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Cooperative Security in the Indian Ocean Region: The IONS Way

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The Indian Ocean has recently witnessed increasing piracy. It is also a region for potential great power rivalry in the 21st century. The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium could emerge as an effective cooperative security mechanism in the region.

THE SECOND meeting of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), a colloquium of naval chiefs of the Indian Ocean littoral area, was held in Dubai from 10-12 May 2010. Among other security issues concerning the Rim area, this year's meeting largely focused on piracy, smuggling and terrorism affecting the Indian Ocean region (IOR). The meeting, attended by naval chiefs from 32 countries of Southeast Asia, South Asia, Africa and Oceania, called for increased cooperation among littoral countries to ensure maritime security.

The IONS, a brain child of the Indian navy, meets every two years. The first IONS was held in New Delhi in 2008 in which 26 navy chiefs participated and discussed various transnational challenges that affect maritime domain. A technical seminar under IONS was held in Sri Lanka in 2008 which discussed areas of interoperability, technical cooperation and understanding procedures between IONS countries. Notably, the United States, the United Kingdom and Japan have applied for observer status in the IONS, but China has not, and the decision will be taken by vote in the IONS.

IONS -- a cooperative security mechanism

The Symposium is conceived on the model of the US-led Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS) to facilitate constructive engagement between littoral countries of the Indian Ocean. Its primary objectives are to promote a shared understanding of the maritime issues facing the littoral states of the Indian Ocean; to strengthen the capability of all littoral nation-states of the Indian Ocean; to establish and promote a variety of transnational, maritime, cooperative-mechanisms to mitigate maritime security concerns; to develop interoperability in terms of doctrines, procedures, organisational and

logistic systems and operational processes; and to identify any other areas of cooperation as may be mutually agreed. Since it comprises countries with different political, ideological and cultural orientations, IONS promotes the idea of “cooperation of the willing”. Although it lacks political vision, its operational dynamism does support the political process for an enduring peace and stability in the Indian Ocean region.

This year’s meeting pondered on the need to prepare participating countries well to tackle the key issues of humanitarian assistance and protection of the environment, apart from piracy. In the meeting Indian naval chief Admiral Nirmal Verma proposed a system to scan all containers of the merchant ships trade cargoes to avoid sea-borne terror attack. To deal with the vastness of the area, he suggested that “limitations of assets among member countries could, in substantial measures, be overcome through a well coordinated and secure information exchange network”. For starters, information exchange could begin at a “sub regional” basis, said Adm Verma.

Piracy a major threat in IOR

The Indian Ocean Region, particularly the Horn of Africa, faces the most potent threat from piracy, which costs tens of millions of dollars for the shipping fraternity, owing to its importance as the busiest trade route and the key channel for global energy trade. According to the International Maritime Bureau (IMB), piracy incidents in 2009 have doubled from the previous year, with Somali waters accounting for more than half of the total of 406 reported incidents. As of now various navies are conducting anti-piracy operations either independently or under the multinational mechanism of the European Union-led Shared Awareness and Deconfliction (SHADE).

Indian Ocean’s lack of a “dominant power”

Compared with other waters of Asia like the East China Sea and South China Sea, a distinctive feature of the Indian Ocean is that it lacks a “dominant power” in the region. Although India is a major country in the littoral area, it is often reluctant to take a leading role in the security apparatus of the Indian Ocean region. Evidently, this “dominant power” vacuum in the region has invited extra regional powers into the area. It could even be argued that an extra-regional power, the United States, is the most significant naval power in the Indian Ocean region. The absence of a “dominant power” at least to ensure security of the sea lines, exposes the region to the contours of power politics in the 21st century, says Robert Kaplan in Foreign Affairs. But Kaplan, like many western thinkers, foresees a power rivalry between India and China in the Indian Ocean for dominance. However, due to the lack of military wherewithal and political will India may not be involved in such a rivalry. India has never dreamt of becoming a hegemon in the region. At the same time India tries to avoid to be seen as part of any bloc to contain any other power, and is trying to ensure that the water should not be a battleground for great power rivalry.

Great power rivalry and regional security

The Indian Ocean has not been free from great power rivalry, however. When the former Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979, ostensibly to open the way to the warm waters, Pakistan facilitated US power in the region. This not only prohibited the Soviet Union’s possible entry into the Indian Ocean but also helped the US to become an unchallenged power in the IOR. In recent times, however, China, another non-littoral country, is increasing its military presence in the Indian Ocean in the name of energy security and anti-piracy operations.

From an Indian perspective, Beijing provides economic and logistical support to construct infrastructure facilities in the coasts of Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Myanmar - it’s so called allies - euphemistically termed as the “string of pearls” strategy. If China strengthens it’s “string of pearls” strategy and possibly get a naval base in the region that would not only encircle India but would

challenge US power in the region. At the same time, a potential military rivalry between China and US in the Pacific over Taiwan could also spill over to the Indian Ocean.

In this circumstances, the littoral countries particularly India should avoid such power rivalry in the Indian Ocean. In a way, IONS can be an effective and inclusive cooperative security mechanism in the Indian Ocean region. It can reduce the influence of extra- regional powers, but more importantly, great power rivalry. It could also ensure maritime security in the Indian Ocean region through practical coordination at the policy level and operational synergy among littoral countries.

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