



INDIAN OCEAN RIM ASSOCIATION (IORA); A PLATFORM FOR REGIONAL PEACE, PROSPERITY AND SECURITY

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Abstract

The Indian Ocean is the third largest ocean in the world. In recent times its importance has grown tremendously due to varied reasons, particularly because of its vast deposits, minerals in the basin, fisheries, increased trade volume and conflict of interests among littoral and non-littoral states. A number of regional organisations have come up to tackle these issues among the Indian Ocean states. The Indian Ocean Rim Association is one of the prominent regional associations of the Indian Ocean states which is playing a vital role in this regard. India is a one of the important members of the IORA and is expected to play a key role in the IORA due to its strategic location and its dependence on the sea routes for trade, particularly oil and natural gas.

Key words: *Indian Ocean, IORA, objectives, trade, oil, security, peace, cooperation, maritime safety, straits*



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Introduction

The Indian Ocean is the third largest ocean in the world (after the Pacific and the Atlantic), and it can be defined as the body of water between Africa, Asia, Australia and the 60° south latitude if considered from a geopolitical perspective. Even though it is smaller than the Pacific Ocean and the Atlantic Ocean, is a vital lifeline to international trade and transport. It carries one third of the world's bulk cargo traffic and almost two thirds of the world's oil shipment through the sea-lanes which are woven across the ocean.

A broad definition of the Indian Ocean Region would include the Indian Ocean, with all its tributary water bodies Persian Gulf, the Red Sea and the Malacca Strait, 38 coastal states, as well as 13 land-locked states for which the transit to and from the sea is mostly oriented towards the Indian Ocean. This coastal and land-locked states include 23 African states and 25 Asian

states. It also includes Australia, France (for Crozet, Kerguelen, Mayotte, Reunion, St. Paul & Amsterdam and the Scattered Islands). The United Kingdom also becomes a part of Indian Ocean Region due to the British Indian Ocean Territory. These 51 states can be categorized into Indian Ocean Rim States (28), Coastal States of the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf (10) and Indian Ocean Land-locked states (13). Only France and United Kingdom amongst these states are exceptional cases as they are European, however they extend and effectively implement their sovereignty over some island territories in the Indian Ocean (Scattered Island and the Chagos Archipelago).

They vary considerably in terms of their areas, populations and levels of economic development. They may also be divided into a number of sub-regions (Australasia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, West Asia and Eastern & Southern Africa), each with their own regional groupings (such as ASEAN, SAARC, GCC and SADC, to name a few). In spite of such diversity and differences, these countries are bound together by the Indian Ocean.

Formation of the Indian Ocean Rim Association

It was on the initiative of the Government of Mauritius which convened a meeting on 29-31 March 1995 to discuss the strengthening and expansion of economic cooperation among countries of the Indian Ocean Rim. Representatives from the governments, business sector and academia. Representatives from Australia, India, Kenya, Mauritius, the Sultanate of Oman, Singapore and South Africa were invited. This group was subsequently referred to as the "core group states" or M-7. At the end of the meeting, the participants declared in a joint statement that they had agreed on: "Principles of open regionalism and inclusivity of membership, with the objectives of trade liberalization and promoting trade co-operation. Activities would focus on trade facilitation, promotion and liberalization of trade, investment promotion and economic cooperation."

Subsequently, a tripartite Working Group comprising government, academic and private sector representatives met in Mauritius on 15 –17 August 1995 and decided to create a second track process complementary to an inter-governmental movement. The next meeting in September 1996 finalised a Charter for the creation of IORA, and expanded the membership to include Indonesia, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Yemen, Tanzania, Madagascar and Mozambique, also known as the M-14. The IORA was formally launched at the first Ministerial Meeting in Mauritius on 6 – 7 March 1997. This meeting adopted the IORA Charter (known as the Charter of the Indian

Ocean Rim Association for Regional Co-operation) and determined several administrative and procedural matters.

It was unanimously decided that the Association will facilitate and promote economic co-operation, bringing together inter-alia representatives of Member States' governments, businesses and academia. In a spirit of multilateralism, the Association seek to build and expand understanding and mutually beneficial co-operation through a consensus-based, evolutionary and non-intrusive approach.

The IORA applied following fundamental principles without qualification or exception to all Member States: -

- (a) Co-operation within the framework of the Association will be based on respect for the principles of sovereign equality, territorial integrity, political independence, non-interference in internal affairs, peaceful co-existence and mutual benefit;
- (b) The membership of the Association will be open to all sovereign States of the Indian Ocean Rim which subscribe to the principles and objectives of the Charter and are willing to undertake commitments under the Charter;
- (c) Decisions on all matters and issues and at all levels will be taken on the basis of consensus;
- (d) Bilateral and other issues likely to generate controversy and be an impediment to regional cooperation efforts will be excluded from deliberations;
- (e) Co-operation within the Association would be without prejudice to rights and obligations entered into by Member States within the framework of other economic and trade co-operation arrangements which will not automatically apply to Member States of the Association. It will not be a substitute for, but seeks to reinforce, be complementary to and consistent with their bilateral, plurilateral and multilateral obligations;
- (f) A member-driven approach will be followed by Member States to achieve the goals and objectives of the Association.
- (g) Promotion of principles of good governance by Member States will enable smooth implementation of programs

Objectives of the IORA

The Indian Ocean Rim Association decided to adopt multiple objectives to achieve peace, prosperity, stability and cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region which would be beneficial to all the member states.

- (a) Promoting the sustained growth and balanced development of the region and of the Member States, and to create common ground for regional economic co-operation;
- (b) Focusing on those areas of economic co-operation such as trade facilitation and liberalization, promotion of foreign investment, scientific and technological exchanges, tourism, movement of natural persons and service providers on a non-discriminatory basis that provide maximum opportunities to develop shared interests and reap mutual benefits.
- (c) Exploring all possibilities and avenues for trade liberalisation, to remove impediments to, and lower barriers towards, freer and enhanced flow of goods, services, investment, and technology within the region;
- (d) Encourage close interaction of trade and industry, academic institutions, scholars and the peoples of the Member States without any discrimination among Member States and without prejudice to obligations under other regional economic and trade co-operation arrangements;
- (e) Strengthening co-operation and dialogue among Member States in international fora on global economic issues;
- (f) Promote co-operation in development of human resources, particularly through closer linkages among training institutions, universities and other specialised institutions of the Member States; and
- (g) Seeking to reinvigorate the Association by progressing the prioritised agenda decided upon at the Council of Ministers' meeting in Bengaluru in November 2011, which has given a focused direction towards formulation of a dynamic road map of cooperation, in line with the growing global emphasis on the unique geo-strategic primacy of the Indian Ocean Rim.

Issues in the Indian Ocean

Since India became the IORA Chair for the period 2011-2013, there has been a growing direction and determination to strengthen institutions and capacities within IORA. India revitalised IORA during its chairmanship and six Priority and two Focus Areas were identified on the basis to promote sustained growth and balanced development in the Indian Ocean Region.

In 2011 the priorities of the Association were overhauled in consonance with the emerging geo-strategic challenges that then confronted the Indian Ocean region and were re-formulated as:

- Maritime Safety and Security;
- Trade and Investment Facilitation;

- Fisheries Management;
- Academic, Science and Technology Cooperation;
- Disaster Risk Management; and
- Tourism and Cultural Exchanges.

The Indian Ocean region is plagued with many traditional and non-traditional safety and security challenges. Piracy, armed robberies at sea, terrorism, human trafficking, irregular movement of persons, drugs trafficking, illicit trafficking in wildlife, trafficking of weapons, crimes in the fisheries sector such as IUU fishing, degradation of ocean health, unlawful exploitation of marine resources and climate change with its related repercussions on environmental security are the major issues which the global community has to deal with.

Covering a vast maritime zone of nearly 68.56 million sq. km. and incorporating coastal states from South Africa in the west, running up the eastern coast of Africa, along the Gulf to South and Southeast Asia, ending with Australia in the east, IORA serves as the ‘first line of defence’ to build upon existing national, regional and international measures, thereby enhancing coordination and supporting harmonised international Maritime Safety and Security (MSS) collaboration.

Maritime Safety & Security

The Indian Ocean is a vital trading hub, connecting the Middle East to Southeast and East Asia, as well as Europe and the Americas. Any disruption along its trading routes will have impact on entire globe’s energy security, The IORA recognised that the safety and security in the Indian Ocean region is paramount for the overall development of all the member states, for maintaining international peace and having normal trade relations. In this direction it made Maritime Safety and Security as its primary area of focus.

Trade and Investment Facilitation

The Indian Ocean Rim region has been linked by commerce for centuries and is still at the centre of global trade and investment flows. Promoting trade and investment amongst the member states and other non-regional powers is at the heart of IORA.

Today half of the world’s container ships and two thirds of the world’s oil shipments pass through the Indian Ocean, including key transit points such as Bab el-Mandeb and the Straits of Hormuz and Malacca. Emerging economies such as India, Indonesia, Kenya, and South Africa has to ensure that the importance of the Indian Ocean Rim to the global trading environment will only increase in years to come.

Academic, Science and Technology

Scientific and technological cooperation, academic exchange is one of the important goals of the IORA. Increasing scientific knowledge, developing research capacity and transfer of technology among the member states is to be increased.

Disaster Risk Management

The Indian Ocean Region is prone to natural and man-made disasters. It has witnessed number of such calamities in the past and continues to be prone to cyclones, tsunamis, floods, tidal surges etc. No wonder sometimes it is referred to as the 'World's Hazard Belt' Natural disasters such as cyclones, tsunamis, floods, tidal surges are very common and re occurring phenomena in the region. Manmade disasters arise from anthropogenic hazards, that is, hazards caused by human action or inaction; many mirrors natural disasters, yet man has a direct hand in their occurrence, as may be seen in cases of oil spills, fires, leakage of poisonous and destructive substances, illegal dumping, and so on.

Management of disaster risks is particularly urgent in the IOR because it is home to small island nation states and developing littoral countries with high population densities, which are hit much harder due to the lack of resources and assets to handle the calamity. Moreover, the region is also witnessing an increasing link of natural disasters to climate change with increasing sea levels and rising water temperatures. Disaster Risk Management (DRM) is therefore an area of collective interest to IORA Member States and hence revolves around the development of knowledge and capacities by governments, communities and individuals to effectively anticipate, respond to and recover from hazards and emergency situations.

Tourism & Cultural Exchanges

Bounded by Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Australia, the Indian Ocean Rim region is home to a melting pot of 2.5 billion people, which is one-third of the world's population. It is a region of diverse origins, cultures, languages and religions. prides itself with gorgeous beaches, magnificent turquoise waters, stunning islands, and breath-taking scenery, being frequently considered as one of the most appealing marine destinations on Earth. IORA promotes tourism and cultural exchanges by setting proposed policy directions for government cooperation and providing platforms for dialogue in promoting tourism amongst Member States, Dialogue Partners, and other international bodies.

India and IORA

Indian occupies a very unique and strategically important position in the Indian Ocean. Surrounded by the Indian Ocean on three sides, the coastline of the country is 7516.6 km, out of which the mainland coastline stretches over 6100 km, and islands 'coastline is spread over 1197 km. The coastline of the country touches nine states and four union territories, thus making the Indian Ocean integral part of its foreign policy, security decision, trade etc.

At present, Indian Ocean carries about half of world's container shipment, one-third of bulk cargo traffic and two-third of oil shipments. It also carries 90% of India's trade by volume and 90% of oil imports.

India continues to promote its official policy of "coordination, cooperation and partnership" in the regional maritime domain. As coordinator to the priority area on disaster risk management, India has published guidelines for IORA. India has been trying to emerge as the net provider of information in the IOR. Indian policy takes into consideration that IOR is not an India-run maritime domain.

Conclusion

In spite of being the major regional association, IORA has not been able to achieve major traction over the past two decades of its existence. India has been hailed for its stewardship to steer the path by defining the six priority areas of IORA during its chairmanship from 2011-2013.

There exist formidable challenges towards effective realisation of the same. The IORA is extremely diverse in its setting compared to EU or ASEAN. Also, there is a geographical disconnect. IORA comprises of developing nations who lack adequate economic and institutional prowess to boost the grouping. Australia and Singapore are the only developed economy.

The growing importance of Indian Ocean Region could be leveraged by IORA to be a formidable regional organisation. India's willingness to work with the member nations on the needs of secure and free navigation needs to be reciprocated. IORA members need to make a collective push for maintaining the ongoing stability/openness in the region. Attempts should be made to foster commonality in the IORA.

IORA members should further cooperate on non- traditional security issues as the region is marred by poverty, calamity and piracy. To make the regional grouping effective, IORA members need to develop a mechanism to address non- security threats.

Regional groupings like BIMSTEC and RCEP could be aligned to boost the liberal trade regime in the IORA region. Private sector linkage should be encouraged. Business travel card could be issued by IORA countries. India has already shown its enthusiasm by signing MSME memorandum with the member states. Thus, the revival of interest in IORA comes at significant/opportune geopolitical turn. The evolving context could be judiciously channelised by IORA members to maintain the existing peace and stability in the region.

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