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Maritime Governance and South Asia

The ISAS book launch and panel discussion on 'Maritime Governance and South Asia' was held in Singapore on 4 June 2018. Organised by the Institute of South Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore, the edited book, 'Maritime Governance and South Asia: Trade, Security and Sustainable Development in the Indian Ocean', was launched during the event. The launch was followed by an engaging panel discussion with four distinguished panellists from the maritime and security domain.

Jivanta Schoettli, Roshni Kapur and Alfred Lien¹

On 4 June 2018, the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) at the National University of Singapore, welcomed Ambassador Ong Keng Yong, Executive Deputy Chairman of the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, as the keynote speaker and Guest-of-Honour to launch the book, *Maritime Governance and South Asia. Trade, Security and Sustainable Development in the Indian Ocean*. The launch was followed by a panel discussion on the theme of the publication.

During his address, Ambassador Ong drew attention to Singapore's location and its huge reliance on the harbour. Maritime issues have been of great significance to Singapore, which has always believed that the ocean must be kept open and secure. He pointed out that, during

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the recent Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, there was much discussion on cooperation in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, including the idea of the Indo-Pacific, which he stated, remained an under-defined concept. While peace and security are central, other pressing concerns include ensuring the sustainability of maritime resources and preparing for, as well as, averting the consequences of global climate change. These concerns and opportunities are captured in the notion of the Blue Economy, which is about conservation and the sustainable use of the ocean. Other disputes relate to the congestion of the sea lanes, illegal fishing and piracy, among others. The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) Secretariat, located in Mauritius, has outlined many action plans and these are critical in discussing maritime governance for the Indian Ocean region. However, recognising that this is a big agenda, including traditional and non-traditional security issues, Ambassador Ong recommended that the priority must be achieving greater global cooperation. While all the countries in the Indian Ocean Rim have their own national interests they need to find ways to cooperate with one another. Ambassador Ong ended his speech with an appeal to think about the IORA in terms of a new set of terms, namely, Institutions, Order, Rules and Accommodation.

Dr Jivanta Schoettli, Visiting Research Fellow at ISAS and editor of the publication, described the relevance of maritime governance to South Asia, as well as the geographical and strategic opportunities for the countries located in and near this region. She noted the emergence of an oceanic outlook, both towards and emanating from South Asia, captured by the various contributors to the book.

Panel Discussion

The official launch was followed by a panel discussion with four panellists. The Chairperson of the session, Professor C Raja Mohan, ISAS' Director, opened the session by outlining five areas of extraordinary change vis-à-vis the oceans and South Asia. First, in economic terms, the rise of China and the expansion of other Asian countries are changing the relationship of South Asia with the rest of the world. Whilst, in the past, it was a dependent relationship, today it is one of engagement. As a result, the seas have become an important lifeline. Second, the power shift has created the potential to re-organise rules, institutions and norms. Third, in terms of geography, the relationship between the two oceans is coming into play,

thanks to both China and India becoming outward-oriented economies. Fourth, geography does not only pertain to the relationship between different parts of the world, but also to the attitude towards one's environment. While previously there was an assumption that everything could be dumped into the sea, today, there is talk about the health of the oceans. Fifth, on the issue of governance and institutions, Professor Mohan named existing structures, such as IORA, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, as relevant. The key question, however, was whether such institutions would survive in the same form, given the fundamental shift in power. Rules and laws after all, he pointed out, are a reflection of changes in politics and the economy.

Ambassador Shivshankar Menon, Distinguished Visiting Research Fellow at ISAS and former National Security Advisor to the Prime Minister of India, spoke about how terms like the Indo-Pacific are useful in raising awareness about the unity of the seas and interconnectedness of these different arenas. Security is key to the Indo-Pacific. Historically, the Indian Ocean has been an *open* ocean – an ocean of trade. No one power has been able to control all eleven choke points of the Indian Ocean. Whilst the Atlantic and Pacific have been arenas of competition, the Indian Ocean has remained relatively peaceful. In fact, maritime warfare, he noted, has been higher in closed seas such as the Mediterranean. Thus, although the Indian and Pacific Oceans are inter-connected, they are also very different in nature. He emphasised that maritime governance cannot just be seen in terms of South Asia and the Indian Ocean, but also needs to take into account global dynamics - that we need to think of how everyone could benefit from trade across the ocean and efforts are needed to achieve a positive-sum maritime order. This is crucial, given that nearly 40 nations border the Indian Ocean.

Ambassador Menon agreed with Professor Mohan that an immense shift in the balance of power is underway. The world's biggest arms race is occurring across this belt and has been ongoing for 20 years. He argued that there is also a shift in doctrines that has led to this new situation, which is historically unprecedented. However, he pointed out that maritime security in the Indian Ocean is not as critical as in the South China Sea. The likelihood of high-level combat is low but there are key areas of concern, including overfishing, environmental degradation, humanitarian and other disasters. What are missing, he argued, are crisis management and confidence-building measures. The problem is that, currently, there is a sense, both in India and in China that the future is going to get better. As a result, the

motivation and urgency to develop new norms and institutions is rather low, thereby creating the need to build from the bottom-up. There is an interest in keeping the sea lanes secure and open by dealing with the freedom of navigation. Counter-piracy, for example, has worked well in the past to galvanise cooperation. We can thus work towards putting in place the building blocks for a maritime order.

The second panellist, Ambassador Frank Lavin, Former United States (US) Undersecretary of Commerce for International Trade and Former US Ambassador to Singapore, began his presentation by making several observations about South Asia. This is a region on the move, he noted, both economically and politically, with purposeful strategies and policies in place to achieve and sustain this. At the same time, as South Asia moves, the United Kingdom and the US, traditionally the internationalist players in the system, are turning against internationalism. This is a new situation. For India, the emphasis, he argued, has got to be on improving trade. The Indian economy, Ambassador Lavin observed, is outperforming in terms of growth in gross domestic product and per capita income. Furthermore, the pace of development has also been sustained. On trade, however, he categorically stated that India is underperforming. With a complicated tariff regime in place, due to a host of reasons – bureaucratic inertia, nationalism, and lobby groups – there has been limited success in tackling these inefficiencies. In terms of solutions, Ambassador Lavin suggested that more processes ought to be digitalised. Furthermore, policymakers should look for areas where changes can be made without inviting a backlash. For example, India imposes tariffs on products that it does not make. It also imposes tariffs on products with a high social value such as medical devices and medical technology. These are areas that could be looked at, in terms of human well-being rather than simply as matters of trade.

Mr Rahul Roy-Chaudhury, Head of the South Asia Programme at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London, focused on India's policy towards the Indian Ocean. He began by analysing Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's speech at the recent Singapore Shangri-La Dialogue in which Modi claimed that the Indian Ocean holds the key to India's future. According to Mr Roy-Chaudhury, the Modi government's perspective towards maritime security is significantly different from the past. Previously, for over one and a half decades, Indian policymakers have identified the Indian Ocean as part of India's immediate and extended neighbourhood, in which it had vested interests. However, this was largely rhetorical, with the Indian Ocean playing only a relatively minor role in India's foreign and

security policy. Today, it has turned into a reality, with maritime security a foreign and security policy priority for the Modi government. This, Mr Roy-Chaudhury argued, is due to three reasons: India's higher economic growth fuelled by increased energy consumption and the resultant heavy reliance on the Indian Ocean for smooth trade and energy; Maritime Terrorism; and China's expanding presence and influence in the Indian Ocean.

The importance of the Indian Ocean was made very clear when Modi visited three island states in the Indian Ocean in March 2015 and unveiled a vision for the future of India's policy towards the Indian Ocean. Mr Roy-Chaudhury noted that India has crafted its response to China's presence in the Indian Ocean in a particular manner:

- a. To compete in certain infrastructure projects in the region to enhance regional connectivity;
- b. To be among the first, if not the first, contributor to humanitarian and disaster relief operations; and
- c. To significantly upgrade India's strategic partnership with the US.

However, India has faced difficulties in the last few months, for example, in the Maldives where it was unable to influence developments, and in Sri Lanka, where there are deep concerns about investments from China.

Mr Roy-Chaudhury also noted that, in Modi's recent speech, there was no reference to the 'Quad'. This could be interpreted in many ways but the bottom line is that India recognises the Indo-Pacific as a free, open and inclusive region, where no one country or group dominates. ASEAN and India's 'Act East' policy, he argued, are central to the idea of the Indo-Pacific and Indo-US relations, and critical to creating a common perspective for such a region. In conclusion, Mr Roy-Chaudhury argued that India's vision may lie in the Indo-Pacific region but the core of this vision would continue to be the Indian Ocean. This was also a matter of material constraints. As a result, he projected that India's engagement with the Indo-Pacific would be largely diplomatic, economic and rhetorical. India's strategic focus lies to the West of the Malacca Strait. In terms of defence diplomacy, India is certainly looking towards the Indo-Pacific region but multilateral cooperation in the region remains

poor. Most importantly, India needs to build up its capabilities at sea as it still has an advantage over China in the Indian Ocean.

The fourth panellist, Professor Alan Chong, from the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies, then addressed three points pertaining to maritime governance – the existence of an economic and security architecture; the challenge of Sino-Indian relations; and the role of new geopolitics. In terms of economic architecture, Professor Chong identified numerous areas for further development, including the need to tap the economies of Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, as well as the African coastline in the Indian Ocean. In this, he posited India could act as a natural leader in pioneering economic agreements like free trade agreements with the region. This would provide India with leadership, the ability to compete with China and an opportunity to share good practices. On security, he spoke of the need to take into account the perception of smaller (and weaker) countries in order to create the ideal of a free and inclusive region. In this regard, Professor Chong brought up the idea of Zones of Peace or *Zoning* for peace. This requires a new wave of security multilateralism in the Indian Ocean where different zones of peace could gradually emerge by focusing on non-traditional security concerns. Leadership in this area would contribute towards ocean governance. In this, one could also work on other areas of improved connectivity and communication, including air traffic control.

On Sino-India relations, Professor Chong argued that confidence-building measures are crucial, given the nuclear powers in the Indian Ocean. Even during the Cold War, there were efforts and successes in creating a cooperative relationship between the US and the Soviet Union – so there is a possibility that India and China could do the same. Development could become a common agenda to form an easy base for diplomatic collaboration across any number of countries in the Indian Ocean region. Coming to the new geopolitics, Professor Chong emphasised that he believed a peaceful new order would be possible through neoliberal institutionalism. The talk of geographical warfare between India and China could be averted and the underlying core ideas behind the Indo-Pacific Free Region and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) need not be incompatible. External parties like ASEAN would be more than willing to support both of these initiatives. This could be a win-win situation for all sides. In this regard, Professor Chong stated his belief that India should join the BRI as well.

Before opening the session to the floor, Professor Mohan posed a set of questions. First, he asked Ambassador Menon about the best way forward to enhance governance and order. Ambassador Menon acknowledged that it is hard to find a common ground that suits everyone but that tackling the building blocks, from the bottom-up, are key. The question to Ambassador Lavin pertained to the current US approach on international trade, especially given President Donald Trump's tendency to question what the liberal order has done for the US. Ambassador Lavin reminded the audience that the US' economy (trade, exports, and investments) is performing well. The current administration has shown scepticism towards international engagement as Trump has a transactional mind-set that does not focus on the past or the future. He simply focuses on the present.

A lively question-and-answer session followed, with discussion on a number of issues, including the likelihood that multilateralism could play a role in countering new challenges of governance at sea; the problem of overcoming an apparent lack of political will amongst the major players to actually do something in the Indo-Pacific; the viability of creating a nuclear free-zone in the Indian Ocean and the question of India engaging in a balance of power strategy.

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