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The Jakarta IORA Summit:

A Way Ahead for Stable Indian Ocean Maritime Order?

Commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the establishment of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), leaders of the 21 member-states have charted a wide-ranging agenda of cooperation. Meeting in Jakarta in March 2017, the IORA leaders outlined the first steps towards ensuring stability and promoting growth in the organisation's vast maritime space. While the challenges are many within the region and from beyond it as well, an available means of generating the requisite strategic trust among the member-countries is to synergise the efforts of IORA and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS).

Yogendra Kumar¹

The 21- members of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) met at the level of heads of state/government in Jakarta on 7 March 2017. Others attending the summit were with the organisation's 7 dialogue partners, namely, China, France, Japan, the United States, Egypt, Germany and the United Kingdom, and other special invitees, including Myanmar. Commemorating the 20th anniversary of its establishment, this was the first time that the

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organisation members met at the summit level which was a special initiative of Indonesia, the current Chair; the earlier meetings earlier were held at the level of the foreign ministers. The Indian delegation was led by the Vice- President Hamid Ansari.

Although currently envisaged as a one-off event, raising the level of this commemorative meeting signifies heightened global interest in the Indian Ocean in the present times as well as the expectation amongst the rim countries that the IORA will have a critical role in preserving the placidity of these waters. These expectations are well grounded in that the adjacent waters, the South China Sea and the Mediterranean, are witnessing growing military tensions and great- power contestations. An inadequate response to the deteriorating security environment will entails the risk of these contestations spilling over into the Indian Ocean and disturbing this placidity.

Moreover, the Indian Ocean region is not without its own security challenges which are showing a downward trend: the northern regions, namely, the Persian Gulf and the Horn of Africa, are already witnessing conflict with its inevitable naval dimension and the expanding footprint of the Chinese Navy portends the undermining of the US-led naval balance of power in the Indian Ocean. The other challenges, impacting on the security and welfare of the littoral countries, include piracy, location of failed/failing states along the main transit routes, jihadist extremism, trans-national transnational crime, such as trafficking in drugs and weapons, and illegal fishing. Even more insidious challenges, affecting the security and welfare of the regional communities, are climate change in the form of extreme weather events like cyclones, ecological degradation and depletion of marine resources. These phenomena affect large populations living in coastal areas, causing serious disruptions to their lives and economic well-being. Inadequate disaster- response capabilities degrade government and social institutions and can destabilise whole countries.

This first IORA summit also represents a collective recognition that a window of opportunity exists to prevent the situation from going down that path. Stabilisation of the Indian Ocean maritime order and containment of the other challenges may open up the opportunity for the full potential of 'Blue Economy', that is, sea-related economic activities, to be exploited by the littoral countries for technological and economic progress as well as the well-being of their populations, especially the poorer fishing communities. The summit adopted three documents, namely, Declaration on Prevention and Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism, IORA

Concord and Action Plan for 2017-2022. On the sidelines of these meetings, a ‘Business Summit’ was held with the participation of over 300 businesses enterprises.

The document on terrorism and violent extremism envisages various forms of cooperation amongst the member-states to combat these problems, including at the national and regional levels. A holistic approach embracing families, civil societies, government and international institutions based on relevant United Nations documents is to guide this cooperation. This collaboration will include coordination of efforts, dialogue and sharing of information, expertise, best practices and lessons learned including terrorism financing, strengthening of national and regional institutions and working with the UN and the other relevant international and regional institutions.

The other two documents, namely, the IORA Concord and Action Plan, dwell upon the different programmes and mechanisms meant to further prepare the organisation to meet the current and looming challenges. Referring to the UN Charter and the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, the UN General Assembly Resolution on the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace, and the UN Sustainable Development Goals 2030, the Concord focuses on maritime safety and security for ensuring freedom of navigation and overflight. The other aspects covered are: enhancing trade and investment cooperation in the region including strengthening the small-scale sector; sustainable and responsible fisheries management and development; disaster risk-management, especially paying attention to coastal and small island developing states; academic and science and technology cooperation; tourism and cultural exchanges; cross-cutting objectives like Blue Economy, gender equality and democratic and good governance; expanding external engagement with Dialogue Partners, extra-regional countries and entities and non-government stakeholders; and, last but not the least, strengthening the IORA’s institutions such as the Secretariat and the specialised agencies.

The IORA Action Plan (2017-2021) goes into key specific short-term, medium-term and long-term initiatives to realise the objectives of the Concord. Under maritime safety and security, it envisages the setting up of a working group with linkages to other external specialised agencies; implementation of the MOU on search and rescue; and a regional maritime surveillance network. Under trade and investment facilitation, it looks at the activation of various business forums and facilitation of easier travel amongst the member-countries. For fisheries management, regional action plan, cooperation with international organisations such as the Food and Agriculture Organisation for capacity-building and mechanism against illegal,

unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing are to be realised. Under disaster risk- management, cooperation with multilateral bodies like inter-governmental oceanographic commission, creation of Centre of Excellence and capacity- building are being considered. Under academic cooperation, linkages and capacity-building through the strengthening of academic institutions linked with the IORA, and cooperation projects under the India-initiated International Solar Alliance and the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) are sought to be developed. Core groups on tourism and culture for capacity-building and feasibility studies are aimed to be strengthened. The fostering of Blue Economy is sought to be achieved through a working group and other appropriate mechanisms with a focus on improving the livelihoods of coastal communities. Women's economic empowerment is envisaged through a working group, in business forum and training and capacity-building. The IORA's own capacity- building is to be achieved through the strengthening of the Secretariat, strengthening engagement with Dialogue Partners, cooperation with other regional bodies such as the African Union (AU) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), ministerial and expert meetings on cross-cutting areas, and the establishment of an IORA Development Fund.

The IORA Business Summit was attended by 31 chief executive officers and businessmen of the country delegations from the member-countries. An 11-point declaration covers subjects like trade diversification of small and medium enterprises, elimination of trade obstacles, improvement of direct trading, maintaining a more inclusive and conducive investment climate and the mobilisation of foreign and domestic private investment.

Opportunities and Contrary Pressures

The driving force behind this Summit, Indonesian President Joko Widodo, called it “a strategic and progressive step... an IORA that is able to move faster, able to face the current situation and able to deal with future challenges”. All of the agreements and understandings arrived at between the delegations and the business leaders, listed in the foregoing paragraphs, seek to address the challenges before the region and, at the same time, use these as the road map to exploit the opportunities for economic growth in an environment which is, still, placid by and large. The summit as well as the increasing engagement of among the leaders of the littoral countries do put the spotlight on institutional capacities necessary to prevent this window of opportunity from closing in the future.

The contrary pressures make the task of sustaining the Indian Ocean's current strategic framework considerably demanding; and, a weak strategic framework makes the pursuit of other objectives difficult due to the conflicting geo-political ambitions of the IORA members. The turmoil in the Middle East is such that it led the International Institute for Strategic Studies, London, to state that "the underpinnings of geopolitics have splintered so much in the past year that the foundations of global order appear alarmingly weak". Its maritime fallout is being witnessed in the tensions both in the Bab El Mendeb and the Persian Gulf especially as the contesting powers consider exerting pressure on the navigational chokepoints as part of their strategy; naval capacity-building is a pointer to a deepening oceanic turbulence. At the same time, a strategic debate is growing as to whether the Chinese Navy's growing presence in the Indian Ocean would undermine this strategic framework with its extensive port construction activity and its expanding naval patrolling, including by its nuclear submarine. A significant threat to this strategic framework is also from a range of failed/fragile countries that lie at these chokepoints or on the Indian Ocean rim; this generates security challenges in the form of Jjihadi terrorism and other kinds of criminal activity including piracy. Amongst all the oceans, the Indian Ocean littoral is the most vulnerable to the impact of climate change largely because of the variable capacities of the coastal states which are also a diverse mix of rich and poor countries; however, no country is immune to the climate change threat, because the coastal areas everywhere host large populations as well as critical industrial centres.

Although a welcome initiative, the First IORA Leaders' Summit does not go far enough. Like some other regional organisations, such as the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the ASEAN, the IORA summits should be regular, not a one-off event, and should invite the dialogue partner countries at that level; the Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, in his landmark speech, called SAGAR ('Security and Growth for All in the Region') on 12 March, 2015 at Port Louis, posited that the interests and stakes of extra-regional countries can be accommodated through dialogue and other forms of partnership based on trust and transparency, respect for international maritime rules and norms, sensitivity to each other's interests, peaceful resolution of maritime issues and increase in maritime cooperation. A corollary is strengthened partnership with the Dialogue Partners which has considerable potential for development; this has been duly recognised in the IORA Action Plan document. A greater involvement of the Dialogue Partners in the implementation of the agenda of cooperation would help in enhancing the trust level especially when the strategic framework for the Indian Ocean maritime order is, by and large, stable. A regular summit-level interaction

would ensure a degree of political commitment and will have a salutary effect on the efforts to prevent destabilisation of the maritime order.

A Missing Synergy

The IORA Summit documents do not have any reference to the coordination with another important pan-Indian-Ocean organisation, namely, the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS). Bringing together 35 navies, with the US planning to apply for dialogue partnership, it is engaged in developing confidence building measures (CBMs) and interoperability capabilities amongst the countries involved. Prime Minister Modi made a special mention of it in his SAGAR speech as aiming to “deepen our mutual understanding on maritime challenges; and, strengthen our collective ability to address them”. The IORA communiqué, dated 9 October 2014, states that the member-countries are “committed to working collaboratively with the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium and other relevant organisations to address shared maritime and security challenges that threaten sea lines of communication and transportation in the Indian Ocean, notably piracy and terrorism.”. It is a useful forum having official naval representatives from South Asia (including Pakistan), West Asian littoral (Saudi Arabia and Iran), the east African littoral (including France and the UK) and Southeast Asian and Australian littoral (including Timor Leste) as well as observer countries comprising China, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Japan, Malaysia, Madagascar, Russia and Spain. The lack of synergy between these two organisations might be the missing link in the effort of the littoral countries to shape a favourable maritime order in the Indian Ocean. A more synergistic growth of this forum could help in developing CBMs for various maritime forces, especially in regard to passage through chokepoints, as well as ground rules for harbour facilities in the littoral for the extra-regional navies. With the injection of political drivers in its activities the requisite synergy between the IONS and IORA would provide the right mix of capabilities to address both the ‘traditional’ and ‘non-traditional’ challenges in the Indian Ocean, hopefully, leading to a wider understanding about the adequacy of respective naval force levels for its stability.

Whilst the IORA Summit documents, rightly, emphasise academic engagements to build the knowledge base to address the challenges facing the Indian Ocean region, there is a pressing necessity for a strong think tank network to develop policy options on these challenges in a holistic manner. Such a course of action could be complemented by the efforts of civil society

and community organisations to address the issues of maritime security, institution- building at the grassroots’ level, sustainable socio-economic growth et cetera. The setting up of an organisation like the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific (CSCAP) would be a useful contribution for shaping up the strategic discourse on the Indian Ocean maritime order. The Vice- President of India, heading the Indian delegation, proposed the setting up of an IORA Centre of Excellence in one of the coastal cities in India for creating online accessibility of the resources available with the member-states, a network of IORA think tanks, an Information Fusion Centre for coordination on Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA), and cooperation in hydrography. The Summit commitment to build capacity of the IORA Secretariat is welcome, as it would need to absorb the generation of information from the rapidly multiplying forums concerned with different aspects of the IORA’s agenda; no less importantly, such capacity would enable it to follow up on the various scenarios being conceptualised and studied by these forums.

The First IORA Leaders’ Summit was a significant event in the efforts of the littoral countries to ensure regional stability so as to enable the pursuit of socio-economic progress by of the regional populations in an ecologically sustainable manner as well as to create conditions for the global community’s peaceful use of the Indian Ocean. The task is, certainly, challenging and complex; any segmented approach is unlikely to be efficacious. By fore-grounding the agenda to meet the ‘non-traditional’ threats combined with judicious moves to meet the ‘traditional’ threats to the region, adequate strategic trust can be created amongst all the stakeholders, both regional as well as extra-regional.

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