

## **The Engagement of India and EU in the Indian Ocean Region**

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### **Abstract**

The Indian Ocean has been chosen for detailed examination because of convergence of economic interests, strategic concerns and the opportunities for multilateral cooperation. The cooperation between India and the European Union highlights the geo-political, geo-economic and geo-strategic significance in this region. Currently in Indian Ocean ongoing nefarious activities have made the countries more cautious and are trying to evolve such mechanism as to provide peace and security. One such activity is piracy. This has become a burden some problem for the world. The author analyses the involvement of the European Union and the need for greater cooperation between India and European Union. As such, from time to time representatives from both the countries have met to solve the ongoing problems so that certain amount of stability can be maintained in the Indian Ocean Region.

**Key Words:** geo-politics, geo-strategic, geo-economics, piracy and counter piracy, Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation, Indo-European maritime cooperation, illicit trade, climate change, Operation Atlanta, Strait of Hormuz.

### **Introduction:**

Diplomatic relations between the European Union (EU) and India have emerged gradually. It was framed by new institutional mechanisms and proclamations of shared interests. This reflects their aspirations as global actors and to accept the reality of power politics. Though commercial and business tracks are sound but the track record of joint-action in the arena of security concern has achieved complete result. The Indian Ocean has been

chosen for analysis because of convergence of economic interests, strategic concerns and the opportunities for multilateral coordination.

The cooperation between India and the European Union in the Indian Ocean the highlights the geopolitical, geo-economic and geostrategic significance of the Indian Ocean region. There is also strong element of continuity in the politico-strategic relations and economic transactions between India and the European states from colonial times right up to the twenty-first century. The Indian Ocean, often called as the 'cradle of globalisation'. It acted as the main bridge between east and west for centuries. Half of all the world's trade and two-thirds of its oil pass through its busy waterways. It also connects East Asian economies to Middle Eastern oil terminals and European markets. Despite having huge economic and strategic importance, the Indian Ocean still remains largely ungoverned.

The piracy issue in the Horn of Africa amply demonstrates the failure of the security situation in the Indian Ocean. As such it attracted the interest and presence of all major regional and extra-regional powers. Though counter-piracy efforts have met with some success it provided greater opportunity for navies to foster international cooperation. But at the same time the presence of major powers have exacerbated existing power rivalries and transformed the Indian Ocean into the arena of power rivalry between India, China, and the US.

Although India is striving to assert its primacy in its maritime neighbourhood, but of its own India can play a dominant role. The EU has invested heavily into maritime security in the western Indian Ocean. It has developed the capability of local maritime agencies and enhanced maritime situational awareness to counter piracy as well as other transnational security threats. There is some pessimism in Indian policy . While the India's and the EU efforts have been welcomed by most countries along the Indo-Pacific rim but major support has been notably missing.

The Indian Ocean is important because of global trade and is an arena for global security. The rise of Asian nations and growing dependence on natural resource flows across the Middle East, Africa, and Asia, have knitted the region even more closely together by sea. At the same time, emerging problems ranging from piracy and territorial disputes in the regional seas to global environmental pressures on coastal and marine resources pose significant governance challenges for maritime policymakers around the Indian Ocean region (IOR).<sup>1</sup>

### **Interests and Involvement of the EU in the Indian Ocean:**

The danger for the EU in the longer term comes from Great Power rivalry that affects the Indian Ocean region to such an extent that it destabilizes regions in Africa and the Middle East. Not only this it had led to instability and increased tensions in the Mediterranean region. But the world is unfortunate to have any effective mechanism for multilateral cooperation on maritime security in the Indian Ocean. So far the UN Security Council is concerned it failed to address the rapid increase of Great Power rivalry in the western Pacific, and it has been unable to deal with such rivalry in the Indian Ocean with great zeal. The Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC) aim is economic rather than security cooperation, and is organizationally weak. The only suitable forum is the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS). It is an Indian initiative that binds the naval chiefs of a large number of littoral countries. Extra-regional countries like China and Japan refrain themselves despite their presence in the region. One can argue that ad-hocism method is adopted by the countries and actors in combating Somali piracy. However, there is not mechanism similar to ASEAN Regional Forum where annual meetings are held at the ministerial level address maritime security issues and it involves both regional countries and extra-regional major powers but this is lacking in the Indian Ocean. The European Union and its member states are active in the Indian Ocean in various of ways. Generally it is seen that EU participates in counterpiracy. This includes not just the EU naval mission Atalanta, but also the EU's participation in the naval coordinating meetings in Bahrain (Shared Awareness and Deconfliction, or SHADE) and various other efforts to address Somali piracy.

Moreover, there is much coordination of the EU member states with the United States with regard to counter-terrorism and Afghanistan crisis. To resolve the problem they maintain a naval presence under NATO and are in direct touch with the US. France maintains naval bases in Djibouti and the United Arab Emirates. Seven EU member states (Bulgaria, Germany, Greece, Italy, Netherlands, Poland and Romania) are members of the UN Ad-Hoc Committee on the Indian Ocean, which was established in 1971 to prevent Great Power rivalry in the Indian Ocean in order to enhance peace and stability in the region.<sup>2</sup> The ad-hoc committee's formed from the UN General Assembly's 1971. Declaration of the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace, called the Major Powers to cease further escalation and expansion of their military presence in the Indian Ocean'. It also called for the establishment of a 'system of universal collective security'.<sup>3</sup> The ad-hoc committee aim was to study the necessary

measures to be taken to achieve the objectives of the Declaration of the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace. This committee still continue but it has made little progress since its establishment.<sup>4</sup>

The EU's main interests regarding maritime security in the Indian Ocean region is safe passage of goods. As a major actor in global trade, the EU relies heavily on the SLOCs in the Indian Ocean. It got huge success in securing the trade routes for its exported or imported goods. It also has huge interest in protecting European fishing activities in the Indian Ocean. One can argue that it is the lack of a comprehensive multilateral agreement on maritime security in the Indian Ocean that is more risk prone for trade over the long run. What is important for EU is long-term planning for a comprehensive multilateral agreement on maritime security in the Indian Ocean. The EU interest also lies in stability and security in its immediate environment – the Mediterranean Sea, the Middle East and North Africa. The countries on the Indian Ocean's rim comprises of 40 per cent of the world's population. Some of those countries are politically weak, and people suffer from poverty and inequality. Over the past decade, the Indian Ocean has become important because of illicit trade, piracy, illegal trafficking of people and drugs, as well as maritime terrorism. The EU commitment to counter piracy in the Horn of Africa, in particular has increased the EU's credibility as an important actor in maritime security in the Indian Ocean.<sup>5</sup> The EU should maintain and intensify its current level of engagement.

#### **Indo-EU maritime cooperation:**

Both India and EU countries have a long history of seafaring and possess modern navies equipped with sophisticated weapons. The areas of operation of the Indian and the EU navies are now fast converging. The Indian Ocean is the primary area of operation of the Indian Navy and the EU countries' navies have been more focused on the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, barring the deployment of their navies for Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom and, since August 2009, Operation Atalanta in the Gulf of Aden. India is also involved on a bilateral basis with the navies of several EU countries. For example, the Indian and the French navies annually participate in joint military exercise Varuna. Similarly, the Indian Navy has also undertaken joint naval exercises with the British Royal Navy as part of the Konkan series. India has been engaged in exercises with the Spanish Navy and Italian Navy. The European Security Strategy (ESS), European Union Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and the India-EU Strategic Partnership Joint

Action Plan do not specifically refer to maritime cooperation. However, it is important to note that the Indian Ocean is a contiguous maritime space adjoining the Mediterranean Sea and as such is the ‘near abroad’ of the EU, and should be seen as strategically important to the EU’s economic vitality. The Indian Ocean also gains salience for the EU in terms of maritime security, given the significance of ‘the Eurasian coastal zone, that stretch of vital oceanic waters running from the Suez Canal to Shanghai, through which a huge proportion of EU commercial traffic passes and whose volume is set to increase between 2006 and 2016 by 121%’.<sup>6</sup>

### **Indo-EU cooperation on Counter Piracy:**

Since 2008, the incidents of sea piracy in the Gulf of Aden and off the coast of Somalia have reached new height. This has forced the UN Security Council to take a number of measures to counter piracy in Somalia. It even called states to provide international assistance to Somalia to fight against piracy in the region and deploy naval forces. Affected nations have stationed naval vessels in the area either as part of existing multilateral security arrangements or individually. In spite of these measures the Somali pirates are successful to hijack vessels, negotiating ransom money and seeking out new prey with impunity in the chaotic northern Arabian Sea.

In the Gulf of Aden, the Indian and EU navies have made an ad hoc arrangement called SHADE (Shared Awareness and Deconfliction). It was established in December 2008. This forum, based in Bahrain, provides a platform for the countries to coordinate activities between the countries that are involved in military counter-piracy operations in the Indian Ocean region. There are, cooperative agendas for a joint and coordinated naval patrols and exercises that are usually focused on a specific operational theme. This can be seen in times of crisis from time to time. In that context, the Indian and EU navies have been engaged in developing the capabilities of small Indian Ocean states. For instance, the Maldives and Sri Lanka have benefited immensely from their maritime cooperation with India.

Similarly, India navy ships have undertaken stern anti-piracy and counter-terrorism measures in Seychelles waters on day to day basis. India and Mozambique have also agreed to work together to improve maritime security in the Indian Ocean by maintaining joint maritime patrols along the Mozambican coast. India recently announced that it would offer technical advice to Somalia to counter piracy and it has been stated that ‘India is also considering extending technical assistance to Somalia in developing a counter-piracy policy

and strategy'.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, EU NAVFOR is a major partner for the Seychelles and Kenya in combating piracy.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, EU NAVFOR has signed a contract with the Seychelles Petroleum Company (SEYPEC) in Port Victoria to supply helicopter fuel to all military counter piracy warships.<sup>9</sup>

#### **Indo-EU cooperation on Climate change:**

The India-EU Strategic Partnership Joint Action Plan also offers an opportunity for the two partners to cooperate to address the issue of climate change at the national and international levels. In 2007, R.K. Pachauri, Chairman of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), had warned that 'even under the most conservative scenario, sea level will be about 40 cm higher than today by the end of 21st century. It is projected to increase the annual number of people flooded in coastal populations from 13 million to 94 million (worldwide).'<sup>10</sup>

The Indian Ocean basin presents substantial evidence of the climatic change and several studies agree that in the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea the intensity of cyclonic storms is greater than ever before. As a result of this change, the shoreline of some countries has suffered adverse effects, with coastal areas being eroded. In the Arabian Sea, India, the Maldives and Pakistan have more or less have experienced the impact of climate change. Male, the capital of the Maldives, is now surrounded by a protection wall built of dense concrete.

In this context, the issue of 'climate refugees' gains "much importance". The people of Maldives may soon be climate refugees due to changes in the sea level that could inundate large parts of the archipelago. The Maldives government looks forward towards India and Sri Lanka so they can offer them space on their territory. While this may result in organized and legal migration, but the fear is that there may be illegal migrants from the Maldives. Displacements resulting from climatic change will likely to be a major problem in coming decades. They will occur more frequently and as such it will need greater humanitarian assistance. At the moment, there is no institutional mechanism on climate-related maritime issues. Indian and EU navies could evolve a bilateral cooperative agenda that could be built around capacity building of island states in the Indian Ocean.

#### **Securing the sea lanes of communication for Europe's trade:**

A notable exception to this is the EU's counter-piracy mission European Union Naval Force Somalia (EU NAVFOR) Operation ATALANTA, launched in late 2008 for, among

other reasons, 'the deterrence, prevention, and repression of acts of piracy and armed robbery off the Somali coast'.<sup>11</sup> Operation ATALANTA works in coordination with NATO's counter-piracy mission. European countries participate in these operations. However, little has been done to address the root causes of piracy, which is a major cause of the fragility of states such as Somalia.

Counter-piracy efforts are a response to the larger concern of securing energy supplies and trade in goods. While the former are largely limited to the western part of the Indian Ocean as they pass through the Strait of Hormuz and then the Suez Canal, the latter cross the Indian Ocean to reach farther east. As James Rogers points out with regard to the maritime space from Suez in the west to Shanghai in the east, 'seven of the fifteen biggest trading partners of the EU – China, Japan, South Korea, India, Taiwan, Singapore and Saudi Arabia – are located along the Eurasian coastline'.<sup>12</sup> Operation ATALANTA demonstrates that the EU can handle security challenges in the IOR and can a strategy when its core interests are threatened.

Rogers has well pointed out, 'while sporadic acts of piracy and terrorist activity will always disrupt European sea lanes, a far greater threat could arise from a blockade resulting from a war between two third parties',<sup>13</sup> as a result of what is perceived to be a 'growing mixture of shiny gunboats, new naval stations and geopolitical intrigue'<sup>14</sup> among countries of the IOR such as India, China, the United States and Iran. Articles with titles such as 'Asia: India and China compete for the Seas',<sup>15</sup> highlights the increasing rivalry between India and China in the Indian Ocean and with regard to Indian Ocean rim states, where both seek to increase their influence. Economic cooperation between New Delhi and Beijing is taken into consideration, yet commentators such as Jörg Himmelreich from the German Marshall Fund argue that these ties do not exclude vying for influence in the region, and stress the need for European states to pay attention to developments in the Indian Ocean due to the latter's importance for European trade, as pointed out above.<sup>16</sup>

It is quite clear that Europe's primary interest in the IOR is trade which flows to and from Asia. Indeed, one further example of the preoccupation of European countries with the security of their maritime trade is 'PiraT – Piracy and Maritime Terrorism as a Challenge for Maritime Trade Security: Indicators, Perceptions and Options for Action', a joint research project being carried out by five German research institutions and funded by around 1 million

Euros from the Federal Ministry of Education and Research, with the objective of making policy recommendations to the German government.<sup>17</sup>

However, the European Union and European states have engaged themselves only in counter-piracy operations which is limited to the waters off the Horn of Africa and they have administered joint naval exercises with IOR countries. One should be aware of the fact of the growing Europe's interest in the region because of their participation in the fight against piracy, naval exercises with IOR rim states and academic writings on maritime security issues in the region. As Volker Perthes, head of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), indicated in an article entitled 'The Indian Ocean as a New Strategic Power Centre', that it is especially in Europe that the growing geopolitical and geo-economic importance of the Indian Ocean Region is still underestimated.<sup>18</sup>

Europe has traditionally relied on the US to secure the SLOCs in the region and Asia in general. Yet European commentators point to the changing maritime balance of power,<sup>19</sup> argues well that the US 'will remain the strongest naval power in the region in the foreseeable future. However, it will not any more be the only naval power'.<sup>20</sup> Among European countries, only Great Britain and France seem to have the potential capabilities to undertake operations to secure the region's SLOCs, given the strength of their navies and their naval stations in the IOR.<sup>21</sup>

Trade is an important factor in Indian Ocean power politics. In an article published in the renowned German weekly Die Zeit, Thomas Speckmann points out that although the 2006 German Defence White Paper states that Germany 'has an elementary interest in an open world trade system and unrestricted transportation routes',<sup>22</sup> the country's navy, 'essential for securing sea lanes of communication that are crucial for an export-oriented country such as Germany',<sup>23</sup> has been curtailed to a great extent. Ullrich Weisser, a retired vice-admiral of the German navy, echoes the same time when he stated that, given Germany's position as one of the biggest maritime trade nations, 'it should be self-evident that ship-owners can rely on protection of their ships by the state – either on its own, or in cooperation with partners'.<sup>24</sup> Similar opinions are being voiced in other European countries involved in trade across the Indian Ocean, such as France.<sup>25</sup>

Rather increasing their presence more in the region, Europe expects IOR rim states to play a more active role in, for instance, the fight against piracy. In this context, officials from EU member states stated that they welcomed the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium

(IONS) held in New Delhi in 2008.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, they indicated the need for one state to take the lead in the initiative in order to further bolster the IONS. At present it, appears to be more a forum than an operational arrangement that could effectively address challenges such as piracy in the IOR. It was also suggested that the establishment of a permanent secretariat might be useful to facilitate coordination with external powers.

**Conclusion:**

The above discussion suggests that the EU-India Strategic Partnership is a significant efforts to play assertive role in Indian Ocean Region. Furthermore, there is widespread faith in India to coordinate with the European powers in an effective manner. This could be done through engagements which could be dependent on the kind of resources the two sides wish to invest to achieve strategic convergence. The level of cooperation between India and the EU in the ongoing counter-piracy operations off Somalia is praiseworthy but it is taking place in a much broader multilateral forum. It can act as model for future India-EU maritime cooperation. It would include joint exercises to address counter-terrorism, counter-proliferation and counter-gun running and drug smuggling. In order to proceed forward the two partners must develop operational interoperability and there must be ample mutual trust and enhance understanding. It is also necessary for them to develop some kind of common doctrine and standard operating procedures for greater cooperation and to improve communications.

The EU should regard maritime security in the Indian Ocean region as a necessary precondition to the security of vital sea lanes of communication and to the security and stability in the Mediterranean Sea, the Middle East and North Africa. The EU will have to play a more active role in order to work for maritime security in the Indian Ocean region. For this, one sees the risk of emerging Great Power rivalry as a fundamental threat to security in the Indian Ocean region because of instability in the region.

In the longer run, the EU should work with littoral countries to establish a new forum for maritime security. This could be done by an annual meeting of the ministers of foreign affairs of its member states, similar to ARF. Major extra-regional maritime powers – such as the United States, China and Japan – should be encouraged to join. The EU should aim at cooperation on both traditional and non-traditional security issues. On this basis it could cooperate closely with existing multilateral security initiatives such as the UN Ad-Hoc Committee on the Indian Ocean and the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia.

This type of security cooperation measures would reduce mistrust and threat perceptions among actors, and strengthen security dialogue and constructive diplomacy.

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