

India–Africa Cooperation in the Maritime Space

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Transnational security threats—such as piracy and associated crew hostage issues, like hostage for ransom, armed robberies, illicit narcotics trade, illegal fishing and arms trafficking—confront India and its African partners in the maritime space. Such challenges undermine a free and open maritime space, as well as secure and uninterrupted global trade, thereby propagating regional instability with worldwide ramifications. These dynamics also encompass human costs. The positioning of organised crime, insurgency and terrorism in this space is critical to understand the extent to which this problem has manifested.

The Indian Navy has stepped up its efforts to counter these threats in conjunction with its African counterparts as a preferred security partner. Dialogues, capacity building, deployment of navy patrols, training and enhancement of security measures are some of the fundamental ways these issues have been taken up on various levels for redressal. The India–Mozambique–Tanzania Trilateral Exercise (IMT TRILAT), whose conception has been based on expanding the maritime domain’s overall security architecture, figures prominently here. Mauritius too has received India’s support for capacity and capability building.

These collective initiatives have resulted in some countries, such as Seychelles and Mauritius, establishing coastal surveillance and radar systems to enhance security measures in their surrounding coastal areas.

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Nonetheless, several African states face challenges in exercising jurisdiction over their exclusive economic zones (EEZs) and cannot deploy sufficient aircraft or boats to police the waters. Thus, due to capacity constraints, they are unable to arrest and escort pirates to the mainland to await trial or extradition to their countries of origin.

Keywords: *India, Africa, Maritime Cooperation, Challenges*

INTRODUCTION

The cooperation between India and its African partners has sustained across centuries of trade and engagement, regardless of heightened global tensions, ideological polarisation and changing geopolitical landscapes.

In the 20th century, the shared colonial legacies and subsequent establishment of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), of which all African states (barring South Sudan) were members, only strengthened their bond. In fact, the presence of India and African countries at the Bandung Conference in Indonesia (18–24 April 1955)—the first notable Afro-Asian meeting of newly independent countries that intended to promote cultural and economic collaboration—set the tone for non-alignment. This meeting sought to encourage a more significant role and voice for players uninvolved in Cold War politics. Thus, united by their vision of charting sovereign foreign policies, this cooperation further intensified in the Cold War era. In fact, Ghana was one of the founding member states of NAM.

As independent states in the post-World War II system, India and African countries began looking towards each other to cement bilateral and broader regional ties and advance their collective interests. Over the years, India took decisive measures to come to the aid of African countries in various sectors, such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) initiatives (a critical component of its maritime cooperation with the continental partners), grant support, technical consultation, small development projects, capacity building, extending the line of credit and naval, military and counter-terror practices, including joint exercises and signing of memorandums of understanding (MoUs).

One of India's earliest defence cooperation with any African state occurred in 1956 when, at the request of Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia, the Indian leadership sanctioned the establishment of the Imperial Military Academy in Harar. As a result, Ethiopian and other African soldiers started receiving training at this renowned institution.¹ Since then, Indian defence institutions have trained several military and naval personnel from various

African countries, as also patrolled the waters in conjunction with its island partners.

This article's primary focus is on India and Africa's maritime cooperation, key pillars, historical context, major agreements signed and achievements, as well as geopolitical considerations driving their relationship forward. The maritime space is critical for deeper introspection because of its weight in international relations and realpolitik debates. According to Alfred T. Mahan:

Those who hold that our political interests are confined to matters within our own borders and are unwilling to admit that circumstances may compel us in the future to political action without them look with dislike and suspicion upon the growth of a body [the navy] whose very existence indicates that nations have international duties as well as international rights and that international complications will arise from which we can no more escape than the states which have preceded us in history or those contemporary with us.²

KEY MARITIME STRATEGIES AND IDEAS DRIVING INDIA–AFRICA COOPERATION

India and African countries are cognisant of the need for calm oceanic spaces and establishing themselves as notable sea powers to preserve and advance their national interests—security and economic. Both partners have affirmed the need for freedom of navigation and rule-based international order, with their primary area of focus being the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

Mutually Beneficial and Strategic Trading Routes

Spanning over one-fifth of the global water surface area, that is, from the eastern coast of Africa to the western coast of Australian, the IOR encompasses key trading routes, namely, the Strait of Malacca, the Bab-el-Mandeb, the Ombai and Wetar Straits and the Strait of Hormuz. The Strait of Malacca, specifically, is a critical chokepoint in the IOR. The world's major trade traverses through these chokepoints and overall, the region is resource rich, where oil, natural gas, plentiful fish and rare earth materials can be found.

The geographical position of the African landmass makes it a critical security partner for India, evident from its frequent mention in India's foreign policy debates. In addition, the resource-rich and vast market of African countries, cumulatively, makes them viable long-term partners for India. Finally, the shared security concerns continue to push India and coastal African countries to work in tandem.

SAGAR and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)

Introduced in 2015 during Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi's visit to Mauritius, the Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) doctrine unveiled India's vision of a peaceful and cooperative environment for littoral states in the IOR to engage in, with the nexus of economic development, maritime security and naval cooperation at its crux. Countering maritime piracy and climate change while working in conjunction in certain areas, such as tourism, infrastructure and trade, is a prominent feature of this policy.

Analysts note that one of the prominent organisations through which PM Modi has implemented this foreign policy directive is the IORA.³ Indeed, the IORA has become one of the key pillars of India's foreign policymaking regarding the littoral states, a fact underlined by PM Modi's 2016 visit to four critical regional players, namely, South Africa, Mozambique, Kenya and Tanzania. Situated in the Western Indian Ocean (WIO) region, these countries provide the gateway into the vast IOR. Approximately 50 per cent of African maritime energy trade occurs using the waterways traversing via chokepoints running through the maritime region surrounding these countries.⁴

Blue Economy, Delhi Declaration, Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI)

India's Defence Minister, Rajnath Singh, addressed the gathering at the African Union (AU) Summit in Lomé in 2016.⁵ During the event, he laid out critical guiding principles for the country's engagement with its African counterparts in maritime space and expressed India's willingness to assist them in 'harnessing the potential of the Blue Economy'. In addition, he broadly underlined the specific areas where the Indian leadership was willing to add to the AU's endeavours:

- (i) To deal with piracy, terrorism and other crimes;
- (ii) To marine safety and natural disasters;
- (iii) Promote greater collaboration in trade, tourism and investment;
- (iv) Develop infrastructure;
- (v) Promote marine science and technology;
- (vi) Promote sustainable fisheries;
- (vii) Protection of the marine environment.⁶

The Delhi Declaration (2015), which was issued after the conclusion of the Third India–Africa Forum Summit, also added another layer to the

overall partnership, where the two sides agreed to cooperate in several areas, such as the blue economy:

...Promote cooperation in the blue/ocean economy towards the sustainable development of marine resources; place special emphasis on closer collaboration in developing sustainable fisheries, combating illegal and unregulated fishing, managing the marine resources, exploring non-marine resources, conducting hydrography surveys, promoting eco-tourism, developing renewable energy, disaster risk reduction through modern early warning tools, pollution control, and other coastal and ocean studies...⁷

Here, it is necessary to understand how India and the wider African region perceive their maritime neighbourhood and position in the global order. To begin with, one can recollect former President Pranab Mukherjee's statement over a decade ago:

Fortunately, after almost a millennia of inward and landward focus, we are once again turning our gaze outwards and seawards, which is the natural direction of view for a nation seeking to re-establish itself not simply as a continental power but even more so as a 'maritime' power and consequently as one that is of significance upon the global stage.⁸

Additionally, on 4 November 2019, PM Modi initiated the IPOI during the East Asia Summit organised in Bangkok. Described as an 'open global initiative', seven key pillars anchor this strategy:⁹

1. trade connectivity and maritime transport;
2. maritime resources;
3. maritime ecology;
4. maritime security;
5. capacity building and resource sharing;
6. science, technology and academic cooperation; and
7. disaster risk reduction and management.

The initiative's globalised, unambiguous, inclusive and transparent nature ensures that African states in the region can, without any challenges or concerns, align themselves with specific pillars and integrate them into their bilateral or multilateral cooperation with India. This will contribute to deepening ties and mutually beneficial cooperation between like-minded countries.

Since the Indo-Pacific region and, by this virtue, the African continent are vital pillars of India's Indo-Pacific strategy, the initiative of instituting the Indian Ocean Division (IOD) has been deemed to represent the country's 'expanding and strengthening Indian Ocean outreach'.¹⁰ As part of its Indo-Pacific strategy, India has displayed an accommodative attitude towards the Vanilla Islands, including Seychelles and Mauritius' centrality, and the significant role that certain countries, like Kenya, Mauritius and Tanzania, can play within the broad framework.

It is thus evident that a greater emphasis on India's role in the maritime domain, particularly by reassessing its approach towards the African continent, has been in place after unveiling the 'Ten Guiding Principles' and the SAGAR doctrine. As is the case with other areas of India's foreign policy engagements, observers of developments in the oceanic space have argued that post-2014, the importance attached to India's overall cooperation with African countries has surged.

2050 Africa Integrated Maritime Strategy

At the same time, the 2050 Africa Integrated Maritime Strategy is one of the key pillars of the continent's overall maritime strategy and its cooperation with India moving forward. As per this framework, the littoral states aim to regain control of their unregulated exclusive economic zones (EEZs) and position themselves in the geopolitically contested ecosystem.

More importantly, they look to sustainably exploit maritime opportunities to their greatest potential and use the maritime economy as a vital factor in realising their economic growth. Finally, a robust coastal zone management system, freedom of access to the maritime bodies even by landlocked countries and the establishment of a combined EEZ are some of the broader themes of this regional strategy. These tenets are a joint regional attempt to move past the constraints, which include their inability to exercise more than limited jurisdiction in their maritime backyard.¹¹

KEY AREAS OF ENGAGEMENT

Piracy and India–Africa Counter-Response

Countering maritime piracy has emerged as a crucial tenet of India's engagement with the region, moving their relationship beyond the economic sphere. To that effect, the Indian Navy and coast guard's role in warding off threats from criminal elements, like pirates, has proven instrumental. Since 2008 when Indian anti-piracy patrols were initiated in the Gulf of Aden,

over 3,000 vessels have found a reliable escort in waters infested with piracy networks.¹² Although piracy has decreased gradually over the years, it is vital to account for the role played by Indian officers in this respect.

Overall, the piracy-affected waters off the Omani and Somalian coast and the Maldives have been one of the key enablers of Indian Navy's participation in oceanic spaces, such as the Eastern Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Aden. This is not only because of the centuries-long linkage between India and Africa or their converging maritime security concerns. Instead, it is India's commercial and energy interests, whose realisation is contingent on the assuredly safe transport of goods, such as oil and fertilisers, to and from its shores, that are also at stake. As per India's Ministry of Shipping records, exports totalling US\$ 60 billion and imports worth US\$ 50 billion make their way across this trade route annually.¹³ With due diligence of Indian officers aboard the vessels, no ship under their protection has faced hijacking by pirates.

Furthermore, for over a decade, the Indian Navy has apprehended 120 pirates and neutralised more than 40 targeted maritime piracy attacks. It has also undertaken measures, such as providing aerial surveillance cover to foreign navies, to thwart piracy attempts. One such effort occurred in 2017 aboard *OS 35*, a bulk carrier. During the same year, the sounding of anti-piracy alarm of *Lord Mountbatten*, a merchant vessel, resulted in an Indian Navy ship seizing control of two mother boats with more than six skiffs, ammunition and at least one AK-47, all of which would have allowed the pirates to attack the vessel under duress.¹⁴

The multilateral formats, like the United Nations Security Council sessions, are another testament to India's commitment towards upholding the tenets enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), adopted in 1982. The UNCLOS provides a framework for governing the maritime space and available resources that the states should abide by while operating in oceans and seas. India firmly advocates for this agreement's implementation across seas and oceans, including in the Gulf of Guinea where it maintains a visible presence, further assuring the international community of extending support to bolster its security. At the same time, Indian representatives at the United Nations (UN) have warned of the nexus between piracy, extremism and terrorism and the resultant impact on the region:

...The growing risk of a terrorist threat from Central Sahel towards the Gulf of Guinea, as was demonstrated by the terrorist attacks against government forces in Benin and Togo since 2021. We need to continue to look out for

links between extremist, terrorist and pirate groups in the Gulf of Guinea, as these can be a lethal nexus and has the potential to reverse the recent antipiracy gains made in the Gulf of Guinea.¹⁵

Piracy-related security threats have resulted in significant losses, worth more than US\$ 1.9 billion annually; and the absence of stringent laws to ensure the persecution of maritime offenders in this region has exacerbated maritime security dilemmas.¹⁶ This is, thus, another key area of cooperation between India and its African partners. Perhaps, they can introduce a framework similar to the Yaoundé Code of Conduct (albeit broader in its outlook to accommodate Indian concerns) to address such issues better. This document, launched in 2013 by countries situated within and in the area surrounding the Gulf of Guinea, sought to combat threats, such as illegal maritime activity in Central and West Africa, piracy and armed robbery of vessels.

The Yaoundé Code of Conduct, however, is a non-binding document. This is a worrying factor since lack of legal ramifications and the non-binding nature of the document hinder any substantial change from taking place and prevent a joint and comprehensive African initiative to neutralise the above-mentioned threats. Therefore, any initiative running parallel to this (in conjunction with India, should it be formulated) must remedy such loopholes. At the same time, India and Africa's littoral states can collaborate on instituting a collective aid agency to fund sustainable blue economy and anti-piracy projects of mutual interests.

African states have welcomed the presence of Indian ships in areas of proximity. During the Third India–Africa Forum Summit in 2015, PM Modi declared the year to be the beginning of a fresh start in India–Africa relations. He announced the advent of India's reformed foreign policymaking, where the growth of the region's island countries would remain a focus area.¹⁷ Thus, Indian patrol vessels were obligated to ensure the safe voyage of commercial and energy products through the waterways and key chokepoints. Some of the other critical responsibilities of the Indian Navy included aiding the littoral states in setting up their coastal radar networks and conducting bathymetric surveys.

This event was a milestone in their ties because it resulted in the launch of the Strategic Partnership Agreement, as per which African countries and India would work towards deepened collaboration in various areas, such as sustainable fisheries, ecotourism, disaster risk reduction, renewable energy, developing blue economy and neutralising illegal and unsupervised

bathymetric surveys and fishing.¹⁸ These themes were given due emphasis due to their linkage with the livelihood of ordinary people who are seafaring individuals.

Hydrographic Surveys

Currently, India has signed MoUs regarding hydrographic surveys with Tanzania, Kenya, Mauritius, the Maldives, Tanzania and Mozambique. There is immense potential for India's cooperation with other littoral states requiring systemic surveys. India's bathymetric capabilities can contribute towards capacity building of the continental countries to enhance their security measures. India has already conducted such surveys for Seychelles and Kenya.

As described by the Indian Navy in the *Indian Maritime Security Strategy* (2015), cooperation in this field is aimed to help India attain the 'status of producer nation of nautical charts in the IOR'. Furthermore, hydrographic surveys conducted by India and its partners in African states are part of former's goal of bolstering overall security and playing a pivotal role in instituting a 'favourable and positive maritime environment'. The interoperability and mutual cognisance of shared interests achieved with friendly countries' navies contribute towards 'capacity-building and capability enhancement'. In addition, the inclusion of the Mozambique Channel and the Mediterranean Sea as critical chokepoints in the 2015 strategy has enhanced the importance of Africa in India's maritime engagement matrix, even though it is in the country's secondary areas of maritime interest. Cumulatively, these activities significantly enhance India and its African partner countries' maritime domain awareness.¹⁹

Insurgency Threats, Terrorism, Security and Capacity Building

Increasingly, littoral states along the WIO region have been confronting security threats emanating from heroin trafficking that occurs between Afghanistan and Europe. A significant portion of this illegal trade takes place via the sea route, for example, through the Mozambique Channel. Also, provinces like the Cape Delgado in Mozambique have had to bear the brunt of exploitation of maritime space by Al-Sunna (an Islamic State of Iraq and Syria [ISIS]-inspired outfit) due to the capture of Mocímboa da Praia Port in 2020.

As per expert observers, violent extremists, such as Al-Sunna, were able to further their insurgency on land using seaborne operations. They used fishing boats, forcefully acquired from nearby fishing communities, to target

a specific country's naval vessels, cut off access to key ports, and transport additional fighters, arms and ammunition across seas. Moreover, they transported illegal goods via sea to the shores and engaged in transactions on the black market with organised crime groups or extorted the local populace. Reports also emerged about the illicit heroin trade, kidnapping for ransom activities and island hopping by this group with complete impunity due to weak institutional apparatus and absence of fear of reprisal by authorities—domestic or external.²⁰

It took nearly a year before Mozambique's naval commander declared that the oceanic space taken hostage by terrorists was 'totally free'.²¹ This was part of the five-year battle against insurgents that jolted Cape Delgado repeatedly and required external support from the South African Development Community and Rwanda to neutralise the broader threat. Further, the challenge underlined the need for self-reliance and for each state to demonstrate effective counter-terror responses in the maritime domain without overwhelmingly relying on external powers to repel and neutralise key security threats.

To address the insurgency threat and assist in bolstering its defence, India presented Mozambique, a strategic African partner, with 44 sports utility vehicles and two indigenous fast interceptor boats. In 2019, India also signed an MoU regarding sharing of white shipping information. Furthermore, communication equipment and the assistance of a four-member team to train local officials to maintain and use the interceptor boats was extended to this coastal African country.²² The defence aid is critical to India's capacity-building efforts to support its African partner's counter-terrorism efforts. This is also important given the fact that the Mozambique Channel is another crucial chokepoint in the IOR and has access to vast coal reserves and natural gas in the Rovuma Basin.²³

Previously, in 2004, the Indian defence minister had transferred the ownership of rapid interceptor boats to Mozambique as the African state began transitioning from dependence on Western security providers to self-reliance. India also worked with Mauritius to make it self-reliant in terms of upholding its maritime security, including extending lines of credit, worth US\$ 500 million, to set up projects crucial for bolstering national security. For that purpose, *CGS Barracuda*, an offshore patrol vessel custom-made by India, was commissioned into the Mauritius Coast Guard in 2015 during PM Modi's visit to the country. Indeed, Port Louis has been one of the major beneficiaries of New Delhi's generosity, receiving interceptor patrol boats and surveillance aircraft as part of its capacity-building-oriented foreign policy,

over a period of time.²⁴ Furthermore, the Indian Navy has been conducting patrols within the EEZ of Mauritius; and this nation benefits from equipment and military training provided by India.

Like Mauritius, the Maldives has also received lines of credit from India, totalling US\$ 100 million, in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami. Besides, the country has benefitted from widespread investments in the infrastructure and tourism sectors. Similarly, Seychelles has been the recipient of two Chetak helicopters, while Comoros has been gifted high-speed interceptor boats. It has also received targeted training from India, focused on countering unreported and unregulated fishing, narcotics trafficking and maritime piracy.

As the African states began to reach out to prospective partners for shoring up their security and safeguarding commercial interests, India, through its naval officers in the IOR, was deemed to be a worthy stakeholder.

Clearly, the continent faces numerous challenges, ranging from arms trafficked through its maritime space, exacerbating conflicts elsewhere, to the trafficking of goods, such as narcotics, antiquities, oil, ivory and charcoal, which are used for terror financing. Moreover, as a manufacturing hub, the continental landmass produces highly profitable raw goods that are eventually shipped throughout the world, such as cotton, cocoa, diamond and gold. A prosperous commercial sector requires secure transit routes and neutralisation of piracy-related activities or remote-controlled boats detonated by terrorists across its maritime chokepoints, including those in the Red Sea.²⁵

Therefore, the African countries' interest in collaborating with the Indian counterparts in securing their maritime spaces lies in the realisation that partnership with credible actors is necessary to secure their maritime domain of influence. The key challenges they hope to address in partnership with the Indian Navy and coast guard include: lack of implementation of their sovereign jurisdiction in their EEZs; arms, human and narcotics trafficking; and environmental degradation of their coastal areas. A sustainable and secure blue economic zones where Africa's littoral states can enforce their maritime rules and regulations.

As a result, in 2016, India's Ministry of External Affairs established the IOD to bring the littoral states, barring Comoros and Madagascar, in the region under the purview of one authority and treat it holistically as a singular theatre. Three years later, the administration reoriented its policy objectives and completed the circle by including the remaining two countries in the list.

Nonetheless, if other littoral states fail to build their capacity to eliminate threats to their security and citizens through real-time surveillance and counter-responses, the pervasive problems created by terrorism will worsen.

Worryingly, the inability to exercise their jurisdiction over their maritime spaces amid a spike in spillover of terrorism due to porous borders will exacerbate the instability posed by other terrorist groups that mushroom at an unprecedented pace under these circumstances.

India–Africa Maritime Exercises and Humanitarian and Disaster Relief Operations

Some of the key maritime exercises that India and its African partners undertake are listed in Table 1; however, this list is not exhaustive. Furthermore, there are some exercises that include additional partners.

Table 1. Maritime Exercises

Index No.	Name of Maritime Exercise
1.	The Africa–India Field Training Exercise (AFINDEX). It involved 23 African countries in the most recent exercise.
2.	India–Mozambique–Tanzania Trilateral Exercise (IMT TRILAT)
3.	Exercise Milan (at least four African countries were involved in the most recent exercise)
4.	IBSAMAR (India, Brazil, South Africa)
5.	Exercise Cutlass Express (involved 12 East African states)

Source: Information from a range of sources, combined by the author.

One of the critical examples of recalibration in India–Africa maritime cooperation has been the joint trilateral exercise, India–Brazil–South Africa Maritime or IBSAMAR. The seventh edition of this exercise was conducted at Port Gqeberha (Port Elizabeth) in 2022. The overall objective of this exercise encompasses some essential features, such as the enhancement of interoperability of the navies to pursue joint operations and objectives, countering maritime security challenges, strengthening maritime cooperation, conducting joint training and securing sea lines of communication. The IBSAMAR was launched in 2008.²⁶

There have also been several instances where India has participated in joint maritime exercises with one or more African states. For example, in October 2022, the navies of India, Tanzania and Mozambique carried out their first three-day trilateral maritime exercise in Dar es Salaam. It broadly centred around training and information sharing to cultivate capability among their navy personnel, deepening maritime cooperation and furthering interoperability.

These measures are critical even though maritime piracy is declining. This is because kidnappings at sea, including in areas such as the Gulf of Guinea (housing key energy trade routes), have remained a particularly acute challenge for various countries, like India and Africa. It is one of the primary reasons why Indian naval vessels, like *INS Tarkash*, are currently deployed in the Gulf of Guinea as part of the anti-maritime piracy operations.

At the same time, HADR operations carried out by the Indian Navy have been one of the cornerstones of India–Africa maritime cooperation. One of the crucial examples of how this played out was in the aftermath of Cyclone IDAI in Mozambique in 2019, where Indian naval ships provided timely assistance to the affected populace.²⁷ Another example is of an Indian naval vessel that delivered more than 500 kilograms of epidemic medicines and 250 megatons of rice to Mozambicans in Beira, the country's capital city.²⁸

Today, all Indian Navy vessels deployed in international waters have to carry on board additional HADR packages to aid countries in the aftermath of disasters like cyclones. This has proven vital in presenting India as a first responder amid major disasters and follow-up operations. This provision's availability is a key lesson learned from the fallout of the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami. This natural calamity was possibly one of the most devastating natural disasters in recent history, resulting in the deaths of more than 200,000 people across at least twelve countries, with its epicentre in Indonesia.

The convergence of interest in securing the IOR by India and its African partners has been noted by Defence Minister Rajnath Singh at the India–Africa Defence Dialogue, organised on the sidelines of the DefExpo in 2022. His remarks highlight the enhanced significance that Indian representatives have attached to their relations with African countries:

India remains united with African countries in their quest for peace, security, stability, growth, and prosperity. Our partnership with Africa is centred on the ten guiding principles articulated by Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi during his address to Parliament of Uganda in 2018. He had clearly stated that Africa will be at the top of our priorities. We will continue to intensify and deeper our engagements with Africa. Apart from the goals of developmental, commercial, and technological partnerships that India wants to forge with African nations, the statement also covered cooperation in strengthening capabilities in combating terrorism and extremism, supporting UN peacekeeping missions, and work for open and free oceans.²⁹

IORA

According to Ababu Namwamba, Kenya's former Chief Administrative Secretary for Foreign Affairs, 'Kenya is the Indo-Pacific gateway to Africa... connecting it to the rest of the world'.³⁰ Furthermore, Kenya—a leading regional economic powerhouse—and Tanzania's geographical positioning makes them credible partners in combating illegal fishing and ensuring a viable and safeguarded blue economy. Finally, Mauritius, as a base of operations for IORA and the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC), housing its headquarters and, due to its geography, has been a critical partner for India in maritime affairs.³¹

The IORA has been treated as an essential forum for member states to address their maritime security grievances and formulate a broad-based consensus on measures needed to establish rule-based governance in international waters and use opportunities presented in that area to their greatest benefit. Nonetheless, efforts must also be made to bring together their technological expertise and political will to inculcate more sustainable fishing and ecologically friendly categories of industries operating in the maritime domain.

Moving beyond frequent visits to the IOR's littoral states' ports and conducting joint exercises, the Indian Navy has facilitated information sharing with its regional counterparts and capacity building via transferring critical hardware. It has also regularly delegated its vessels to patrol key trading chokepoints, like the Gulf of Aden, Strait of Hormuz and Bab-el-Mandeb, which open into the Indian Ocean.

ADDITIONAL AREAS OF COOPERATION

India has demonstrated capabilities in providing maritime security for the littoral states. Further, India's wariness about the Chinese presence in its traditional areas of influence has pushed it and the African partners closer. Madagascar and Mauritius are case studies wherein India has helped set up coastal radar chain networks to survey maritime threats on the high seas.

Mission Sagar and COVID-19 Assistance

Maritime engagement between partners has also been relied on to ensure the delivery of vital assistance, primarily through India's 'Mission Sagar', including vaccines, food and medical equipment, to island countries in the African continent. This initiative was unveiled in the COVID-19 aftermath as part of India's assistance to at least 15 island countries in the IOR. Countries

like Comoros, Madagascar, Seychelles, Mauritius, the Maldives and Djibouti made it onto the list. Some of the vital aid provisions delivered by the Indian Navy included 300 megatons of liquid medical oxygen, 3,000 megatons of food items and 900 oxygen concentrators.³²

To understand the contemporary logic behind strategic engagement between India and its African partners, it is important to reflect on PM Modi's 2016 visit to Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique and South Africa and the key themes under discussion. For example, during the Kenyan visit, he spoke about deeper engagement in areas such as coastal and maritime security amid myriad complexities. Likewise, the interaction with the Tanzanian president revolved around bolstering defence and security partnerships, mainly in the oceanic space.

Such initiatives cultivate goodwill among the African states and strengthen India–Africa cooperation in the maritime space over the long term. This has been visible in deepening of ties between these historical partners through signing of various agreements and cooperation in shared areas of concern and interest.

Information Fusion Centre–Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR)

India has spearheaded the IFC-IOR over the last three years, which links coastal radar centres of littoral states along the nearly 7,500 kilometre-long coastline. Two African liaison officers, that is, from Mauritius and Seychelles, are posted at the centre at the moment. Efforts must be made to engage more extensively with African states by bolstering the strength of liaison officers posted at the IFC-IOR. Launched in 2018, the centre is located in Gurugram, within the Indian Navy's Information Management and Analysis Centre.

In order to expand the IFC-IOR's role and scope of maritime space activities, including bolster bilateral maritime information sharing, awareness, mutual trust, synergy and expertise development, an MoU has been signed with the Regional Coordination Operations Centre (RCOC) in Seychelles on 21 February 2023. This initiative will potentially:

allow the centres to effectively develop a common maritime understanding to counter non-traditional maritime security threats such as piracy and armed robbery, human and contraband trafficking, Illegal Unregulated and Unreported fishing, arms running, poaching, maritime tourism, etc., with a special focus on the western Indian Ocean.³³

This centre has been set up to promote maritime awareness and work in conjunction with other information centres, international agencies and partner states globally, considering that over 50 per cent of worldwide oil trade and 75 per cent of international maritime trade traverses through the IOR. It is further hoped that the training imparted to liaison officers in the centre would translate into joint coordination to manage disasters and other maritime incidents. This would also help enhance capacity building and information sharing, thereby facilitating ship and submarine safety. As a result, to date, liaison officers from 12 partner countries, including Australia, Singapore, Seychelles, the Maldives and Sri Lanka, have been stationed at the centre.³⁴ Furthermore, visiting dignitaries have been taken to the site for an insightful briefing and to foster interest for deeper engagement among other like-minded states.

The IFC-IOR operates as a concentrated, single-point maritime data domain, generating real-time images of the vast coastline. Its facilities and services have been thrown open to members of the IORA to facilitate real-time tracking of their deployed vessels. Its vision is “to advance maritime safety and security in the Indian Ocean Region; by enhancing maritime domain awareness and coordinating activities, through information sharing, cooperation, and expertise development, along with partner nations and agencies.”³⁵

Illicit, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing

All African states require maritime fishing to be closely regulated as, in many countries, approximately 90 per cent of the protein is derived from fish. Thus, any disruption due to environmental damage or illegal and unregulated fishing can hamper the livelihood and sustenance of millions. This unregulated, illicit and unreported fishing for more than five decades has resulted in water livestock becoming endangered, biodiversity damage and industry loss totalling US\$ 11.20 billion.³⁶

The Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) of the UN states that such activities obstruct:

regional efforts to conserve and manage fish stocks and, as a consequence, inhibits progress towards achieving the goals of long-term sustainability and responsibility...Disadvantages and discriminates against those fishers that act responsibly...threatening marine biodiversity, food security for communities who rely on fisheries resources for protein and the livelihoods of those involved in this sector.³⁷

It has also been observed that these unlawful actions, often carried out by foreign vessels, result in coastal African states losing taxes, as well as landing and licence fees levied on regulated and lawful fishing.³⁸ This act has simultaneously impacted the maritime environment, with domino effects, and the livelihood of millions of individuals who depend on this occupation solely to sustain their families.

In November 2022, four African countries, that is, Nigeria, Eritrea, Morocco and Angola, formalised the FAO's Agreement on Port State Measures (PSMA) to address the challenge of IUU fishing. The PSMA binds its signatories to 'prevent, deter, and eliminate' such non-permissible activities by foreign actors' vessels by disallowing port access to them. Nigeria, in particular, is on the list of the 10 worst-performing countries affected by this crisis.³⁹

Stated simply, IUU fishing undermines the sustainability of maritime ecosystems and livelihood of those residing in coastal areas; violates international conventions regarding permissible fishing; and poses an existential crisis to marine species. For example, piracy, mainly off the coast of Somalia, has significantly threatened the availability of fish in the region and exacerbated food insecurity of the locals. In fact, due to IUU fishing, at least US\$ 300 million⁴⁰ losses have been incurred by this country annually. Furthermore, problems related to jurisdiction and fishing rights have also raised tensions between India and its neighbouring countries, such as Pakistan and Sri Lanka.⁴¹ India can draw on its experiences to facilitate coastal African states' capacity building to respond to these persisting issues.

It has been reported that at least 48.90 per cent of identified vessels involved in such type of fishing—half of which are Chinese and European—are concentrated in African waters, with West Africa in the eye of the storm, reporting approximately 40 per cent of these cases.⁴²

Under such circumstances, India can assist its partner states in capacity building in areas of fisheries intelligence and cultivating cooperation on a multi-agency level, involving navies, coastguard, customs officials, intelligence agencies and political and civil society actors. This pathway is vital to address the challenge of IUU fishing off African coasts.

Notably, due to their territorial and economic size, a number of countries, including Comoros, Madagascar and Mauritius, can be categorised as high risk with regards to the consequences of bearing most of the above-mentioned maritime-based challenges.

Civilisational Ties and Non-Traditional Security

The civilisational ties between India and the wider continent through people-to-people contact and cultural and economic exchanges have only strengthened India's credibility in their eyes. Also, as part of India's extended neighbourhood, these four littoral countries' ports provide the essential gateway into the landlocked continental areas.

Deepened interactions between India and the African states have been critical to a prosperous and peaceful IOR, which is necessary for combating non-traditional security threats. These challenges include those posed to food, energy and merchandise security. Moreover, the threat posed by oil and toxic chemicals spillover (releasing toxic chemicals into oceans and seas) and piracy—attempted or successful—in these domains can only be countered through unimpeded capacity and consensus building.

AREAS OF CONSIDERATION MOVING FORWARD

India has been at the forefront of conducting regular anti-piracy patrols, raising maritime awareness and training naval personnel from African states to stabilise the surrounding maritime space. Its efforts stem from deep-rooted understanding of how threats, such as piracy, can hamper trade, human security and freedom of navigation. Also, illicit trafficking of narcotics, arms and humans, radicalisation, extremism and terrorism concern India and its African partners, and this is why deepened maritime security cooperation of all the stakeholders is important.

The 26/11 attacks that occurred in Mumbai underscored how concerning the challenge of maritime terrorism can be for a country's overall security. Since then, India has bolstered security on its shores and prevented the recurrence of a large-scale terrorist attack. It can, therefore, assist coastal African countries to formulate a comprehensive maritime policy and scale up their security measures to prevent the occurrence of targeted terrorist attacks; uphold and exercise their sovereignty in the EEZ; and contribute towards the management of a sustainable blue economy in the region. This is important because coastal African countries lack a comprehensive national maritime strategy to address these visible challenges.

As India aids its littoral partners in attaining maritime security and economic objectives, it can use their shared objectives of countering climate change and global warming-induced disasters to transition from reliance on non-renewable fossil fuels towards renewable energy resources.

In addition, littoral countries must be involved in increasing capacities within major working groups led by India across various international and regional organisations and events. The G20 presidency is a milestone in Indian foreign policymaking, for it has provided a unique opportunity for the country to be an inclusive voice for the Global South in a pivotal grouping. This would further help towards greater maritime interoperability and cohesion between these stakeholders, while allowing India's geopolitical concerns regarding China to be adequately addressed. The greater the pace at which India can achieve these objectives, the more effective role it will play in the IOR in conjunction with African partners.

CONCLUSION

The IOR is a key maritime area where India can offer its expertise and experience to the regional partners, who can follow suit as part of the SAGAR policy and other policies surrounding blue economy. As Beijing intensifies its coercive and hostile efforts in the region, New Delhi must counteract that with a more inclusive regional eco-maritime framework.

Beyond geopolitical calculations, the need to address shared challenges must continue driving India–Africa partnership in the IOR. Some of the main reasons behind increased cooperation between the littoral states and India are the mutual threats facing them: piracy; terrorism; trafficking of arms, ammunition and humans; unregulated and illegal fishing; and migration.

Furthermore, it would be beneficial if testimonies and experiences of coastal communities and fishers are considered by India and African littoral states to best prepare for the way forward and ensure credible governance of maritime space and species. These steps are critical for enhancing the socio-economic status of those legally involved in fishing activities and preserving the marine ecology of surrounding waters.

India and concerned African states must also account for the fallout of climate change, including global warming, on the chemical composition and sustainability of marine biosphere, while formulating laws and regulations to address the scourge of IUU fishing. Additionally, these actors must incorporate the benefits presented by artificial intelligence as part of their counter-response to keep pace with technological advancements to deal with evolving maritime challenges.

Despite the absence of legally binding mechanisms globally, India and coastal African states must make due efforts to ensure that maritime governance in areas of mutual interest and/or concerns is positioned within a

broader enforceable security architecture. The existing areas of collaboration between India and Africa, including but not limited to energy trade and capacity building in infrastructural development, could continue serving as the anchors of cooperation in the maritime domain. This applies particularly to the promotion of a sustainable international blue economy.

Moreover, to ensure that a holistic approach is adopted towards India–Africa maritime cooperation in a way that reflects everyone’s best interests, there needs to be a cohesive African approach towards dealing with maritime threats. This is pertinent because Small Island Developing States (SIDS) have not received robust regional backing by organisations like the AU (concerning anti-piracy initiatives) in this regard. Nevertheless, the situation appears to be changing for the better, with SIDS defining themselves, through their efforts, as reliable partners in tackling threats, like maritime piracy, over time. These efforts have been demonstrated through their presence in the IOC.⁴³

This must occur as it continues enhancing its overall presence as a maritime security capacity builder, torchbearer of ecotourism and viable blue economy. Regular monetary aid, domain awareness, data processing centres, operational support and subject-based expertise must be made available to diminish the invested stakeholders’ constraints. This must occur along with efforts to aid the littoral states in overcoming their capacities to redress case-by-case security threats.

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