United in Disunity? Pan-regional Organisations in the Indian Ocean Region

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Summary

Although the Indian Ocean region is home to a veritable alphabet soup of sub- and intra-regional groupings (which will be the subject of a separate forthcoming Strategic Analysis Paper), there are – or have been – few truly pan-regional organisations. This is reflective of the fact that the Indian Ocean region is more of a geographical entity than a political one.

In addition to their region-wide focus, those few organisations generally share another trait: from auspicious and promising beginnings, their effectiveness has invariably waned, even ending in the demise of the organisation. The Indian Ocean Rim-Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC), for instance, is now at just such a turning point. Largely moribund, if it cannot be rejuvenated during next year’s Indian presidency, it will most likely meet the same fate as its predecessors. The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, on the other hand, may be able to buck the trend; it could yet go from strength to strength.

Analysis

Unlike the Pacific, there are few truly regional organisations in the Indian Ocean region. This in no small measure is due to the fact that the region is more of a geographical entity, rather than any kind of political community. The majority of the region’s states have tended to view the Indian Ocean – and their place in it – as a number of different sub-regions with only the most tenuous links or commonalities. It is a situation that has been compounded by Cold War tensions, national rivalries, the fallout of colonialism and, most of all, simply the sheer
size and diversity of the region – a point emphasised by Australia’s then-Foreign Minister, Senator Gareth Evans, in a May 1995 speech given in New Delhi:

“... the region is so diffuse ... it contains sovereign states ranging in size from India with over 900 million people, to Seychelles with less than 80,000 people. Economies range in size from over $250 billion for our two countries [India and Australia], to less than $400 million for the Maldives and Comoros.”

The figures may have changed, but with momentum once again building for greater regional co-operation – just as it was fifteen years ago – a review of pan-regional groupings in the Indian Ocean area is timely. It is worth noting that, in addition to Australia and India, the two most vigorous proponents of regional (and, for that matter, sub-regional), organisations have been two of its smaller states: Mauritius and Sri Lanka.

- **Indian Ocean Rim-Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC)**

The IOR-ARC was launched as the Indian Ocean Region Initiative in Mauritius in 1997. The launch followed discussions such as the first Inter-Governmental Meeting of the Indian Ocean Rim Initiative held in Mauritius on 31 March 1995 and the International Forum on the Indian Ocean Region, held in Perth in June that same year. The principle objective of the IOR-ARC is to facilitate enhanced economic co-operation between members, with a particular focus on trade and investment liberalisation.

The IOR-ARC currently comprises 18 members (Australia, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Iran, Kenya, Madagascar, Malaysia, Mauritius, Mozambique, Oman, Singapore, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Thailand, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen). Five countries are dialogue partners (Egypt, Japan, China, France and the United Kingdom); Turkey has applied to become a dialogue partner but its application has been deferred by the IOR-ARC in order to further consider the criteria for dialogue partners. After joining in 1999, the Seychelles withdrew in July 2003. The Seychellois Government presumably felt that it was getting insufficient return on its IOR-ARC investment.

At the present time, the Indian Ocean Tourism Organisation is the only grouping that has observer status. The Indian Ocean Research Group, with nodes in Perth and Chandigarh, northern India, has indicated that it intends to apply for observer status.

In addition to a Secretariat, High Level Task Force and the biennial Council of Ministers meetings, the IOR-ARC comprises three working groups: the Working Group on Trade and Investment (WGTI), the Indian Ocean Rim Business Forum (IORBF), and the Indian Ocean Rim Academic Group (IORAG). It is for observer status within the last grouping that the Indian Ocean Research Group intends to apply.

Despite a well-conceived structure and the initial enthusiasm of members, little of substance has been achieved by the IOR-ARC and the organisation is now largely moribund. Within the IOR-ARC, Australia has funded two major research reports, *Barriers to Trade in Indian Ocean*
Rim Countries (2003) and Foreign Direct Investment in the Indian Ocean Rim (2001), in addition to a project to develop training and reference materials for trade negotiators, policy-makers and industry groups from developing countries within the organisation. Over the course of the 2000s, however, the national focus shifted away from the wider Indian Ocean region and interest in the IOR-ARC dwindled.

In South Africa, too, the focus has moved away from the Indian Ocean to become more concentrated on internal and African affairs. The words of then-President Nelson Mandela, speaking on a 1995 official visit to India, now seem very distant:

“The natural urge of the facts of history and geography ... should broaden itself to include the concept of an Indian Ocean Rim for socio-economic cooperation and other peaceful endeavours. Recent changes in the international system demand that the countries of the Indian Ocean shall become a single platform."

The other third of the “big three”, India, has demonstrated similar ambivalence towards the IOR-ARC. It has moved from being – along with Australia – a key driver of the organisation’s establishment to focussing more closely on issues in the South Asian sub-region. India will assume the role of Chair in 2011 and much will hinge on its ability to revitalise the IOR-ARC. A failure do so and to engage with other member states in the process – particularly Australia, as it re-engages with the Indian Ocean – and important prospective members such as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, would almost certainly consign the IOR-ARC to history, albeit via a slow, lingering death.

- **Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC)**

Headquartered in the Seychelles, the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission was established in 1993 under the auspices of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), entering into force three years later. It superseded the Indo-Pacific Tuna Development and Management Programme (IPTP), which was established in Colombo, Sri Lanka, in 1982.

The IOTC is charged with managing tuna and tuna-like species within the waters of the Indian Ocean and encouraging the conservation and sustainable development of the region’s tuna fisheries, in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

The largest regional organisation in the Indian Ocean, IOTC members can be either Indian Ocean island or littoral states, or countries whose fleets fish in the Indian Ocean. All IOTC members must also be members of the United Nations. As such, the IOTC’s membership, which currently stands at 28, also includes a number of extra-regional countries: Australia, Belize, China, Comoros, Eritrea, the European Union, France, Guinea, India, Indonesia, Iran, Japan, Kenya, Madagascar, Malaysia, Mauritius, Oman, Pakistan, Philippines, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Tanzania, Thailand, the United Kingdom and Vanuatu. Senegal, South Africa and Uruguay are not full members, but have the status of
Co-operating Non-Contracting Parties. The Maldives has announced it intends to join the IOTC in that same capacity.

The most recent session of the IOTC took place from 1-5 March 2010, at Busan, South Korea. Although the IOTC and its various working groups conduct a large number of programmes, including fish tagging and data gathering, it does receive criticism. The World Wildlife Fund describes the decision taken at Busan to close an area off the Somali coast to long-line and purse seine fishing vessels for one month as “laughable”, saying that the area was effectively already closed due to piracy. The EU had expressed its disappointment with the IOTC after the 2009 session, noting that the organisation failed to achieve “the genuine multilateral co-operation expected of it.” Nevertheless, with the backing of the FAO’s Regional Fishery Bodies programme behind it, the IOTC fulfils an important role and is unlikely to fold.

- **Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS)**

The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, instituted in 2008, offers a template for a naval version of a pan-regional organisation, which could also be replicated for land, air and police forces. Membership is open to all regional Chiefs of Navy and has attracted participants from across the region and beyond. The IONS has attracted a great deal of interest and could conceivably go from strength to strength. The biggest threat to its continuing success is the possibility that, as it was inaugurated by India, it could be perceived by some as being dominated by New Delhi. Holding the 2009 IONS in Sri Lanka and the 2010 symposium in the United Arab Emirates should go some way towards countering such views, as would the full participation of Pakistan, also slated for the 2010 event.

In addition to India and Australia, past participants have included Burma, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, France, Indonesia, Kenya, Kuwait, Madagascar, Malaysia, Maldives, Mauritius, Mozambique, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Seychelles, Singapore, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Tanzania, Thailand and the United Arab Emirates.

The United States, United Kingdom, Brazil and China have all expressed interest in the IONS. Possibly because of its potential as a component of strategic policy, India has, however, been less enthusiastic about the prospect of Chinese participation, remaining wary of encroachment.

- **Indian Ocean Centre for Peace Studies and the Indian Ocean Centre**

The Indian Ocean Centre for Peace Studies (IOCPs) was established at the University of Western Australia in the 1990s by the late Professor Kenneth McPherson. The IOCPs received funding from the Commonwealth Government and published a multi-disciplinary research journal, the *Indian Ocean Review*. A particular IOCPs achievement was hosting the 1995 International Forum on the Indian Ocean Region, which preceded the establishment of the IOR-ARC. When government funding was withdrawn, IOCPs moved, along with Professor
McPherson, across town to Curtin University of Technology, where it was renamed the Indian Ocean Centre. Both Centres fulfilled research and policy advisory roles.

As had been the case with IOCPS, institutional politics and internal in-fighting weakened the Indian Ocean Centre, which was closed by the university in 2002. Both centres nevertheless had strong reputations; Professor McPherson went on to head the South Asia Institute at Heidelberg University, Germany.

- **Indian Ocean Zone of Peace (IOZOP) and Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN)**

The Indian Ocean Zone of Peace was a Sri Lankan proposal brought before the United Nations General Assembly in 1971, while the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality was a Malaysian proposal also put forward that year. As a result, the following year the United Nations formed an unwieldy 44-member Ad Hoc Committee on the Indian Ocean, which was intended as the first stage in implementing the Zone of Peace proposal.

The wider goal of both IOZOP and ZOPFAN, conceived as they were in the post-colonial Cold War context, was to reduce superpower rivalries in the region, but failed to take into account the fact that, far from viewing the US presence in the region as a threat, a number of states – Australia included – actually viewed it as being beneficial. Indeed, the proposals were strenuously opposed by the US, UK and France.

Under such circumstances, consensus was difficult to achieve. The end of the Cold War and the display of multinational unity during the first Gulf War effectively ended the concept.

- **Organisation for Indian Ocean Marine Affairs Cooperation (IOMAC)**

Another unsuccessful Sri Lankan initiative, the Organisation for Indian Ocean Marine Affairs Co-operation (IOMAC), was established in 1985 in concert with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation. Headquartered in Colombo, the remit of IOMAC was to foster the development of Indian Ocean states through dialogue and technical co-operation. Despite the fact that it was open to states that were users of the Indian Ocean as well as the region’s island and littoral states, the 1990 Arusha Agreement, which formalised the organisation, was signed by just nine countries: Indonesia, Iran, Kenya, Mauritius, Mozambique, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Tanzania.

A more specialised sub-group, the IOMAC Technical Co-operation Group (TCG), received more support, with 28 countries participating in at least some way: Australia, Bangladesh, Burma, China, Egypt, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Kenya, Malawi, Malaysia, Mauritius, Netherlands, Nepal, Norway, Pakistan, Romania, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Seychelles, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Thailand, United Kingdom and the United States. Despite the widespread interest in the TCG, disputes between members ultimately reduced its effectiveness, to the point where IOMAC essentially became defunct. The fact that two of...
the largest states in the region, India and Australia, did not formally sign up also reduced its impact, although it is unlikely that IOMAC would have been any more effective, or long-lived, had either or both signed the Arusha Agreement.

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As the above outline shows, the Indian Ocean region has not been altogether fertile ground for pan-regional organisations; sub-regional groupings have perhaps fared somewhat better, as will be discussed in a future Strategic Analysis Paper. Nevertheless, the situation is not due to a lack of effort or goodwill – at least initially – and, despite their obvious differences and disparities, a large number of the region’s states do, or have, had an interest in establishing truly regional organisations. It may very well be the case, therefore, that a less formal, “track two” format, such as the Indian Ocean Dialogue envisaged by Future Directions International, could offer an ideal vehicle with which to begin the larger process of reinvigorating pan-regional discussion in the Indian Ocean.