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The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium – Will the Navies of the Indian Ocean Region unite?

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India recently launched the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) to promote cooperation between navies and coast guards across the Indian Ocean Region. However, past attempts at promoting cooperation in the region have largely failed and a lot of drive and resources from India will be required if the IONS is to remain afloat.

DR MANMOHAN Singh, the Prime Minister of India, opened the first Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) in New Delhi on 14 February 2008. The IONS is an Indian initiative to bring together the Chiefs of Navies and Heads of Maritime Security Organisations from the island and littoral states of the Indian Ocean. It is intended to become a biennial event. No less than 27 countries were represented at the inaugural IONS.

The IONS is aimed at fostering maritime cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) to deal with threats at or from the sea, including mitigating the effects of maritime natural hazards such as tsunamis and cyclones. It will also foster a better understanding of the ocean through the application of marine science and technology.

In his opening address, the prime minister noted that Indian Ocean littoral states have witnessed rapid economic growth in recent years and that the sea-lanes of the region have emerged as one of the most important lines of communication in the world. However, he also observed that recent years have seen a rise in crimes at sea in the region such as terrorism, smuggling, piracy and robbery, as well as a marked increase in incidents of natural disasters.

The countries that participated in the IONS comprised Australia, Brazil, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, France, India, Indonesia, Kuwait, Kenya, Malaysia, Malagasy, Maldives, Mauritius, Myanmar, Mozambique, Oman, Qatar, Seychelles, Sri Lanka, the United Arab Emirates, Singapore, South Africa, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Tanzania and Thailand. Notable absentees were Iran, Iraq and Pakistan. The United States presumably was not a participant because it is not an Indian Ocean littoral state. Nevertheless, it would surely have been an interested observer as the concept of the IONS is in line

with the US Global Maritime Partnership Initiative to build cooperation between maritime security forces to provide good order at sea.

Western Pacific Naval Symposium

The IONS is modelled on the Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS) launched in 1988 to bring together the navies of countries in the Western Pacific. The WPNS provides a forum for discussion of maritime issues to generate a flow of information and ideas between naval professionals. Originally conceived as a confidence and security building measure in the last days of the Cold War, it has evolved a lot over the years.

The WPNS drifted to some extent during the 1990s and early 2000s. However, it has developed more focus recently and is now a coherent forum providing a framework for cooperative exercises and training, including submarine rescue, diving and mine countermeasures. It also includes workshops addressing particular technical issues and has published useful manuals, including a Replenishment at Sea (RAS) Handbook and a Code for Unalerted Encounters at Sea (CUES).

The membership of the WPNS currently comprises Australia, Brunei, Cambodia, China, France, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, South Korea, Russia, Singapore, Thailand, Tonga, the US and Vietnam, with Bangladesh, Canada, Chile and India as observers. India aspired to full membership but this was rejected. There is some overlap of membership between the WPNS and the IONS with Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand members of both forums.

The WPNS is now successful because most of its members have significant navies that have grown in recent times in both capability and confidence. They are reasonably relaxed with each other and most have the resources to participate fully in WPNS activities. Its members take it in turns to host major biennial meetings, specialist workshops and exercises.

Differences are apparent between the WPNS and the IONS. Many members of the latter forum are small, underdeveloped countries that lack the resources to participate fully in forum activities. Their navies or coastguards are small with only inshore patrol craft and they have less to gain from activities such as those conducted by the WPNS. Another difference is that the WPNS is restricted to navies (or defence forces) while coast guards are included in the IONS, recognizing that some of its participants only have coast guards.

Indian Ocean Cooperation

Efforts to build maritime cooperation in the IOR have quite a long history. Sri Lanka launched the Indian Ocean Marine Affairs Cooperation (IOMAC) network in the late 1980s to exploit the common interest of littoral and island states in managing the marine resources of the Indian Ocean, protecting the ocean's environment and conducting marine scientific research. However, India did not support IOMAC because Pakistan and the United States were involved.

There was a flurry of activity in the mid-1990s to promote cooperation in the IOR. Australia for example, hosted the International Forum on the Indian Ocean Region (IFIOR) in 1995 to explore possible cooperation across a wide range of activities, including maritime affairs. The Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC) was the only outcome of this activity. This was established in 1997 with the primary aim of facilitating trade and investment in the region. However, IOR-ARC has stagnated in recent years due largely to a decline in the interest of its three major protagonists: Australia, India and South Africa.

These attempts at promoting cooperation in the IOR foundered for several reasons. First, there were

political obstacles that excluded some IOR countries from membership and objected to any involvement of non-littoral countries. The list of countries participating in the inaugural IONS suggests these sensitivities have not gone away.

Secondly, there was the lack of clear common interests to bring the IOR countries together. While the IOR includes about one-third of the world's population, its peoples are an extraordinarily diverse lot and their countries widely divergent in terms of economic development and national interests.

Thirdly, getting around the IOR is difficult and expensive. Great distances are involved. There are few direct air routes and delegates to attend meetings may have to use several airlines and pay premium fares as a consequence. Not surprisingly and unless they were sponsored by a better-off member, most potential participants will decide that the benefits of participation are simply not worth the costs.

Outlook for the IONS

While the IONS is similar in concept to that of the WPNS, its implementation will be very different. The IONS lacks the political top cover that notionally is provided for the WPNS through APEC and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Its continued existence is likely to be entirely dependent on Indian funding and leadership. Potentially this defeats the purpose of a truly cooperative arrangement because India, as a consequence of providing most of the funding, will likely want firm control over IONS activities.

Many IOR states are quite poor. Participation in IONS activities will be expensive for them and they will require financial assistance if they are to participate. India at least initially will provide this support, but except possibly for South Africa, other "richer" Indian Ocean littorals, particularly Australia and the Southeast Asians, are unlikely to be forthcoming with much assistance. They will go along tacitly with the initiative but the WPNS, where common interests are more apparent, will remain their principal forum for naval cooperation. A lot of drive and resources from India will be required if the IONS is to remain afloat.

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