

Enhancing Maritime Visibility through International Security Cooperation: a Critical Look at the Indian Ocean Region



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Good day. Let me express my thanks to the Commander of the Sri Lankan Navy and the government of Sri Lanka for the honor of inviting me to the Galle Dialogue. It is a privilege to be here among this excellent company. In the spirit of this year's theme, Greater Maritime Visibility for Enhanced Maritime Security, I would like to center my comments on the challenge of capacity building in the Indian Ocean Region. Specifically, how we can leverage our strengths for cooperative action to address gaps in our vision and counter emerging threats in the region.

Everyone is well aware of the importance of the Indian Ocean. Geopolitical stability is increasingly dependent on the health of IOR littoral states and the Indian Ocean itself is both a source of growing economic opportunity and a key conduit for global trade. Amidst this dynamic region are serious threats to shared security: violent extremist organizations, illicit networks/trafficking, incursions on maritime sovereignty (illegal fishing), and the potential for interstate conflict in several littoral zones, among others. The sheer size of the IOR is daunting and makes

for a complex strategic setting for any state to navigate.

Today's reality is that maritime forces in much of the world find themselves in situations where the scale of land-based threats overshadows the needs of navies and coast guards. Competition for constrained budget allocations, evolving or emerging threats, and the inability to impact the strategic space constitute the overarching challenge that maritime forces must address in the IOR. An effective remedy to this challenge is to expand the capability of maritime forces through collective effort. We have to work together because security today cannot be achieved alone.

The Strategic Space

The Indian Ocean strategic space is defined by its complex blend of opportunity and risk. On the one hand, maritime regional security architecture has evolved by leaps and bounds over the past decade. Institutions like Combined Maritime Forces have matured in their operations and done an effective job at addressing

¹ The Near East South Asia (NESA) Center for Strategic Studies is a United States Department of Defense research and executive education Center with an area of responsibility that covers North Africa, the Levant, the Gulf, Central Asia, and South Asia. Headquartered in Washington, DC on the campus of the National Defense University, the NESA Center runs over 60 engagements a year on security and strategic topics. The views expressed in these remarks are solely of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the NESA Center, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.

ongoing threats in the western Indian Ocean. Joint training and maritime exercises like Malabar have expanded familiarity among regional naval forces and refined operational capacity on a host of security topics. HA/DR cooperation has been intensified both due to a recognition of the shared interest all regional states have in responding to crises, but also because of the hard lessons learned from past disasters. Greater military-military engagement has in turn fostered greater willingness to engage on sensitive security topics. These successes should be celebrated, but they are only the start of the work needed to address over the horizon concerns.

Some of the security challenges we shall inevitably face in the future include:

- Piracy: Emerging out of instability on land, this threat principally endangers commercial and private sea traffic. Cooperative counterpiracy operations have a proven continuously successful and new methodologies for private vessels have assisted in alleviating the danger posed by pirates. Yet, continuous vigilance is a necessity and effort must be made to do more to bridge the gap between maritime and land-based efforts. The challenge is levying our resources to eliminate the causes of piracy and not merely to respond to its emergence.
- Smuggling/Illicit Networks: Illegally transporting arms, people, narcotics, and other illicit goods remains a burden for all littoral states in the IOR. Here in Sri Lanka for instance, there has been an uptick of narco-trafficking in the past year. Illegal arms and other illicit goods are being smuggled into ungoverned areas of Yemen, further destabilizing the war-torn country. Illicit networks are most effective in exploiting ungoverned areas where local security forces are either non-existent or otherwise occupied, but they have also proven increasingly capable of exploiting gaps in a stable state's security infrastructure.
- Violent Extremism: a global problem, but an increasing IOR maritime concern due to the ongoing collapse of Daesh and the return of fighters to their home countries.

Smuggling routes are a common means by which such extremists traverse borders and maritime security forces are the initial firewall against extremists dispersing among littoral states.

- Geopolitics: established non-regional powers are seeking to navigate strains on their resources and maintain global reach, while emerging non-regional powers are expanding their overseas operations to better address national interests. Rising IOR states are gaining operational depth that allows them to take on greater security responsibilities. Such changes could increase tensions between states, threaten to undermine established cooperative action, or simply change the manner in which states see the strategic setting due to an expansion of actors.
- Border Issues: As the current situation along the Bangladesh and Myanmar border reveals, state boundaries become flash points for security issues during times of instability. Refugees will inevitably become a larger issue in the near future and put added strain onto naval forces in the IOR by requiring greater concentration of forces at these flash points at the possible expense of other priorities. Further, border regions are often the locale of many gray zone conflicts.

These security concerns are daunting, but the situation should not and need not be seen through a pessimistic lens. The reason we need not be pessimists is simple – regional states of the IOR and the major non-regional powers all recognize the threats. There is widespread agreement that we collectively face a dangerous time that will be marked both by progress and conflict. Compared to other maritime zones, the IOR states have the advantage of simultaneously seeing the horizon in a similar fashion and shared perspective is critical for mapping the future.

The Problem Set

To put it simply – our main impediment for addressing threats is a lack of willingness to recognize the gaps in our vision that impedes necessary cooperative action. The IOR, while a critically important strategic region, suffers from a lack of successful multilateral institutions that positions us for the future. This in turn creates

higher hurdles that shall have to be overcome when seeking cooperative action, even when all potential parties involved recognize the common threat/need. Not only does a lack of multilateralism inevitably facilitate the operations of some of the opponents we face, but it can encourage nation states to exploit such conditions in the future to gain at the expense of others.

Take the Arabian Peninsula, where the states of the region are unfortunately divided. The Saudi Arabia/UAE and Qatar diplomatic row that began this summer has undermined the GCC and severely complicated the relations of many states that have partnered with the five Gulf kingdoms in the past. Adding in the ongoing war in Yemen and other destabilizing trends, there will need to be substantial engagement by all involved parties to overcome current tensions.

The row in the Arabian Peninsula has made Gulf and Arabian Sea maritime security operations more complicated at a time when joint operations are essential. The ongoing crisis in Yemen has facilitated the rise of maritime smuggling lanes between African states and the Arabian Peninsula whereby a variety of illicit goods are transferred and increasing numbers of violent extremists are being smuggled out of the Middle East. The presence of these lanes is known by all involved in regional maritime operations, but overstretched non-regional actors and otherwise-focused regional actors weaken the prospect of addressing this problem.

A divided situation also exists throughout South Asia where ongoing disagreements about burden sharing and concerns about interoperability have created gaps where illegal fishing operations and drug trafficking, for instance, have maintained as regional irritants. Even during a time when transnational threats are direct dangers to the health and stability of South Asian states, the region remains suspicious of joint action or unwilling to leverage the necessary political will to move beyond discussion. This lends to the reputation that South Asia has as a region – a region whose power is underutilized.

China's foray into the IOR has been met with widespread interest. Rising economic interests throughout the region has led to an

increased presence by the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), culminating in the opening of its first overseas military base in Djibouti. China's military investment in the IOR has provided the capability to sustain its vessels for longer periods away from home, to stockpile necessary provisions for overseas operation, and to establish a more comprehensive intelligence gathering apparatus. PLAN's larger wake in the IOR could be a collective addition to regional security, such as already has been the case in the Western IOR where Chinese vessels have assisted in counterpiracy operations. Yet, thus far China has not shown a willingness to lead nor substantially participate in multinational security institutions throughout the region. While it remains true that the PRC prefers bilateral engagement over multilateral, the fact that China shares a common viewpoint on many of the security issue facing the region begs the question of how China can do more.

The United States also can and should do more to deepen multilateral engagement on security issues in the IOR. For the United States, it is about bridging the Say-Do gap. Given the complexities of the Gulf and the ongoing tensions in the Asia-Pacific, it cannot be expected that the United States Navy will have the ability to task vessels to the IOR to the degree that some regional partners may desire. Yet, the United States, through the Department of State and the Department of Defense, does have the capacity to invest manpower and resources towards assisting regional partners in addressing gaps in our maritime vision and tooling to counter new threats. Programs and models employed in other maritime regions can be adapted to match the needs of the IOR. In other words, do more to assist in the process of preparing ourselves and our partners for the future.

As I stated earlier in my remarks, the IOR is not devoid of successful examples of multilateral security cooperation. Nor is the picture for all the various involved national actors a dreary one. Combined Maritime Forces in the western IOR is working to build capacity towards addressing smuggling through work with regional states and other international organizations, such the United Nations. South Asia, while perhaps not as regional integrated as we all hope, uniformly adheres to international standards for maritime

rules – evidenced by the acceptance of all parties regarding rulings of the maritime boundaries in the Bay of Bengal. China, while engaging substantial in the IOR, is still evaluating how it will operate in the Indian Ocean. As time progresses and China's interests in the region diversify, it could be an active participant in security efforts. The United States is doing the work needed to address current threats and investing in preparation for future threats. In fact, Ambassador Keshap here in Sri Lanka is working to invigorate relations and address issues of capacity and strategy.

All engaged actors need to make the effort to expand our vision of the IOR so that we can better map out threats, both present and future. Yet, we must follow up that project with intensified and diversified joint effort for no actor can effectively address all the threats faced alone.

Recommendations on Building Capacity

If current trends hold, the IOR will become even more important for global economic stability than it does today. Simultaneously, our opponents operating in the IOR will find new ways to exploit gaps in our security infrastructure. To address these threats, we must bridge the gaps, but the bridges cannot be built by any single actor. They can only be bridged through collective capacity building efforts. What I recommend as a starting point are the following:

- **Strategic Military Exchanges:** the IOR littoral states have dramatically increased the regularity of military exchanges, but many of these meetings focus on operational capacity. It is without a doubt a net positive for all to continue the trend of more exchanges, with a component of these focused on the elements of strategy. Strategic development will further assist in recognizing the gaps in our vision and in a multilateral framework, strategic conversations and training can assist in developing regional responses to emerging shared threats.

- **Intensified Joint Training:** despite our efforts at building more comprehensive bilateral and multilateral training platforms, we still experience consistent deficiencies in interoperability. To better coordinate as navies, we need trust and that can best be achieved by more exposure in exercise-like environments. Joint training should also include components that seek to address

seam issues in the IOR found along maritime boundaries and within ungoverned territorial waters.

- **Increase Attention towards the Gray Zone:** Efforts at maritime domain awareness should include the potential impact of gray zone conflicts. Such conflicts are to be a consistent threat in the years to come and will test naval forces in new ways. Effective preparation for the gray zone will require both interagency investment within states and more adaptive formulas for cooperation among states.

- **Face the Reality of Resource Scarcity:** Many states in the IOR will face unconventional threats that are difficult to counter. When added to the established responsibilities of maritime forces, addressing unconventional threats will be a difficult task given budget limitations and personnel availability. Navies should invest in the process of developing adaptive force postures as a rule of thumb. In the case of limitations, maritime domain awareness architecture is essential for requesting assistance, whether through equipment, operational knowledge, or intelligence, from partners and allies.

Conclusion

The recommendations provided constitute a means by which to enhance our maritime vision. The IOR is and shall remain a critical region. The importance of the waters of the Indian Ocean translates into there being more to lose from threats that arise. Some threats states will face shall be of a conventional sort, but all too frequently future threats will be unconventional in nature.

To adapt to this emerging security environment, our efforts should be focused on building cooperative maritime capacity. This shall not be a quick, nor easy process, but I content that it is the best methodology by which we can achieve lasting results and greater security. Navies are tasked with greater responsibilities at a time of limited resources. If we wish to overcome the security gaps that exist and be optimally positioned over the horizon, then we need to work together more than ever before.

I thank you for your attention. It has been an honor to be here today and my congratulations to our gracious hosts and to all my fellow attendees for making the Galle Dialogue a success.