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The Indian Ocean Research Group (IORG) Inc: History, Aims, Goals and Future Directions

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The Indian Ocean Research Group (IORG) is a social science, policy-oriented research network. It was formed as a result of a lengthy set of negotiations and discussions with Sanjay Chaturvedi from the Panjab University in Chandigarh during Dennis Rumley's study leave in 2000. What we agreed was that there was a need to maintain an active academic group in the Indian Ocean Region. Even though we had had some wonderful work from Ken McPherson and others, we felt that the earlier attempts had failed for political and economic reasons. We felt also that another key reason why they fell by the wayside was that they were built on one node: Perth. What we decided to do was to try and construct a group built initially on two nodes: one in Perth and one in Chandigarh, and then to develop a network to create a series of nodes around the Indian Ocean Region. We felt that this general strategy would enable us to produce an academic group that would actually last and be sustainable. It would be a network. It would be a set of nodes and links, a twenty-first century concept.

We set about doing just that. We would have one pillar in Perth and one in Chandigarh in India. These would be the initial nodes. We launched the Group in Chandigarh in November 2002, and then we would try and hold a series of meetings in different locations around the Indian Ocean Region at different centres and institutes. The centres and institutes where we held meetings would be added to the network. We would create additional nodes in that sense. We also set about trying to identify social science scholars around and outside the Indian Ocean Region who had actually written on the Indian Ocean Region. The numbers are still relatively small.

We were very lucky that at our first meeting that we received quite strong support for the launch in Chandigarh from the Indian Government and also from the Australian Government. Penny Wensley was the Australian High Commissioner in Delhi at that time and she was very helpful and supportive. We also had strong support from a BHP-Billiton representative. Part of the reason for this was at

that time the so-called “Peace Pipeline” was being discussed, and India was very much in the forefront of discussions about the pipeline from Iran, through Pakistan, to India. So we had good support, at least to start with.

We also had, and to some extent still have, fairly idealistic notions about what we could do. Of course, reality soon creeps in as we all know. We had some guiding principles. We felt that we could be complementary. We did not want to be in competition with any other group. We wanted to collaborate, so we had collaboration as a theme and we wanted to co-operate with other groups if there were any other groups around the region. We wanted to have representation, of course, from all Indian Ocean states and from other Indian and Australian institutions as time went on.

Our key objective was to try and initiate a policy dialogue among academics, but not just academics but also governments, industries, NGOs and communities towards sharing a kind of idealised view of a peaceful, stable, prosperous Indian Ocean Region. What we realised fairly quickly was that most people, even those who write about the Indian Ocean, underestimate the importance of the Indian Ocean.

So what is the Indian Ocean’s importance both strategically and economically? It clearly possesses considerable and often underrated geo-political significance if only because of its operation as a maritime highway. Given its relative location and the fact that it provides a relatively short and economic link between the Pacific and the Atlantic, it is perhaps not surprising that not only does the Ocean account for the highest tonnage of commodities in the world, but more than three-quarters of this tonnage is extra-regional trade. As many of you will be aware, the uninhibited maintenance of ocean routes and associate choke-points is particularly significant for the movement of commodities, especially oil, to North-East Asia, Western Europe and to North America.

Of course, the Indian Ocean is also known to contain natural resources, much of which have yet to be fully determined. Resources on, in and under the Ocean itself, and the exploitation of these resources, in the context of the delimitation of exclusive economic zones, clearly requires careful monitoring and interstate collaboration. This was one of our initial assumptions – that collaboration is essential around the Indian Ocean to deal with Indian Ocean issues.

We are also starting to move towards a different concept of sovereignty to some extent – that is, sovereignty which is shared, rather than sovereignty that is totally state-oriented. One of our early missions was to try and encourage and persuade states around the region to collaborate. Maintaining the integrity of the regional environment is one of the most important common interests of Indian Ocean states. Managing and monitoring the environmental impacts of human activity on the Ocean clearly is essential to the maintenance of the living resources in the Ocean itself.

Environmental security issues are extremely diverse, ranging from – for example – an industrial partner’s need to secure access to resources for investment purposes to a specific community’s need to secure access to healthy and sustainable supplies of food, water and shelter. So, fostering interstate cooperation in order to maximise positive management and to minimise environmental insecurity and climate change risk is an important policy goal that we started off with.

For the maintenance of the peace and stability of the Indian Ocean Region, we also argue, and still

argue that it is of the utmost importance that regional, coastal, island and land-locked states become aware of the geopolitical orientation of one another as Indian Ocean neighbours. We started off as one of our research projects to try and investigate the geopolitical orientations of Indian Ocean states and states' views of the Indian Ocean itself to maximise or begin to try and maximise regional transparency regarding regional goals, state goals and intentions.

We decided we would try and identify a number of key goals. Let me list seven key goals that we came up with.

1. First, we wanted to try and encourage research on geopolitical, economic, socio-cultural, environmental, scientific and technological issues relevant to the Indian Ocean Region.
2. Second, we wanted to try and promote dialogue on the peaceful uses and ecologically sustainable development of maritime resources.
3. Third, we wanted to try and foster and encourage inter-state co-operation in the sustainable management of ocean resources and a peaceful resolution of maritime disputes.
4. Fourth, we wanted to try and ensure a holistic discourse on the human and environmental security of the region among its states, peoples and communities. Some of these, of course, are overlapping, but I am trying to tease them out a little bit.
5. Fifth, to contribute to an understanding of the causes as well as the effects of a wide range of non-traditional regional security threats.
6. Sixth, we wanted to try and facilitate information flow and discussion on international maritime regimes on the rights of states and local communities representing the Indian Ocean Region.
7. And seventh, we wanted to facilitate and initiate informed policy debate – as I said earlier – among governments, NGOs, business groups, academics and other stakeholders in the region on issues of common concern. I guess we took it as self-evident that the Ocean itself is sufficient reason to be interested in issues of common concern. We all have an interest in the sustainability and security of the Ocean.

The Indian Ocean Research Group, the IORG, was incorporated in WA on 22 June 2007. So we are relatively recently “inc’d” under the WA Associations Incorporation Act. Under the rules of association, we have to have a committee, so we have a committee of management of eight members drawn mainly from Australia and India, but also one person from Canada. Membership of the group is open to all academics, policy makers and others who have a research and policy interest in the aims and objectives of the group. We are obligated to hold annual general meetings, the first of which was only held in November of 2008.

Since the launch in 2002 in Chandigarh, we have held subsequent meetings in Iran in 2004 which was on the theme of energy security. We have held a meeting in Malaysia in 2005 on the issue of sealanes of communication. We held a meeting in Oman in 2007 on the general issue of fisheries policy in the Indian Ocean Region. We were associated with a maritime security meeting in Canberra last year and we had a meeting on climate change in Hyderabad also late last year. We have a

website that is managed at Panjab University in Chandigarh.

To date, we have published five books, the first of which was based on the launch and is titled *Geopolitical Orientations, Regionalism and Security of the Indian Ocean*. We decided that, for the first two books, we wanted to disseminate the results of our conferences fairly quickly so we found a very co-operative publisher in Delhi, who was willing to do it quickly and cheaply. The first two were published in Delhi: the first on regionalism and the second is based on the Iran conference on energy security. The third book on sealanes of communication was published by the Maritime Institute of Malaysia in 2007. A book on environmental security was published by Rutgers University Press in 2008. Our most recent offering, which is *Fisheries Exploitation in the Indian Ocean*, was published by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore last year.

In June of this year we launched our new journal. Routledge of London has been extremely supportive in helping us launch the new *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*. The first edition came out in June and I am currently in the midst of editing issue number two, which is due in December. This will be on climate change. We decided, as far as the journal was concerned, that because it was a new initiative, that the first few issues would be based around a number of key regional themes. The first issue in June was on maritime security, although the first essay is on research agendas for the Indian Ocean Region. The second issue, as I said, is on climate change. Next year, the first issue is planned to be on geopolitical orientations of Indian Ocean states. The December issue of next year is planned to be on Indian Ocean regionalism.

We are hoping that our next conference will be in Delhi, probably in April. India takes over the chair of IOR-ARC next year and so I assume the meeting will be in Delhi. We are planning a meeting in April prior to that to discuss a variety of ways in which regionalism can be reinvigorated in the Indian Ocean Region. There will be a special issue in June or December next year on regionalism and then the following year it is planned that the June 2012 issue will be on the role of external powers in the Indian Ocean Region as the themed issue. The final issue of my editorial term will be on environmental security in December 2012.

With regard to the inaugural Editorial Essay, we wanted to set the scene for those issues that were of interest to members of the editorial board. We have an editorial board of more than 20. I wrote to each of the members of the board asking them to outline what they thought were the key research issues. Half of the board responded. We identified a list of six main research tasks which are overlapping in terms of geopolitical change, state security, maritime jurisdiction and security and environmental security.

There is also a strong literary and cultural studies Indian Ocean group based mainly in eastern Australia. One of our editorial board members is a South African who is involved in this group, so we have a section on literary and cultural studies, which I thought we would be foolish to ignore. The sixth theme is on regionalism and the prospect for greater regional co-operation.

These are the broad research agendas for at least certain members of the editorial board. This is not to deny the existence of other research themes.

In terms of future directions, I was very fortunate to be able to attend the tenth IOR-ARC ministerial meeting in Yemen which was held from 31 July to 5 August in Sana'a this year.

There were several reasons for attending the meeting. One was to observe the meeting and to present a report to DFAT on the prospects for the IOR-ARC academic group. Another reason for attending was that, as I implied earlier, we have had strong support from the Government of Oman and some of its representatives, particularly the IOR-ARC tourism group.

When IOR-ARC was created in 1997, apart from the economic co-operation first-track groups which now includes 18 states from the original 19 states, there were three second-track groups: an academic group, a tourism group, and a business group. I understand the business group is fairly active and seemed so at the IOR-ARC meeting. The tourism group, which is currently chaired by Oman, is relatively weak. The academic group did not seem to be in existence at all. That was one of the reasons to go to Yemen. We (IORG) also wanted to apply to the IOR-ARC for Observer status, partly because of the weakness of the pre-existing academic group. My colleague from Chandigarh, one of the original co-founders, and I, were present at the meeting for that purpose. The IOR-ARC secretariat was extremely helpful during this overall process.

Of the 18 states that were meant to be members of the IOR-ARC academic group, there were only four or five that actually sent academic representatives. Most of those representing their states were bureaucrats or diplomats. The questions that followed my presentation at the meeting were quite interesting. We got strong vocal support for our Observer status from Indonesia, Oman, Sri Lanka, Tanzania and Yemen. South Africa said they had “no objection” to our joining the group, which I thought was a rather backhanded form of support. Questions and comments came from India and Yemen. No comments came from Australia, Iran and one or two others. Five states were absent. In terms of the overall membership there are only 14 members actually represented at the academic group.

As I said, the regional pattern of vocal support and comments was interesting. India, while offering support for our Observer status, was extremely concerned about the criteria for IORG membership. The questioner was concerned that, without strict entry requirements, IORG could be, quote: ‘taken over by criminal elements’.

Minority academic representation on the academic group in particular I think is a clear reflection of the fact that very few states have nominated a focal point. Each State in the IOR-ARC group is meant to nominate a focal point, to be the centre of Indian Ocean studies in that state. Most states, including Australia, are still in the process of considering the identification of a focal point. Malaysia clearly has a focal point. Indonesia is in the process of creating a new Indonesian Centre for Indian Ocean studies. Yemen had a clear focal point; Yemen was the chair of the meeting. Oman also had a clear focal point, but most of the states have not nominated a focal point. Again, that was one of the reasons I was there, to try and facilitate the discussion about where an Australian focal point might be and what it might constitute. In the event, the meeting of the academic group gave its full support to our application for Observer status. That was not the end of it; of course, the recommendation from the academic group had to go to the committee of senior officials. If they approve it, then it has to go to the committee of ministers which is the last day when the final decisions are made. In the event, we officially achieved Observer status to IOR-ARC on 5 August 2010.

During the course of the meeting, we were allowed to observe all of the meetings, apart from one or

two closed-door meetings. It was interesting to try to think how the academic group could be strengthened. A minority of states – Iran, Oman and Sri Lanka – raised issues about how the academic group could actually be reformed. It was felt that academics should be represented on the academic group in the future. As Sri Lanka pointed out, neither the bottom-up nor the top-down approach seemed to be working. It may also be a reflection of the fact that there is a relative paucity of Indian scholars around the region in any case. Iran raised an interesting prospect in the presentations. It suggested that it may be possible to not only think of national focal points, but also of sub-regional focal points. A national focal point might be Yemen or a sub-regional one might be in West Asia to facilitate greater collective action. It was clear that there was a need to actually identify a research agenda. The academic group did not seem to have any coherent notion of what its role should be or what research issues should be raised or researched. During the course of the meeting, when there were reports on what research projects were actually in progress, the most significant issue was the number of failed projects. Proper funding guidelines, participation and timelines were clearly needed.

One of the other issues that came up was that the three second track groups – the academic, tourism and business groups – seemed to be operating quite separately. Some felt that there was a need for more co-operation and collaboration among the three second track groups which could be of mutual benefit.

Another issue which was raised is that there is a university mobility organisation in the Indian Ocean Region but the relationship of this to the academic group was unclear. No one was quite sure what that relationship should be. I guess the overall concept, funding and location of the regional Indian Ocean Studies chair or chairs, which had been mooted for several years, needed to be elaborated. To bring it all together, Oman suggested that another subcommittee should be struck to meet in Muscat to talk about an agenda for reform of the academic group. I presume that that reform group will report at the next meeting in Delhi next year.

What are some of the implications of the above for an Australian Indian Ocean focal point? The identification of an Australian Indian Ocean focal point or points, I would suggest, should take into consideration certain key principles and requirements. The requirement of IOR-ARC is for Australia to designate a specific focal point presumably at the next meeting in Delhi next year, or a Centre for Indian Ocean regional research. The Australian Government needs to supply, I think, a specific location. This should not imply any exclusivity. In other words, overall national, academic and other relevant expertise from around Australia needs to be part of any new initiative. From next year, since India takes over the chair of IOR-ARC and Australia assumes the vice-chair of IOR-ARC then the assumption on the part of myself and my colleagues at least is that there is going to be a concerted attempt over the next four years to breathe new life into the IOR-ARC group, both economically from the first track perspective but also into the three second track groups. If that does not happen after four years, then perhaps IOR-ARC will cease to exist, but that is another issue.

There are some interesting and positive signs on the agenda in my view. I would suggest that serious consideration from the Australian point of view should be given to the identification of more than one focal point, perhaps each concentrating on a particular specialisation and the construction of an Australian Indian Ocean Studies Network. The focal point or points or centre, that could/would coordinate an Australian Indian Ocean regional research network, perhaps could be located in

Western Australia. It certainly was assumed that before the last Federal election when Kevin Rudd was Prime Minister, that if there were to be an Australian focal point, it would inevitably be located in Western Australia. But of course, things have changed, and so that is not a certainty now by any means.

As all of you know, in Australia there are two Indian Ocean States, according to my cartographic and oceanographic colleagues: Western Australia and South Australia. Perhaps a research network could be based on those two. Given the experience of Indian Ocean regional studies in various guises over the last 15 years or so, I would suggest it is a moot point as to whether such a focal point should be located only at a Western Australian university. The reason I say that is that the track record on this issue in the past is not an especially positive one, especially in non-scientific matters. Both Curtin University and the University of WA have been responsible in their varying ways for the lack of encouragement and even the dismantling of Indian Ocean research and study centres due to what I would call “internal structural problems”. Furthermore, Murdoch University has considerably weakened its formerly quite powerful Asian Studies Centre. To be fair, Curtin University still has some remnants of the Indian Ocean Centre in the form of the South Asia Research Unit and its Strategic Studies Group.

The track record on Indian Ocean regional studies overall on the part of Western Australian universities is not a particularly good one. I think, however, that it is important to note that the University of Western Australia has recently received considerable funding to initiate a New Oceans Institute. This, as many of you will be aware, is a marine science based organisation and clearly should be regarded as a principal Australian focal point for scientific Indian Ocean research. Indeed, there will be a seminar given by Professor Carlos Duarte, who is from one of the maritime centres (IMEDEA, CSIC-UIB) in Spain, next week titled *The Role of the Oceans and the Future of Humanity: Opportunities and Challenges*. I understand that Professor Duarte is a candidate for the Directorship of the new Oceans Institute, so you need to get to him fairly quickly if you want to talk about social science research.

Of course, the universities are not the only candidates for focal points. I would argue that another principal candidate for a more strategic business and social science WA Indian Ocean focal point is Future Directions International. As we all know, FDI is in the process of reconstructing itself under the wise guidance of John Hartley who has initiated a very important Indian Ocean Dialogue. I think that FDI needs to be in the mix. I understand that sometime later this year in Canberra there will be a meeting of all interested stakeholders on the possible location of an Indian Ocean focal point for Australia, but we wait for that one. I would suggest for a focal point or points to be fully effective and in order for it to achieve long-term success in Indian Ocean scientific and non-scientific research, it is imperative that the principle of inclusivity be applied. That is, all currently active Australian Indian Ocean researchers who have a strong publications record in this area should be involved in what I have suggested should be an Australian Indian Ocean Regional Academic Network (AIORAN).

I guess it goes without saying that the creation of such an organisation and whether it becomes a centre of excellence in Indian Ocean studies will have some fairly significant financial and other important structural organisational and operational considerations. I will leave that for the moment for let me conclude by quoting a quote I used in the editorial essay in the final section in the inaugural issue of the Journal. The research directions essay identified ‘six broad areas of research

aimed at the development of policies that improve the life chances of all the inhabitants of the Indian Ocean region. It seems to us as self evident, that the very existence of the Ocean itself should be a key catalyst for collaborative interest in research and policy making, given its regional, global, social, environmental, geopolitical and economic importance. In the development of regional policies aimed at creating just peaceful and resilient localities, communities and regions, and in order to maximise all dimensions of security and thus minimise the necessity for conflict, and for arms acquisition and use, it is to be hoped that a renewed IOR-ARC imbued with a wider vision, a broader regional membership, and a firmer commitment, can function as one among many platforms for such an important endeavour.'

One of the more interesting writers on the Indian Ocean is Sugata Bose, the author of *A Hundred Horizons: the Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire*. He is at Harvard University and I close the editorial essay by quoting from him. As Bose has put it so eloquently:

'If the globe at the dawn of the twenty-first century is indeed witnessing a new ferocious round in the clash of civilisations, the prognosis will be one of deepening conflict and unending war. But, if the history of the modern world can be interpreted to a significant degree as an interplay of multiple and competing universalisms, room can be created for understanding through intelligible translations. It was this task of creating hybrid and polyphonic languages of translation that the peoples of the Indian Ocean interregional arena had so successfully accomplished through the archaic and modern phases of globalisation. It remains the only hope for a new cosmopolitanism in a post-colonial setting.'

Thank you.

QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION

QUESTION: There is emerging concern over the standoff between China and Japan. The Indian Ocean, however, seems relatively peaceful apart from the instability in Somalia. How stable and secure are the Indian Ocean littoral states?

ANSWER: One of the regional issues that we have examined is that of the so-called failed states. One of the common characteristics of the Indian Ocean Region is that it has enjoyed a significant degree of conflict for control of resources and territory, involving European colonial powers. The legacy of this conflict endures to this day. The well-known violence and not yet fully chronicled atrocities against indigenous peoples, and the colonial imposition of centralised states, with boundaries incorporating and/or bisecting nations, inevitably created a dislocation with the state. As Bose has put it so eloquently, 'the Indian Ocean realm experienced a sea change in the concept of the sovereignty in the age of high imperialism which has lingered as colonialism's most poisoned legacy'. It therefore comes as no surprise that the Indian Ocean region contains close to half the number of states that fall into the first quartile of the failed State index.

So, we have, in the first quartile, quite a number of Indian Ocean states. Somalia is, of course, globally ranked number one, but we also have Zimbabwe as number two and Sudan as number three. Iraq is number six, Afghanistan is number seven and so on, and that is just one element of insecurity. In my answer I have not even considered other forms of traditional security, plus environmental security.

QUESTION: I'm working on a PhD at the moment on all sorts of world issues and this region in particular is of great interest, particularly in relation to water issues. One of the areas that I work on is foresight, so I am very interested in how we bring communities together for the long-term picture. To your knowledge, has any work been done in this area within the Indian Ocean littoral states? Has anybody actually brought these states together in an attempt to get them to have a dialogue and say 'what we are going to look like in one hundred years' time?'

ANSWER: I can answer this in three ways. You mentioned water; we have an essay on environmental security with a subsection on water insecurity. We identify seven states in the region which we refer to as water-insecure states, where the withdrawal of water totally outstrips the renewable water resources. The second approach involves Tim Doyle, who leads the environmental security group and is based at the University of Adelaide. I can provide details, but Tim hopes to run a major conference, or series of conferences, on environmental security themes over the next several years. The third point that I wanted to make was that when the academic group was initiated, it would encourage states to actually do the sort of thing that you just mentioned. We have tried to take on that role. I am not saying we have achieved a great deal but we are trying to encourage the raising and discussion of issues around the region that require collaboration. One of the issues that I put to the IOR-ARC meeting when I was giving the presentation for Observer status was that we can also use the Journal as a mechanism for dialogue around the region on issues of common concern.

QUESTION: If I understood you correctly, only Australia and India are totally involved in IOR-ARC and that you are looking to expand elsewhere. My question is, what other countries are likely to come on board in the same manner as the first two? My second question is whether the location of an IOR-ARC office in a capital city is likely to compromise its integrity.

ANSWER: Thank you for your two questions. We are certainly aware of the Australia-India focus. The focus for Australia-India for IORG was inevitable because of the foundation meeting in Chandigarh. These were the key people who started the concept. But we are also aware of the need to expand representation. Firstly, we have done so in the editorial board. We have membership not only from Australia and India but also from Malaysia, Singapore, South Africa, and from one or two others. But we still have a few regional and state gaps. We thought initially that we would confine ourselves to membership of IOR-ARC. So one of the outcomes that we wanted to achieve at the Yemen meeting was to try and identify people who might fill the gaps, the regional gaps. Fortunately, we discovered that the five members who were present at the academic group who were actually academics were keen to be involved. As a result they have filled five gaps. There is still a major gap in Africa, although I am discussing this issue with someone from Tanzania and also from Kenya.

On the policy capture issue, it is a truism that most Australians live in capital cities. If you want a representative group, you have got to go for people in the capital cities, at least until we can find someone else. That is why I have suggested inclusivity as the principle by which you develop this network. The Australian Government has to identify a focal point, or points. It has to be a network. But it needs a base or bases. So, I am suggesting the base or bases should be in Indian Ocean states and the network can be throughout Australia.

QUESTION: Perhaps you could comment on how you might engage ASEAN, either as a national group or as individual countries, so that the IOR-ARC could be more broadly representative.

ANSWER: The truth is that we have engaged ASEAN. We have a Malaysian member on our board and have invited the head of the National Centre in Malaysia as well. We have had a meeting in Malaysia, at the Maritime Institute of Malaysia, and our latest book is published in Singapore. We also have a member from the National University of Singapore on the editorial board. There is a new Indian Ocean Centre being constructed in Indonesia and its director has been invited to be a member of the editorial board. So we have developing linkages with Indonesia. Thailand is the only other major ASEAN State who is a member of IOR-ARC that we have not made a linkage with. We tried to encourage the Thai representatives at our meeting in Sana'a to come on board, but without success. So you can see, we have increased, and are attempting to further increase, ASEAN representation.

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