USS Mason was evidence of how the conflict in Yemen can spread and increase security worries along one of the world's most used sea lines of communication. Daesh's recent losses in Iraq and Syria are a positive development, but it reveals the importance of the following question – what happens after Daesh is driven out of the Levant? Daesh's membership is made up of fighters from many countries that could move to a new location to “carry on the fight” or return to their home countries to engage in acts of terror. For many of us in this room, maritime security forces are an irreplaceable source for effective monitoring, securing national interests, and providing a firewall for the spread of threats. In the western Indian Ocean, a primary threat comes from non-state actors. Given that we all have a stake in this

part of the world and that we all recognize the need to respond to the threat, it provides a platform for us to expand cooperation.

The Model

The western Indian Ocean is the location of two existing examples of successful multilateral cooperation: Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) and various anti-piracy operations near the Horn of Africa. CMF began in 2002 with a mandate to conduct maritime security operations in proximity to the Arabian Sea. Today, 31 sovereign states participate in CMF, which is headquartered in Bahrain at the home port of the United States' 5th Fleet. Three distinct task forces operate under the CMF banner: Combined Task Force (CTF) 150 conducts operations relating to counterterrorism operations in an Area of Responsibility that includes the Arabian Sea, Red Sea, and the Gulf of Aden, among others, CTF 151 is charged with counter-piracy operations throughout much of the western Indian Ocean, and finally, CTF152 covers the Gulf of Basra and any maritime security issues that emerge therein.

CMF has grown considerably since its founding and beyond its history of successful operations, serves as a valuable resource for professional interaction and advanced training for participating naval units. CMF has also become a resource for commercial sailing vessels in the waters of the western Indian Ocean. CTF 150, the oldest within CMF, has established itself as an effective maritime partnership for counterterrorism monitoring, interdiction of terrorist resources, and ensuring freedom of navigation for civilian vessels. CTF 150 is the most diverse task force in terms of both mission and membership. For this reason, it serves as the strongest example out of CMF that should be emulated.

The second notable source of multilateral cooperation comes in the form of the successful international effort to mitigate the impact of pirate crews operating in the waters near the Horn of Africa. By 2008, piracy had become a very profitable enterprise, especially in Somalia. The lack of a functioning government in Somalia and the proximity of major sea lines of communication contributed to an explosion of attempted vessel hijackings. With trade interrupted and increased danger to individuals sailing in these waters, many states around the world took interest in addressing the problem. Initial steps were taken to lessen the direct threat against civilian vessels through increased patrols by naval vessels of various countries, greater coordination between military units and civilian vessels, and increased engagement and information sharing among present military personnel.

This lessened the threat, but progress at sea had to be matched by progress on land. One of the primary motivators for piracy was the lack of legitimate economic options for individuals. The collapse of the Somalian government in particular led to a massive increase in illegal fishing, illegal dumping, and other criminal behavior by non-Somalians. This specifically drove fisherman out of business. Thus, while security improved at sea, peacekeeping forces of the African Union made progress on land, a provisional government was able to restore order in some parts of the country, and the ability to engage in legal economic activity was improved.

Cooperation between naval forces took several forms, including the creation of the CTF 151, which was specifically organized around a mandate to combat piracy. Operation Atalanta remains active near the Gulf of Aden and is the first sustained European Union Naval Force operation. Both CTF 151 and Operation Atalanta coordinate with NATO's Operation Open Shield that centers on an anti-piracy mission. Outside of these multilateral missions, Japan's Maritime Self Defense Forces engaged in escort operations, the Indian Navy performed escort operations and anti-piracy patrols, and China's People's Liberation Army Navy engaged in escort missions and anti-piracy operations. Countries that did not join one of the larger multilateral operations were still part of a communicative chain that shared information, engaged in ship-ship exchanges, and regularly coordinated monitoring duties.

Counterpiracy missions and CMF's operations reveal the extent by which cooperation can be built when shared purpose exists. What I recommend based on the threats of illicit networks and violent extremism and building upon what is already established are the following:

- Intensified naval exchanges and professional development on the best practices for countering illicit networks and violent extremism. This is the model by which NESA operates when it comes to strategic engagements with colleagues throughout North Africa, the Levant, the Gulf, Central Asia, and South Asia. Bring together policymakers, officers, strategists, and others so that best practices can be communicated and regionally-driven solutions to problems can be recognized.
- Develop and intensify multilateral joint force engagements to discuss violent extremism and illicit networks. These threats have both maritime and land-based elements and too often efforts to combat them are disrupted by cleavages between maritime and land-based security forces. As example,

the ongoing threats posed by Al-Shabaab impact regional coast guards, naval forces operating in the region, border forces, police forces, and Special Forces operators. The development of deeper and more regular engagements intent on bringing these various security forces together can only enhance capability, vision, and responses. Additionally, such exchanges are instrumental in assisting security sector reforms, a much needed activity in many states.

- Whole of government approaches – this in my view is absolutely essential for countering these threats. Security is not merely the responsibility of militaries, police forces, and other security elements – it is the responsibility of all elements of government to develop diverse and effective approaches to counter threats. Inter-government cooperation is a problem for all states, no matter location or level of development. A lack of coordination can lead to cookie cutter responses to evolving threats – the problem of seeing all threats as nails when all you have is a hammer. A whole of government approach also means integrating the views and experiences of civilian groups, NGOs, and civil society who often have better evidence of how threats materialize and interesting methodologies by which we can enhance strategy. Cooperation between nations on the topic of whole of government improvements is increasing, but there has not been the same degree of interest as it pertains to maritime threats. This should change.

Conclusion

Illicit networks and violent extremism represent threats that we all face to some degree. As such, there is a lower barrier for building more advanced forms of multilateral cooperation to counter these threats. The success of counterpiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden and the continued success of CMF provide us an organizational model. The method of cooperative action must bridge land and sea, integrate diverse voices, and increase our familiarity with one another, while highlighting best methods for operations.

In the western Indian Ocean, countering violent extremism and degrading illicit networks is becoming a focus of cooperation between states. If we can further progress and integrate aspects like whole of government approaches, then all actors and organizations seeking to counter these particular threats will be better positioned for long-term success.

Further success in the western Indian Ocean can in turn be applied in other regions. The greater frequency by which we cooperate makes us more familiar. Greater familiarity improves the professionalism of our naval units and makes us less likely to misread the intentions of others. Over the long term, efforts taken to counter illicit networks and violent extremism will enhance comprehensive security at sea and provide us greater tools that we can use to address maritime concerns and disputes elsewhere.

Again, it has been my pleasure to attend this dialogue. I thank our gracious hosts and each of you for your attention.