

Importance of Increasing Maritime Shared Awareness in the Indian Ocean: An Analytical View on Challenges and Way Forward



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Introduction

The Famous science writer Arthur C Clerk once stated that “How inappropriate it is to call our planet the earth, when clearly it is Ocean”. This evidently showcases the vastness of the ocean. What is important is not only the fact that comes out of this statement, that this planet is more of an ocean than a land space. It gives the students and learners of the maritime domain and professionals concerned about the maritime security, an idea about the enormity of the challenges the Global community faces in securing the seas. When we have the task of predicting the outcomes of different dynamics involved in specific security related issues, we always have to be mindful of the space that we have to deal with. The ocean is a domain that the nature has trusted upon the mankind with great opportunities as well as challenges.

In this vast space of global commons, we face what the most analyst call the 70/80/90 theory. It is very simple but fascinating, almost 2/3 of this beautiful planet of us, which is close to 70%, is covered by water or/and the ocean. 80% of the world’s population lives close to the coast, within the proximity of about 150 Km from the coast. The reasons are quite clear and simple. More urbanization has occurred in areas

close to sea, and therefore more wealth is created close to the coast and vice versa. It highlights the critical importance and relevance of security of the maritime domain towards a nation’s security interests. Globalization, especially during the last four decades, has fueled prosperity (although it has brought many challenges too). This prosperity has been benefitted by the connectivity of trade through the oceans. Further emphasizing this fact, 90% of the world trade is facilitated through the ocean. Whether it is the most critical commodity products, energy supplies, or the industrial or agricultural products, all are traded through the seas in an increasingly connected world due to the rapid globalization that we have experienced in the recent decades.

It is in this context that Asia as a region is experiencing the highest economic growth in the world. Much is talked about that and hence will refrain from dwelling into details. Consequently, the Indian Ocean Region has become a critical ocean space in connecting Asia and the Pacific and the vital link and economic lifeblood of the world’s economic growth. Hence, all of us with all our vigor should strive to contribute to make the ocean around us remains a safe, stable and a peaceful space and a dependable conduit for the benefit of the whole of Indo- Asia-Pacific.

It is commonly accepted that a single country cannot ensure the freedom of the seas; it has to be a collective effort. The adequacy of any region's security architecture is inextricably linked to its security outlook. In that context, my contribution today is underpinned by following, to justify the necessity to enhance the domain awareness and thereby to move towards common objectives for better management of the ocean space.

a. First, the Indian Ocean's unique strategic circumstances and as a major world economic growth center, IOR has become increasingly important in economic and geopolitical terms for countries within the region and beyond.

b. That the need for effective security architecture in the Indian Ocean region has never attracted attention than at present. Also, as the Indian ocean is connected to Atlantic and Pacific, national interests of Atlantic and Pacific countries are intertwined to the IOR and the security aspects needs to be looked through that prism.

c. The notion that the strategic demarcations between the Indian and Pacific oceans are breaking down and a new Indo-Pacific security framework has evolved is gaining prominence. Nevertheless, it is increasingly becoming a necessity to have Security architecture for this region, and that MDA is an integral part and a biding fabric of such a maritime order.

d. The fact that the vastness of the oceans and the resultant challenges makes it mandatory for each nation to work in collaboration is universally accepted. Therefore the need has arisen to continue to work on broadly shared objectives.

Within that framework, I would like to stress that Maritime security is an enduring, multilateral task, which defies easy geographic definition. It is by necessity a collaborative activity, as no nation has the capacity to provide ubiquitous protection for all of its maritime interests.

I think above would lay the foundation of my brief presentation of facts on the topic entrusted to me. The challenges are many and let's start with, "Tyranny of Distance" discussed earlier, which could only be dealt with partnership, cooperation, technology and sharing of Domain awareness. Indian Ocean is the 3rd largest ocean body and occupies 20% of the global ocean space. This ocean is nearly 10,000 kilometers (6,200 mi) wide at the southern tips of Africa and Australia; its area is 73,556,000 square kilometers (28,400,000 mi²), including the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. Therefore, it is not difficult to comprehend the strain on Time, Space and Force, in ensuring maritime security in this region.

Such a vast ocean space provides opportunities and challenges and parallelly demands efficient and prudent management. But Geography makes it difficult to monitor events as they occur and to move assets for expeditious response.

Conceptually, all maritime nations acknowledged that information-sharing is critical for maritime domain awareness, and hence it has become a "common thread championed at various security dialogues and forums".

It is believed that Navies, should, by their action at sea influence events on land. That is the primary aim of nations to commit their blood and treasure to maintain a Naval Force. It is at a huge cost to the nation and smaller nations find it harder since ships are expensive and so are sailors who need multitude of skills and abilities and adoptability to operate in this unique environment. In an era of decreasing defense budgets, all countries will be more judicious in applying limited resources to build partnerships with countries in this vast region.

A robust policy and academic discussion has emerged in many important forums in the recent past about the need to pursue a strategy for an agreed maritime order in the IOR while ensuring greater collaboration and partnership.

The strategically most important aspect in this process would be norms of building partnerships and collaborations. Given the nature

of the projection of power through the maritime domain by regional and global powers, the countries in the IOR including Sri Lanka should be prudent to understand the reality of such power play in building partnerships.

Importantly, multilateral cooperation essentially needs the development of habits of cooperation. These habits and relationships start with mutual understanding and trust and are based on agreed principles to work towards shared objectives. Asia, and even the Asia – Pacific, to a certain extent, is behind Europe or the Atlantic regions in establishing corporative structures and have a long way to go to fully inculcate such habits of corporation.

The Regional Maritime co-operation should include collective efforts on confronting common maritime challenges we face. These could be categorized into four broad areas; traditional challenges; “Between States”, Non Traditional Challenges by Non state actors, Natural Disasters and serious Environmental concerns.

These needs to be confronted through combined operations and Surveillance, Capacity and Capability building initiatives, Humanitarian and Disaster Relief Operations, monitoring of exploitation of Sea bed resources including research and survey, Enforcing regulations against Illegal, Unregulated and unreported (IUU) fishing and improving on Environment protection mechanisms. All these Challenges need greater visibility of the domain to put in place effective counter measures. The relevance of cyber and space is set to dominate the MDA in future and need to be included in any solution.

However, building information sharing networks needs developed technological solutions and such are expensive and are essential to be shared to gain maximum return on investment.

All countries in the IO RIM should become a key player in the region and an important security provider for the Indian Ocean community, to respond to maritime security threats in coastal waters and much farther afield. The region needs to work more closely with each other and develop a new maritime outlook through MDA, in the face

of rapidly changing geopolitical landscape in the Indian Ocean region.

Such an approach will not only bring exclusive military benefits but have overlapping commercial benefits also. The trust and confidence established through good maritime order and partnership will also compliment to regulate exclusive commercial interests like Port operations, Industrial development, Ship building, fishing and tourism and leisure related industries.

The availability of the common operational picture will allow situational awareness. This will enhance the ability to “Sense, Share, and Contribute” to maritime security. Once the common picture is shared by partner nations it will expand the ability to react to events and situations through an institutionalized structure. The assets closer to the situation could respond, thereby shrinking the challenges of ‘Tyranny of Space’. Such initiatives need entering into mutually beneficial agreements and must be pursued without any apprehensions. The habit of cooperation will matter.

Whilst the region progress through the information sharing and networking, same has to be complimented with the right kind of assets, capabilities and understanding of the applicable rule of law in carrying out these operations. This needs training of Human Capital.

Maritime domain awareness is not only sharing the maritime picture to curb illegal activities and/or monitoring of offenders who do not adhere to accepted regulations in the maritime management (of the categories described earlier), it is also about monitoring of exploitation of resources (IUU) and about environment pollution and degradation. Melting of ice around the Polar Regions has been evident through the awareness created due to monitoring the environment through interconnected visibility.

Therefore, it is wise that we understand the vital importance of seamless visibility in the maritime corridors that links the East and the West and vice versa not only in a strategic security perspective but for Blue economic, Environmental

and Security perspectives.

As pointed out earlier the Asian Region has drawn attention as the growth center of the world and along with that opportunities and challenges will follow us. There are many analyses on the possible emergence of competition of major Naval powers who considers the IOR is crucial to their national interests, and hence IOR has become an extremely important geo-strategic space.

In this emerging order, it is wise that the visibility of the maritime domain is expanded and shared among all nations from land and out at sea. The connectivity through transparency thus created will help to understand the operational patterns, and the intent of all the stake holders, thereby allowing more space for building trust and confidence. And I would argue that MDA, while allowing to monitor the ocean space and enabling expeditious response to critical challenges, will equally be beneficial for everyone to understand the intent of each other and thereby mitigate possibilities of tension, ease competition and help the rule based maritime order that we all talk about and aspire.

In this enhancing Maritime visibility Architecture we conceptualize, the relevance of space and cyber domains are critically important and is an area smaller nations will struggle to deal with.

There has been improved corporation among the nations in the region, and also supported by powerful maritime nations which are outside the region, but considers the region is vital for their national security interests. Even with such corporations many security challenges remain and many traditional and Nontraditional challenges may evolve in the future. As shipping patterns change and new transit hubs emerge, refocusing of efforts will become necessary.

Therefor it is my view that assistance by advances states in the region to smaller Navies to increase this capacity must be persistent, Cyber and Space included.

In this light we can look around the

region and beyond to see some of the successful arrangements in place to coordinate response at sea through shared MDA.

The Information Fusion Centre (IFC) in Singapore:

Established to provide actionable information to regional enforcement agencies, it effectively acts as a maritime information hub for the region and has been developing and implementing a range of info-sharing initiatives. It not only engages info-sharing portals, it also carries out seminars and courses, to tighten linkages with its partners so as to enhance regional maritime security.

The concept of international Liaison officers and the linkage with other operational centers and agencies makes it a truly regional Fusion Centre. It had enabled to provide timely situational updates on Maritime Security incidents.

Commercial ships are been involved effectively in SAR for sightings or Nil sightings, which is very important to manage crisis situations.

ASEAN Humanitarian Assistance Centre (AHA):

AHA Centre is considered the regional hub of the ASEAN region for information sharing for disaster management. It serves as the Centre for point of mobilization of resources to disaster-affected areas and act as the coordination engine to ensure ASEAN's fast and collective response to disasters.

Information Sharing centers Under the Djibouti Code of Conduct:

There are three centers in Sana'a (Yemen), Mombasa (Kenya) and Dar es Salaam (Tanzania). The Centers Capacity is enhanced through the joint training of maritime security forces in the so called Djibouti Regional Training Center (DRTC).

Likewise, the Information Management and Analysis Centre (IMAC) at Gurgaon in India is an Indian Navy initiative and connects national coastal radar stations and other maritime systems

and collates, fuses and disseminates critical intelligence and information about activities at sea to be used by Indian agencies.

The Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) in Baharain carries out a similar dissemination of critical intelligence for actionable response through three Combined Task Forces. It's truly a unique International arrangement that could consider to be a model to be studied.

All these arrangements have unique traits distinct to the specific regional requirements and are symbols of effective mechanism of 'multi-agency co-operation and interoperability amongst national and regional maritime agencies. These are enablers for technological and operational interoperability among maritime forces which ensures timely regional responses to crisis.

However, an institutionalized networking arrangement to generate a common maritime picture for the Indian Ocean Region is lacking.

Getting a cue from these experiments, which have helped to increase the coordination against Maritime security challenges, there could be a fusion Centre in the center of the IOR and I feel Sri Lanka could be a contender for such an arrangement, especially due to the Strategic location we are in. The cordial and productive partnerships that Sri Lanka has developed with all stake holders could go a long way in such an endeavor. The concept of International Liaison officers similar to the IFS in Singapore will add more impetus to the regional Architecture that is been widely discussed.

In conclusion, I would re-emphasize that the traditional demarcations between geographic boundaries are diminishing. The ocean space that we are looking at is vast and overwhelming. Security risks can instantly spread across the globe. To respond to such risks in a timely manner, seamless corporation is vital. Therefore, in order

to build such corporation and be prepared for risks that quickly spread across domains and boundaries, strong networking is a must.

In this complex emerging order we will see strengthening of partnerships and networks that are already in existent and also new partnerships and networks emerging with added value. I would like to equal this to a web laid by a spider. When the strings of the web are attached to every possible corner, among nations which identifies common objectives, greater protection to the region and beyond could be established. The norm should be to spread and lay the web seamlessly, since restricting to borders cannot and will not make effective partnerships and would only result in sporadic response. In a seamless concept, when events of concern are caught into the web, all focal points will reverberate, prompting actionable response. Nations could respond by expeditious action and the entity closer to the incident will shrink the time gap to respond. The backbone of such a Network will certainly be the sharing of Domain awareness. Also such a network would ensure stability in partnerships and prevent apprehensions that smaller nations could be dragged into their sphere of influence by powerful nations. In that sense, possible strains due suspicion have more chances to fade away, by the natural balance created through networking.

The question would be where and how to start the process? The starting point would be sharing white shipping information, which is being happening now among many countries. This is the first logical step. In going forward, the success would depend on agreeing to equal sharing of information. It could be initiated through many Maritime Dialogues/Forums that are functioning in the region.

It is therefore vital, that we set our sights as a region in particular and far beyond in general, so that stability and peace could be established through Domain Awareness.