Security in the Indian Ocean[1]

The world's centre of political and economic gravity is moving eastwards to Asia. The maritime order in the Indian Ocean is calm but fragile due to the lack of an overarching security architecture and a diverse range of traditional and non-traditional security threats facing the region. Maritime cooperation agreements, naval risk reduction measures and negotiations around code of conduct, policing and applicability of UNCLOS are needed in peace time to keep the Indian Ocean secure in the future.

Shivshankar Menon[2]

The importance of the Indian Ocean needs no reiteration especially for a country like Singapore whose existence, prosperity and security was, and always will be, intimately linked to it. It is not necessary to go into the figures to convey the importance of the Indian Ocean to the world's container trade, oil trade and even the transportation of coal. And yet, the Indian Ocean region as a whole is one of the least economically integrated regions of the world. There is a historical irony here, because thanks to the predictable monsoons, the Indian Ocean didn't have to wait for the age of steam to be united unlike the other oceans. Deep water sailing developed here

---

[1] This paper is based on a transcript of Mr. Shivshankar Menon's presentation at the Public Forum on 'The Indian Ocean', organized by the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore on 9 January 2017. The Public Forum is the inaugural session of the ISAS Distinguished Visitors Programme.

[2] Mr. Shivshankar Menon is the first Distinguished Visiting Fellow under the ISAS Distinguished Visitors Programme. He served as National Security Adviser to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. Prior to that he served as Foreign Secretary of India and High Commissioner to Sri Lanka and Pakistan and Ambassador to China. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.

first. The 38 states around the Indian Ocean account for over 35% of the world population but only over 10% of the world GDP. Rather strangely, these states are more integrated with the rest of the world then they are with each other.

In the last twenty-five years, the Indian Ocean has evolved from an international throughroute for trade and energy, into a major global intersection for economy, resources and environment and increasingly for geostrategic issues. And the Ocean's shores are today home for the nexus between terrorism, anarchy, energy flows and environmental change, and that is an explosive mix. This is why the security of the Indian Ocean is being discussed today, when no one was concerned with it twenty-five years ago.

An additional edge to the issue of the security in the Indian Ocean is the fact that the world's centre of political gravity has moved with the economic centre of gravity, eastwards to this part of the world and to the Asia-Pacific. Turbulence along the rim of the Indian Ocean has occurred not just along the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea, but also most recently in the South and East China Seas. This has led to heightened interest by extra-regional powers in the Indian Ocean and in the security of the region. The extra-regional powers are attracted by the rise of China and India, the economic importance of the Indian Ocean rim and the sea lanes of communications. In the 1990s, when there was piracy in the Malacca Straits, it was primarily handled by the regional and local powers who, led by Singapore, organized themselves and achieved success. On the other hand, when piracy came up off the Somali coast of Gulf of Aden in 2004, the whole world got involved - NATO, the United States (US) and everybody else. Thus, there is a big difference in the level of interest of the extra-regional powers in the security of the Indian Ocean.

Today it is home to the most important strategic choke points. For example, China and most of India's energy comes through the harbours in Malacca. The signs of heightened security consciousness and interest of the extra-regional powers are visible in various ways. Firstly, there has been naval build-up over the last twenty years, including construction of deep water ports, all around the littoral, and close to the choke points such as Gawadar. Secondly, there has been a collective increase in military presence, patrols and exercises in the Indian Ocean region. Thirdly, there are now diverse, non-traditional security threats and challenges ranging from piracy to drug smuggling, human and narcotics trafficking and now non-proliferation as well. Lastly, there is growing demand for humanitarian and disaster relief, caused not just by

climate change effects but also ethnic and other violence in the Indian Ocean region. And what we often overlook is that this is probably the "most nuclearized of the seven seas"[3].

It is natural therefore that we have a whole body of literature in the last few years which describes the Indian Ocean as the new cockpit of the great power rivalry, where the future of Asia and the world will be determined. The US Navy's Maritime Strategy Report of 2007[4], for instance, noted that the Indian Ocean and its adjacent waters would be the central theatre of conflict and competition in the future. Local navies and defence analysts have all adopted this narrative in what can only be described as a growing industry which no doubt serves organizational and budgetary interests. In reality, the security of the Indian Ocean is probably more nuanced and not as stark as it is made out in public presentation and existing literature.

The maritime order in the Indian Ocean is largely calm at present, but for fortuitous reasons rather than by design. If this fragile and deceptive calm is to be preserved in the future, action must be taken, whilst a relatively benign strategic environment still persists.

We now look at the factors responsible for the fragile calm in the Indian Ocean, the strategic environment in which we deal with the security challenges and possible solutions

The Indian Ocean – A Fortuitous and Fragile Calm

There is no overarching security architecture in the Indian Ocean, unlike in other oceans. Nor is there a coalition of powers that has created the present peace. In fact, the present situation in the Indian Ocean is the result of multiple local balances and independent decisions across this vast region. This is because the Indian Ocean has been the sum of its parts, broken up as it is into sub-units - the Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal, and so forth. The Indian Ocean is very different from the western Pacific and the seas near China due to its relatively open geography, the fact that there are multiple powers and no local super power has enforced dominance, strategic issues and the balance of forces. Its shores are home to an agglomeration of peoples, with no super power, unlike the Atlantic or the Pacific and there is multiplicity of regional and ideological alliances in different parts of the Ocean.

---

[3] Thomas PM Barnett: The Pentagon's New Map; War and Peace in the Twenty-first Century (2004)
[4] United States Navy. A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Sea Power. Rep. N.p., Oct. 2007. Web. <https://www.ise.gov/sites/default/files/Maritime_Strategy.pdf>.

Historically, for a millennium before pax Britannica, the natural condition of the Indian Ocean allowed for several local hegemonic powers to coexist. The Ocean was considered to be in a 'neutral' state, where no one state power dominated. The Indian Ocean has evolved from being a "British lake" before the Second World War, a dominance that once challenged by Japan, was never restored. Despite a very brief period of US-Soviet naval contention in the late '70s and early '80s, the Indian Ocean was secondary to the primary geo-political fault lines of Europe and elsewhere, during the Cold War. Since the 1995 reactivation of the US Fifth Fleet in Bahrain, the US naval preponderance in the Indian Ocean has been unchallenged, unlike the western Pacific and seas near China. The biggest and most permanent naval presence for the most part has been the US, with varying force levels over time.

Today the Indian Ocean does not see the same overlapping sovereignty claims as the South China Sea (SCS). Its littoral states display an evident willingness to rely on United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)[5] and accept its decisions; to illustrate, India and Bangladesh recently accepted what UNCLOS prescribed for their maritime boundaries[6]. Conversely, there in increasing tension in the SCS, without a direct military threat. The asymmetry of power between China and the US, and the US-China economic interdependence assures that. The Indian Ocean sees much less tension and a much more diffused power balance with no contestation of the US naval predominance. But this does not preclude sources of future instability, which is why the present calm is considered fragile. One possible source of instability is the amount of tensions in the neighbourhood, the Persian Gulf, East and South China Seas which could spill over into the Indian Ocean.

The geopolitical framing of Indian Ocean security is becoming more complex. Security is determined by circumstances in littoral states, especially around choke points and terrorists and extremist organizations are attempting to create presence around them, whether it is Al-Qaeda near the Bab-el-Mandeb, Lashkar-i-Taiba or the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) near the Arabian Sea and so on. Conflicts such as Yemen, Iraq and Syria facilitate this phenomenon, as do narcotics and weapons trafficking. Therefore, the rise of Jihadist extremism and state failure

---

[5] The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), also called the Law of the Sea Convention or the Law of the Sea treaty is an international agreement. It defines the rights and responsibilities of nations with respect to their use of the world's oceans, establishing guidelines for businesses, environment, and management of marine natural resources.

[6] Rashid14, Harun Ur. "India-Bangladesh: UNCLOS and the Sea Boundary Dispute." Institute of Peace & Conflict Studies - India-Bangladesh: UNCLOS and the Sea Boundary Dispute. N.p., 14 July 2104. Web. 17 Jan. 2017. <http://www.ipcs.org/article/india/india-bangladesh-unclos-and-the-sea-boundary-dispute-4557.html>.

combined with global economic turmoil has diminished institutional and state capacity and increased risks to security in the Indian Ocean region.

New technologies and the resulting revolution in military affairs could potentially destabilize the Indian Ocean maritime order. Precision strike capabilities, robotization, irregular naval warfare and the focus on naval choke points, all of these empower small groups, individuals, terrorists and non-state actors. For instance, the practice of "floating armouries" is dangerous and needs regulation lest they fall into the wrong hands.

In response to increasing uncertainty, states in the Asia-Pacific, including Indian Ocean states, have undertaken naval build-up in the last two decades, concentrating on offensive capabilities such as attack submarines, naval anti-ship missiles, and land attack cruise missiles. Much of this is a ripple effect of China's military modernization across South and Southeast Asia. The Indian Ocean region is today, certainly much more militarized than it was twenty years ago, though it is still not comparable to the seas near China or the Western Pacific.

As mentioned before, there is no overarching security architecture and this lack of institutional framework makes the present calm fragile, particularly when the balance of power shifts rapidly. This is an opportunity for pragmatic solutions. But unfortunately, this is happening at a time when there is a clear phenomenon of ultra-nationalism on land, in regimes across the board. That makes compromise, adjustment and negotiation which are needed to create collective institutions to help with security, much more difficult. Therefore, it is all the more important to address these challenges.

There are traditional and non-traditional challenges in the Indian Ocean. Traditional challenges including piracy, sea lanes of communication (SLOC) security, military presence and competition collectively reflect the shifting balance of power in the region such as China's rise and desire to secure energy/trade flows through the Indian Ocean. The increasing Americanisation of Chinese military doctrines and strategic thinking gives insight on China's plans for the ocean. However, America's possible reaction to this evolving situation is less clear.

Alongside the above traditional challenges, non-traditional challenges such as fishermen, natural disasters, humanitarian crises and climate change are also on the rise. Some examples are maritime violence in the Sulu Sea or the crisis in the Andaman Sea in 2015, when over 25,000 Rohingyas were displaced from Myanmar and Bangladesh and fled by boat. Whether these crises were caused by ethnic violence, climate change or lawlessness, in the future, we

have to be prepared for mass displacement events in this region. However, it is hard to be confident that we have learnt our lessons and organized ourselves to deal with such events in the future.

The Strategic Environment

Despite the list of security challenges, there are reassuring factors when observing the larger security environment within which we are dealing in the Indian Ocean. Firstly, maritime orders are positive-sum, unlike zerosum territorial orders where territory can only belong to one state or the other. That's not true with maritime orders because it is a public good and there are collective goals such as freedom of navigation. There are also positive effects on trade and economy. Therefore, the Indian Ocean security as a maritime order should be amenable, theoretically at least, to cooperative solutions. It is here that the world's largest trading nations have their interests. Hence, it makes sense to build a maritime order. Of course, the sea is still a source of contention for power. But in today's age, that is realized very differently from the past.

Secondly, as mentioned earlier, in the absence of a security architecture, it is possible to find pragmatic solutions. And there are some useful experiences. The experience in dealing with piracy off the Malacca Straits in 1990s was very successful. Singapore's leadership, effective intelligence sharing and early recognition of solutions to piracy on sea and land, meant much less investment was required as compared to the Somali Coast. We have enough experience now of working together around the Indian Ocean. We also have the beginnings of some institutions, for example the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) or the Indian Ocean Navel Symposium (IONS) where the countries concerned are represented but these organizations are underutilized.

It is often wondered whether India and China can manage their relationship or whether their rivalry in the Indian Ocean region is inevitable and unmanageable. It is also said that Indian Ocean as an ocean only for the Indians is no longer possible. However, this displays a continental, zero-sum sort of mind-set and a territorial view of the seas. It also seeks to deny India something it has never sought, namely to make it a purely Indian Ocean, exclusively under its use or control. India's behaviour in the last few years, and right through history shows that exclusivity has never been the goal. In fact, it is the opposite. India has worked on mutual

dependency on the freedom of navigation and the sea lanes. It has also agreed with China on a maritime security dialogue to discuss these issues. Given the successful experience between India and China in the last 30 years of keeping a peaceful border despite having the world's largest border dispute, India actually has the capability and statecraft to handle issues relating to security in the Indian Ocean. However, it will require both leaders to overcome increasingly nationalist rhetoric at home and to concentrate on the interests and outcomes that they seek, rather than a zero-sum continental view of the seas.

India's approach to Indian Ocean security was made clear by Prime Minister Narendra Modi at Port Louis on 12th March 2015.[7] He spoke of India as the power strengthening maritime security capabilities in the region through collective action and cooperation. He also spoke of the blue revolution and the ocean economy, indicating that the primary responsibility for security lies with the Indian Ocean countries themselves, while recognizing the interests of the extra-regional countries. He also stressed the importance of respect for international maritime rules and the peaceful resolution of maritime issues.

Solutions

Looking ahead, a number of steps can be taken to ensure that the Indian Ocean stays calm and peaceful. Practical steps starting from the bottom up need to be taken, rather than building a fancy structure right at the beginning. In addition to the littoral and ION states of the Indian Ocean who have primary responsibility, the extra-regional powers who have a great interest in the region can also be included, along with regional security architecture. As mentioned above, some institutions already exist—IONS with thirty-five navies, IORA and Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multisectoral and Technical Cooperation (BIMSTEC). The IONS can, for instance, be used for the exchange of views among regional military forces. In addition, both bilateral and multilateral exchanges, security consultations and coordination mechanisms can be started, building habits of cooperation and institutionalization. There exists no overarching institution and there need not be. It may be advantageous to go with the geopolitical grain and use the pluralism and diversity of the security environment.

---

[7] "There Are Other Nations with Stakes in Indian Ocean: PM Narendra Modi." *The Economic Times*. Economic Times, 12 Mar. 2015. Web. 17 Jan. 2017. <http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2015-03-12/news/60047786_1_indian-ocean-region-maritime-issues-south-china-sea>.

Another solution is to build cooperative arrangements from the bottom up. For example, in the recent past, India, Sri Lanka and Maldives initiated a trilateral agreement on maritime cooperation. Seychelles and Mauritius are now also part of it. These countries began with maritime domain awareness and simultaneously made efforts to secure sea lanes, humanitarian and disaster relief and cooperation against non-traditional threats. The same can be done in Bay of Bengal and other areas. This also makes sense since the maritime boundaries between India, Bangladesh and Myanmar have been settled.

Naval risk reduction measures must also be put in place, to prepare before the next crisis occurs and also because the space is becoming crowded with an increasing number of navies in operation. Therefore, there should be discussion around maritime code of conduct, legal issues, policing and applicability of UNCLOS. There are also issues of coastal state jurisdiction, where for example, China limits military activities in its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) whereas India requires permission before allowing repair of submarine cables in its EEZ. These issues must be clarified while things are peaceful and have the greatest chance of implementation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Indian Ocean may have moved to the centre of global politics and will play an increasingly important role in the future. It is unlikely to pose the same level of danger to peace and security as other more contested and closed bodies of water. Those of us who live on its shores and have an interest in keeping it safe should work now if we want to keep it so in the years to come.

. . . . .