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IONS and the Indian Ocean: Reviving a Listless Initiative

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Synopsis

Despite an enthusiastic start in 2008, the only pan Indian Ocean Region maritime security initiative, IONS, had fallen into strategic inertia, threatened by creeping irrelevance. Will the growing interest of China and other external powers along with a change of Chairmanship revive this forum?

Commentary

THE INDIAN Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), the sole naval forum in this region, is attracting interest from China and other “out of area” powers. This growing interest is providing a catalyst for the rejuvenation of IONS at a time when it is, ironically, threatened by creeping irrelevance due to ineffective leadership.

Given the growing interest of China and the other external powers such as Brazil, Chile and Peru to join as members or observers, IONS seriously needs to review itself. The emergence of Australia as IONS’ new chair provides an impetus for fresh leadership of the forum.

Growing interest of external powers

China has, for a long time, been pushing hard to get itself admitted into IONS. Given its strategic interest, China would naturally like to influence the maritime security discourse in the region by joining the forum either as an observer or a member. Ironically, the original idea of not having “observers” in IONS was aimed at ensuring that out of region powers like China did not manage to enter the organisation through the “observer route”.

Indeed, China’s interest reflects the increasing attention in IONS by many ‘out of area’ powers which have also expressed a keen desire to join as members or observers. Their rationale was motivated by IONS’ mission of enhancing cooperation on issues of regional maritime security.

The South American countries - Brazil, Chile and Peru - have sought greater interaction with Indian Ocean littorals given what they perceive as the growing strategic importance of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). They would not only like to participate in some maritime exercises in this region but also start a similar initiative in their own area.

Notwithstanding the growing external interest, the IONS itself has been facing internal inertia. While it began in earnest in 2008, the forum seemed to have lacked direction and leadership since then.

The lacklustre years

IONS began in 2008 when the Indian Navy, in collaboration with the National Maritime Foundation, took the lead to set up the regional forum of navies. The primary aim of the initiative was to encourage discussions on matters of common maritime interest and promote cooperative engagement to ensure regional safety, stability and security. It was envisaged that a range of confidence-building initiatives, including a series of workshops, seminars and the like would foster cooperation amongst the littoral navies.

At the inaugural meeting that year, the expectations from the 27 naval chiefs who attended were high as this was the only pan-Indian Ocean maritime security initiative covering the entire region. However, the initiative lost steam over the years. The next Chair, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), did not provide the desired impetus to the forum. The UAE had been expected to showcase, with the backing of a large number of Gulf navies, their growing professional abilities, maritime capacities and “coming of age” through the IONS vehicle.

South Africa, which took over as the next Chair, was also expected to revive the initiative. It, too, did not provide the desired vibrancy and focus. Similarly, the hope that supporting East African navies would use the opportunity to bring forth their growing maritime capacities did not materialise. With such lackluster performance of the forum, some maritime strategists felt that the IONS initiative would soon lapse to irrelevance.

Australia as the new Chair

It was at this crucial juncture that Australia took over the Chair of IONS in March 2014 in Perth. Australia seems to have infused new energy into the initiative, giving hope that the forum will once again regain its strategic importance. Striking the right chord, the Royal Australian Navy (RAN), under its charismatic chief VAdm R J Griggs, organised a seminar titled “Protecting the Ability to Trade in the Indian Ocean Region” as well as the Chiefs’ Conclave in Perth.

The event rekindled considerable interest and was attended by 21 member countries with seven naval chiefs deciding to participate. Twelve members, however, indicated an inability to take part while 14 countries designated as ‘Observers for this event’ attended with two naval chiefs leading their delegations. The low number of attending chiefs from member navies was disappointing as it reflected the reduced importance they attached to the IONS initiative.

Still, one of the biggest achievements of RAN at the Chiefs’ Conclave was the agreement on the IONS Charter which had been delayed since inception. The move involved considerable backroom discussions and was achievement of sorts for the hosts. Discussing the nuances of the growing maritime economy and shipping trade in IOR, the IONS seminar did well to focus on core security and economic aspects of shipping and energy trade.

Not only did this bring about the concerns and common interests of the littorals but also refocused the necessity of evolving coordinated response strategies towards these issues under the umbrella of IONS.

In addition, Australia’s recent assumption of the chairmanship of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) proved helpful. This organisation has also found relevance in maritime security in contrast to its earlier charter which made no mention of the issue. However, attempts to subsume IONS under the larger IORA during the seminar phase was quickly opposed by members who argued that these two organisations were different in outlook and evolution.

Way forward

Given the potential revival of IONS as a maritime security player, the challenge facing the new Chair is to provide the leadership for the forum and introduce reforms, including initiating a permanent IONS secretariat. At the same time, the new Chair needs to forge cohesion among the member navies despite their differing capacities and make the forum more active and relevant to the growing challenges in maritime security in the region.

Just as importantly, the Chair has to carefully approach the debate of encouraging/ accepting the concept of having “out of area” countries as observers while being mindful of the possible complications arising from the injection of power politics. Given the current encouraging trends, the new Chair will have to rejuvenate this important pan-Indian Ocean security forum to its full strategic potential – or see IONS sidelined by the external powers.

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