



# Scrambling for the Indian Ocean

by Eva Pejsova

The Indian Ocean, often referred to as the ‘cradle of globalisation’, has been the main link between east and west for centuries. Half of all the world’s trade and two-thirds of its oil pass through its busy waterways, connecting booming East Asian economies to Middle Eastern oil terminals and European markets. Despite its enormous economic and strategic importance, however, the third-largest ocean in the world remains largely ungoverned.

The emergence of piracy off the Horn of Africa demonstrated the fragility of the security situation in the Indian Ocean and attracted the interest and presence of all major regional and extra-regional powers. While counter-piracy efforts have been successful and provided a great opportunity for navies to foster international cooperation, the resulting increased military presence has also exacerbated existing power rivalries and transformed the Indian Ocean into the next arena of strategic competition between India, China, and the US.

Although India is striving to assert its primacy in its maritime neighbourhood, it cannot provide for the theatre’s security alone. The EU has been investing heavily into maritime security in the western Indian Ocean, building the capacity of local maritime agencies and enhancing maritime situational awareness to counter piracy, as well as other

transnational security threats. While the Union’s efforts have been welcomed by most countries along the Indo-Pacific rim, India’s support has been notably missing. When debating how to revitalise the EU-India strategic partnership, in place since 2004, functional maritime security cooperation in the Indian Ocean would thus be the most logical starting point.

## An ocean ‘made in India’

Since Narendra Modi became prime minister, maritime security – focused on the Indian Ocean – has become a top priority in India’s domestic and foreign security policy. This focus is both understandable and welcome: India is surrounded by – and vitally dependent on – the ocean’s sea lanes, which carry 90% of its foreign trade. It is also well in line with India’s effort to assert its position as a global power and net security provider in its neighbourhood and beyond, at a time when most sources of tension and potential conflict in Asia lie at sea. Last but certainly not least, it is driven by the increased military activity of foreign players in its own backyard – notably China.

For a long time, India was accused of ‘sea blindness’: it focused mainly on land-based defence against China and Pakistan and neglected its maritime



potential. Keen to protect its independence and neutrality, it has traditionally insisted on developing indigenous capabilities, which substantially slowed down the development of its maritime power. In line with Modi's 'make in India' doctrine, indigenous production continues to be promoted today (albeit not exclusively), with the aim of also boosting its domestic economy.

New Delhi's 'blue water' ambitions were first outlined in its 2007 Maritime Security Strategy, after which it acquired a number of capabilities, including amphibious surface ships and nuclear-powered submarines. With the acquisition of the *Vikramaditya* aircraft carrier, India is now the only power in Asia (apart from the US) in possession of two such landing platforms. In 2013, it also launched its first indigenous naval communication satellite, which further enhanced its capacity to monitor the entire Indian Ocean.

Last week, India hosted the 2016 International Fleet Review (IFR) – a series of events including an international military exercise, a prestigious parade and a set of conferences, bringing together navies from over 50 countries. With the theme 'United through Oceans', the IFR traditionally aims at promoting trust and cooperation among neighbouring navies. This year, however, it was also an opportunity to demonstrate India's new operational capabilities and assets, as well as underline its new-found maritime might and determination to set the rules in the Indian Ocean. Although official discourses on land are full of mutual reassurance, tensions under the (sea) surface are growing.

### From a 'string of pearls' to a game of Go

China's increased presence in the Indian Ocean is the greatest triggering factor behind India's efforts to regain control. As both powers scramble for influence in surrounding countries, the ocean looks increasingly like the board of Go – the great encircling game. Suspicions about Beijing's regional ambitions date back to the so-called 'string of pearls' theory from the mid-2000s, when China started negotiating the use of – and investing into – port facilities in Myanmar/Burma, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, the Seychelles and the Maldives. The development of the new Maritime Silk Route is likely to further boost China's economic influence and strengthen relations with those countries. Finally, Beijing's recent announcement of the establishment of a naval base in Djibouti, which will be the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) first-ever permanent military base overseas, can be seen as a strategic game changer, especially given China's growing economic interests in East Africa.

Although presented as moves to support counter-piracy activities, China's behaviour in the South China Sea and its general lack of transparency inspires little confidence that its intentions are peaceful. Needless to say, nuclear submarines are of little help in the fight against piracy. The spectre of PLA Navy submarines roaming the waters of the Indian Ocean has kept India's defence analysts on high alert since the end of 2014 (when the first Chinese submarine docked in Colombo, Sri Lanka). These fears were further compounded by a week-long port call in the Pakistani city of Karachi by a Yuan-class submarine in May 2015. While such deployments are common power-projection exercises, India's nervousness over China's military activities in the area is understandable, especially given the latter's enduring friendship with rival Pakistan.

As China moves westwards, India is moving eastwards. In 2012, India expanded its naval presence on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, located at the western bottleneck of the Malacca Straits. The islands constitute a strategic outpost for any engagement with South-East Asian navies, and facilitate deployment in the South China Sea, where Delhi is becoming increasingly involved – much to China's chagrin. The repeated mentioning of the 'Indo-Pacific' in India's new Maritime Security Strategy (published in October 2015) reflects a geostrategic shift in which New Delhi not only 'looks' but also 'acts East'. India's interest to play a more active security role in East Asia is warmly welcomed by its strategic partners – the US and Japan, with which it holds regular joint naval exercises (*Malabar*), as well as ASEAN countries. This, in turn, is perceived by Beijing as a concerted effort to prevent its rise.

### Ungoverned waters

The ability to control, however, does not necessarily mean effective governance. The Indian Ocean desperately needs a sustainable, inclusive international regime for the management of its growing security challenges. Surrounded by fragile states, its waters are plagued by transnational crime – from piracy and illegal fishing to people, goods and weapons smuggling. The ocean is also home to a number of small island states, such as the Maldives and the Seychelles, which are particularly vulnerable to marine environmental degradation and climate change. Finally, if the militarisation of the region's waters continues, there will soon be need for an established crisis prevention mechanism to diffuse potential tensions or avoid accidental clashes.

## Big power presence in the Indian Ocean



Source: EUISS

Despite India's rhetoric on the need for multilateral maritime cooperation, the Indian Ocean lacks the adequate institutional structures, political willingness and necessary trust required to bring this about. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the only formal regional organisation, is paralysed by the ever-lasting tensions between India and Pakistan, and in maritime terms only discusses elementary legislation on trade and fisheries.

The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the largest regional organisation bringing together 20 countries, increasingly discusses the need for maritime cooperation and building a 'blue economy', but geopolitical competition and a lack of resources are hampering any practical implementation. Finally, the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), launched in 2008, is the latest example of India's effort to promote maritime cooperation in the region, inspired by the Western Pacific Naval Symposium. The voluntary organisation brings together the navy chiefs of 35 littoral countries (with China as an observer), to discuss basic issues

such as information-sharing, transnational crime, and interoperability in case of search and rescue operations – albeit informally.

While not disputing the added value of such multilateral fora, their effectiveness in reducing regional tensions or implementing functional security measures remains limited. First of all, this is due to major discrepancies in size and level of economic development, as well as political and strategic divergences among parties. This is further complicated by the presence of extra-regional powers – namely China, Japan and the US. Culturally, the concepts of regional cooperation and multilateralism are neither fully understood nor developed in the area due to a lack of common historical identity.

The final stumbling block, ironically, seems to be India itself. While it is trying more than ever to regain control in the Indian Ocean and promote maritime cooperation, New Delhi is also less willing to engage in initiatives that may weaken or undermine its dominant position.





## Potential for EU-India cooperation?

Strategic interests and power rivalries notwithstanding, functional maritime security issues in the Indian Ocean need to be addressed, and can only be managed through effective international cooperation and inter-agency coordination. Until trust is built, many operational difficulties can be overcome by sufficient financial resources, as well as human and technical capacity-building.

The EU has been actively involved in the Western Indian Ocean since it launched its counter-piracy operations in 2008. Since then, significant financial and human resources have been deployed by EU institutions and member states to enhance maritime security and safety in the region. Promoting a holistic approach to maritime security, it has been investing into training, enhancing national legislation, information-sharing and maritime domain awareness through its Critical Maritime Routes Programme (CMR).

Specifically, the EU supported the implementation of the IMO Djibouti Code of Conduct (DCOC), signed by 21 coastal states on the Western Indian Ocean rim, by facilitating the creation of three information-sharing centres in Kenya, Tanzania and Yemen, as well as of a Regional Maritime Training Centre in Djibouti. The EU MASE Programme, launched in 2013 with a budget of €37.5 million, ensures coordination and continuity between its various capacity-building projects in the Indian Ocean – including its CSDP missions, law enforcement (CRIMLEA) and inland economic development and governance projects. The EU also provides 80% of the budget (over €80 million) of the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC), a body which builds capacity in regional fisheries management, small island state development and marine biodiversity protection.

The latest CMR initiative is the EU CRIMARIO project (Critical Maritime Routes in the Indian Ocean). Launched in July 2015, it aims to enhance maritime situational awareness throughout the Indian Ocean by providing technical assistance to coastal states in realms of information sharing (relying on two centralised Information Fusion Centres supported by the project), capacity building (providing inter-agency training) and operational policies and governance (fostering common understanding and methodologies). The plan is to connect East African countries and small island states, which have already expressed support for the initiative, with other countries along the rim, including those in South-East Asia. The first Asian countries to show an interest in the initiative have

## Signatories of the Djibouti Code of Conduct (DCOC)



Source: International Maritime Organization (IMO)

been Malaysia and Bangladesh, while India, the key regional player, has largely ignored it.

Although the EU and India have been ‘strategic partners’ since 2004, relations have been largely stalled, with little to no progress made in security cooperation. The ongoing diplomatic stand-off between Italy and India over the *Enrica Lexie* case does not help matters, especially in the field of maritime security. However, the problems run deeper, and are largely attributable to differences in security cultures and threat perceptions. The Indian leadership tends to view maritime security in purely conventional terms, seeking alliances to deter possible threats from China and Pakistan. It also hardly acknowledges the EU as a security partner (or sometimes even a fully-fledged political entity).

Yet prevention is better than cure. If Delhi wishes to ensure long-term stability in the Indian Ocean, it will also have to look into the everyday technical problems related to its governance, something for which the EU can be an invaluable partner. Meanwhile, the EU could try to listen better to India’s needs, and India to overcome its ‘EU-blindness’.

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