

POWERPLAY IN THE IOR – IMPLICATIONS FOR SECURITY AND ECONOMIC PROSPERITY



Vice Admiral Tarun Sobti, AVSM, VSM Deputy Chief of Naval Staff- Indian Navy

1. The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is witnessing a dynamic transformation in its geopolitical landscape, marked by intensified powerplay among global and regional actors. It is accentuated not only because of presence of multiple power-centers, but also because of non-traditional challenges, such as climate change.

2. In order to holistically comprehend the implications of this power play, the paper intends to utilise four underlying elements of this Region – **GIST**, encompassing **G** – Geography; **I** – International Relations; **S** – Security; and **T** – Trade and Economics.

Geography

3. The Indian Ocean Region has remained an expression or idea that defines the contemporary geo-strategic world - with India being privileged to be at the core of this defining idea of present times. The Region's pre-dominant characteristic is its primarily 'maritime orientation'. The Indian Ocean,

through which much of the world's shipping transits, is distinguished by a land rim on three sides, with maritime access to the region possible only through certain 'choke points' leading to and from the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal, and from the southern Indian Ocean.

4. Not just trade, this Region is also the world's most bio-diverse area. It is owing to these natural and human resources, along with its unique maritime geography, that the Region has, and will continue, to drive global growth and prosperity.

5. But this growth comes with a caveat. Contrary to land, the oceans are largely uncontrolled, un-owned and ungoverned, and unregulated. These characteristics, in turn, contribute to the maritime domain of the IOR being free for all to access, navigate and utilise in pursuit of respective interests. It also provides unfettered reach and access to nation states and, therefore, are a medium of choice for power projection – and inevitably competition.

International Relations

6. To be able to clearly understand the ongoing competition and suggest measures towards managing it, there is a need to be cognizant of the evolving nature of International Relations in the Region.

7. International relations in the IOR have increasingly become complex, as cooperation and competition co-exist. This Cooperation and Competition is accompanied by a third C – ‘Centrality’. We are witnessing a return of great power competition, making this resource rich region an arena for jostling between states for influence, resources, markets, and energy among others. This jostling threatens overall security calculus in the Region, including maritime security.

Security

8. The reshaping of global competition is altering the geo-strategic equations and thereby, affecting the prevailing security environment - characterised by a multitude of conventional and unconventional threats.

9. The conventional challenges of military aggression have and will continue to exist in the maritime domain. In addition, the unconventional challenges such as disputes of jurisdiction, Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) monitoring, offshore defence, transit rights, piracy and armed robbery at sea, maritime terrorism, humanitarian crises necessitating Non-Combatant Evacuation Operations (NEO), trafficking/ smuggling, Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing (IUU), proliferation of Private Armed Security and climate change, make the maritime security matrix further complicated.

10. As many Indian Ocean littorals do not have the requisite capability and capacity to counter these threats, they are unable to meet their maritime security needs. Additionally, this Region, being the most militarised region in the world, further exacerbates the probability of the ongoing competition

becoming a conflict. Owing to the increased presence of multi-national forces in the IOR, and differing interpretations of international laws, there is this fear that the Region’s ‘Global Commons’ can change to ‘Contested Seas’.

Trade and Economics

11. Closely linked to the security, is prosperity, or in other words, Trade and Economics – the **T of GIST**. The Indian Ocean accounts for the transportation of the highest tonnage of goods in the world, with almost 120,000 ships transiting its expanse annually. On its waters are carried two-thirds of the world's oil shipments, one-third of bulk cargo traffic and half the world's container shipments.

12. Another factor that distinguishes the Indian Ocean from the Atlantic and Pacific oceans is the pattern of trade. Of the total trade conducted over the Indian Ocean, only 20 percent is conducted between the littoral countries of the region, whilst 80 per cent is extra-regional. In the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, this pattern is just the reverse. This exemplifies the importance of the Indian Ocean to extra regional powers and explains their presence in the area.

13. With seas as the lifelines of global trade and prosperity, most nations within - and beyond - the IOR have a core interest in keeping the region free for commerce. Given the maritime orientation of IOR, Navies will naturally play an important role in providing an overarching security umbrella.

Adding VALUE – an Imperative for IOR Navies

14. IOR Navies, through sustained presence and credible responses, as well as cooperation and collaboration with each other, must add **VALUE** to the IOR, both figuratively and literally:-

V - Vision

A - Assurance and Trust

L - Leveraging Competencies

U - United Force

E - Engagements

15. The overarching outlook should be towards finding **regional solutions to regional problems** through cooperation. The approach towards addressing regional problems should be aimed at expanding the ambit of engagements to free flow of ideas, experiences, information exchange, organisational culture, and best practices. This will further harmonise collective endeavours in the IOR, adding more **VALUE** to the efforts of like-minded states in the IOR.