

INDIAN OCEAN NAVAL SYMPOSIUM (IONS) - A FORUM FOR INDIA'S STEP TOWARDS MARITIME SECURITY IN THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION

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Abstract

The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) is an inclusive and voluntary initiative that brings together navies of littoral states of the Indian Ocean Region with the aim of increasing maritime cooperation and enhancing regional security. It is a forum for discussion, policy formulation as well as numerous aspects of naval operation, all of which are crucial elements of a cooperative mechanism.

Key words: *IONS, Indian Ocean, safety mechanism, dialogue*



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Introduction

The period after the end of the Cold War was renaissance of global and regional informal interstate organizations. During the years of confrontation between military blocs and world wars, they played an auxiliary role, but under the chaotic and muddled condition of world politics that began after the collapse of the bipolar system, informal organizations and blocs have become into a promising format of interstate interactions. The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) is not unique in this sense. It was created in 2007 on the model of the Western Pacific Naval Symposium (Western Pacific Naval Symposium, WPNS). But unlike the latter, IONS is the only organization within which ocean-wide security dialogue takes place. It has an institution of formal membership, but no permanent secretariat; there are permanent working groups, but informal conclave meetings remain the main format of interaction. From the very beginning of the symposium, proposals were put forward for its further institutionalization and transformation into a full-fledged formal intergovernmental organization.

Background

The independence of many Asian and African states from colonial rulers after the end of the Second World War, growth of trade, commerce and business among these newly independent states and the increasing significance of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) opened a vast arena of opportunity for many non-littoral states to explore possibilities and ultimately brought the world's naval powers into the Indian Ocean waters. The presence of navies belonging to the USSR, USA, France and other naval powers created a condition of rivalry in the Indian Ocean. Both the USSR and the USA pursued their own goals of growing their respective sphere of influence in the region and trying to increase their bloc. India, being the largest regional non-bloc player, could not be the basis of such a system. Although since the time of Indira Gandhi, the Indian government believed that it had the right to interfere in what was happening processes in the ocean in order to restore status quo (although this was never officially declared), the lack of a powerful navy did not allow India to fully realize its ambitions. As a result, New Delhi was limited to protests against the presence of fleets of non-regional powers in the Indian Ocean.

After the end of the Cold War, under the resulting vacuum of power India gradually came to realize its leading role in regional affairs. The Naval Strategy adopted in 2007 outlined the main goals - policing maritime borders, protecting Indian citizens (and ethnic Indians) living in the region, guarding trade routes, fighting extremism and terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. It was impossible for the Indian Navy to cope with this full range of diverse tasks and needed interaction with the navies of other countries in the region, for which it was necessary to have a platform, an organization within which this interaction would be carried out.

Although there were a number of regional organizations, such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IORARC), which was later renamed The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA); Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic cooperation (BIMSTEC); South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC); The Southern African Development Community (SADC); economic community of West African States (ECOWAS) – it focussed mainly on interaction in the economic sphere. Despite their attempts to address the topic of maritime security (for example, on the IORA agenda it is listed as one of the priorities since 2011), significant results were not achieved. Thus, it was necessary to create a new structure that would deal with security issues, and for this India needed solve a number of problems internally as well as externally: strengthen the fleet, eliminate existing

mistrust among small countries towards India and to find a compromise between the interests of all potential participants.

The idea for having a forum which would initiate a dialogue and discussion on security issues in the ocean as a whole, and in its sub-regions, and building confidence between the navies of the participating countries was brought in the form of the Indian Naval Ocean Symposium (IONS). The IONS is probably the only such organization which grew out of a scientific conference held by a think tank. The idea behind the creation of IONS germinated at National Maritime Foundation (NMF), a think tank, closely associated with the Navy and having in its ranks a large number of retired naval officers. Though the NMF is known for championing the idea of conduct of independent and policy-relevant research on all 'matters maritime', to create and heighten maritime awareness amongst India's policy-makers, intellectual echelons, and civil society at large, the main focus in their studies was concentrated on giving the maritime component of the balance of power in the Indian Ocean.

IONS was conceived by the Indian Navy in 2008 as a forum which seeks to enhance maritime co-operation among Navies of the littoral states of the Indian Ocean Region by providing an open and inclusive platform for discussions on regionally relevant maritime issues and building an effective maritime security architecture in the Indian Ocean Region that would lead to common understanding on the way ahead necessary for IOR's collective prosperity.

The inaugural edition of IONS was held in Feb 2008 at New Delhi, with Indian Navy as the Chair for the subsequent two years. Subsequent seminars and meetings of the 'Conclave of Chiefs' have been held at the commencement of each two year.

This unprecedented initiative has grown in significance and has been whole-heartedly accepted across the Indian Ocean Region, establishing itself as an effective platform for discussion and deliberation on issues related to maritime security.

In the subsequent years the IONS Chairmanship: has been held by the United Arab Emirates in 2010, South Africa in 2012, Australia in 2014, Bangladesh in 2016 and Iran in 2018. At present the IONS includes 24 nations that permanently hold territory that abuts or lies within the Indian Ocean, and 8 observer nations:

Members of the IONS

South Asian Littorals: Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Pakistan, Seychelles, Sri Lanka and United Kingdom (British Indian Ocean Territory)

West Asian Littorals: Iran, Oman, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates

East African Littorals: France (Reunion), Kenya, Mauritius, Mozambique, South Africa, and Tanzania.

South East Asian and Australian Littorals: Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand and Timor-Leste.

Observers: China, Germany, Italy, Japan, Madagascar, the Netherlands, Russia and Spain.

Consisting of 32 nations, including eight observer states, grouped into four categories, the wide and inclusive membership of IONS provides its members with a platform that can be used to reach out to a range of IOR states and at the same time strengthen and deepen its existing partnerships in the region.

The IONS consists of three Working Groups (IWGs) focussing on Maritime Security, Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) as well as Information Sharing and Interoperability.

Working of the IONS

The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium works as a security construct in the entire Indian Ocean region, similar to the functioning of the Western Pacific Naval Symposium. The maritime security agencies and the navies of the member states have taken up this voluntary initiative to maintain harmony among them in relation to the activities over the Indian Ocean. The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) acts as an organisation that also facilitates the organising of lectures, essay competitions and various workshops with the original objective in consideration.

The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) celebrated its 10th anniversary at Kochi, India. Primarily created as an open and inclusive forum for the navies of the Indian Ocean states to initiate discussion and cooperation on regionally relevant maritime security issues, the event was organized on the theme of SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region), an acronym coined by Prime Minister Modi. The theme “*IONS as Catalyst for SAGAR*” is in consonance with India’s ‘Act East’ policy and nation’s diplomatic, economic and military outreach in the region. This not only puts the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) as a top priority for New Delhi’s security and economic prosperity, but also seeks to project India as a benign maritime power initiating multilateralism and inclusivity in the region.

Significance for India

In the last few decades the geopolitical and strategic importance of the Indian Ocean Region has grown manifold. The presence of abundant natural resources, oil and natural gas, fisheries and other valuable minerals in the IOR, has turned the region into a hotspot of activities for not

only the littorals but also for the powerful non-littoral nations. The contest for controlling the region and its resources has created a volatile situation in the entire IOR. Continues presence of the great naval powers, particularly the US navy and the Chinese PLA-N, and their activities and regular naval exercises with littorals has made the situation more critical. For India the region is very important from geopolitical and strategic perspective given its central location in the Indian Ocean and a vast coastline of about 7,500 km (National Institute of Oceanography (NIO) (2018). The increasing visibility of the Chinese PLA-N in the region and its strategy to encircle India through its 'string of pearls', by means of construction and development of ports and harbours in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar and other littorals which could be used also as naval facilities during a conflict has caused a serious concern in the Indian defence establishment. In such a situation it becomes imperative for India to play a more proactive role. With the growing strategic importance of the region, the emerging local level conflicts among the littorals, the presence of non-littoral powerful navies competing for control and supremacy, piracy, maritime terrorism and host of other serious issues will affect the security of the entire IOR and would put India into particularly vulnerable situation due to its centrality in the region. India's dependence on the Indian Ocean for its energy and other requirements can be understood from the fact that 95 percent of India's trade by volume and 68 percent of trade by value come via the Indian Ocean. Additionally, 3.28 million barrels per day—or nearly 80 percent of India's crude oil requirement—is imported by sea via the Indian Ocean. India is heavily dependent on the resources of the Indian Ocean. Fisheries and aquaculture industries are also a major source of exports. India's maritime exports grew 55 times in volume between 1962 and 2012. This sea lines of communication are vital for continuing the economic growth of the country and meeting variety of needs of its population. India has also been granted sovereign rights over the area beyond and adjacent to its territorial sea, termed as Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. India has exclusive jurisdiction over the resources present in this zone including navigation of seafaring trade and transport vessels in this area which it needs to safeguard from any adversary. Considering the overall situation in the Indian Ocean Region and particularly in its immediate neighbourhood in the Indian Ocean, India needs to adopt a multifaceted strategy to counter attack on its sovereignty and protect its interest internally and externally. The IONS can help India in realizing its ambitions to play a bigger and more proactive role in the Indian Ocean Region.

From this perspective the IONS fits into India's three-fold ambitions in the region:

- Strengthening and deepening the relations with the Indian Ocean littoral states;
- Establishing its leadership potential and aspirations of being a net-security provider; and
- Fulfilling India's vision of a rules-based and stable maritime order in the IOR.

As India seeks to consolidate its sphere of influence from the Straits of Malacca to Hormuz, a platform like IONS would ensure that India has the scope to cooperate with the littoral states on issues of maritime security and awareness in the region. Being a technical forum with a broad membership, unlike the politically driven Quad, India can use IONS to unite the regional states on shared principles and strategies without antagonising any state at the cost of block politics.

Conclusion

Indian Ocean is an "ocean of economic opportunities" for India. The security threats posed by State and non-state actors are impeding the progress. Any interference to our sea lanes, coastal offshore areas and ports, will have a crippling impact on the country's economic growth. With this realisation India's policy towards its ocean has undergone a pragmatic shift. It has realised the emerging geopolitical situation and the security implications for its safety, growth and progress. Bilateral and multilateral agreements with littorals and non-littorals, defence cooperation treaties, naval engagements with countries, protection of SLOC's, joint patrolling of the waters etc. have increased in the last few years. Its SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) programme, which is in line with the principles of the IORA (Indian Ocean Rim Association) was initiated in the year 2015, aiming at a maritime initiative which gives priority to the Indian Ocean region for ensuring peace, stability and prosperity of India in the Indian Ocean region. The goal is to seek a climate of trust and transparency; respect for international maritime rules and norms by all countries; sensitivity to each other's interests; peaceful resolution of maritime issues; and increase in maritime cooperation.

The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium provides multiple prospects of showcasing and fulfilling India's ambitions in the region, but at the same time it also struggles to prove its effectiveness due to the lack of coordination among the member states and absence of strong political will. India cannot ignore the ground reality of existing geopolitical situation in the region. Current and emerging security dynamics of the Indian Ocean would also stand in the way of India and its ambitions being pushed through a multilateral domain. Another serious concern is the prominent visibility of extra-regional powers in the IOR, which want to extend their sphere of influence and have the potential to alter the balance of power in the region. The littorals in the

IOR do not share the same size, capacity, resources, economic development, demography and political systems. They differ in multiple ways and also have antagonistic interest in the region which has led to emergence of several exclusive regional and inter-regional agreements amongst them as well as between the littorals and non-littoral states.

The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium is a multilateral initiative like many other regional agreements in the IOR and carries the potential to become an enabling factor in India's roadmap for IOR in areas of institution building, agenda-setting and power projection. But it needs to chart out a definite role and purpose for IONS without which its IOR ambitions would ring hollow. The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium can be India's platform to showcase that India can be an effective and benign power in the region with diplomatic potential and might along with bringing a structural change that has the possibility of ensuring stability for the Asian balance of power.

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