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THE “INDO” IN THE “INDO-PACIFIC”

An Indian View

Yogendra Kumar and Probal K. Ghosh

Like all strategic constructs, the expression *Indo-Pacific* evokes divergent, even contradictory, responses, depending on the strategic outlook of the responder. For the proponents of this construct, the challenge lies in allaying the sensitivities of those who consider the term to be an attempt to bolster the U.S.-led security architecture that is fraying under the challenge of China’s growing maritime power and the perceived unsteadiness of the Trump administration’s commitment to that architecture.

On 1 June 2018, Indian prime minister Narendra Modi delivered what is referred to as his “Shangri-La Dialogue speech.” It was aimed at mitigating such sensitivities and articulating his vision of a constructive relationship for India with all countries of the Indo-Pacific region. He stated that India’s Indo-Pacific outlook is not directed against any country but instead stands for “a free, open, inclusive region, which embraces us all [including extraregional stakeholders] in a common pursuit of progress and prosperity.” Emphasizing India’s approach of promoting “a democratic and rules-based international order,” he placed responsibility on “both existing and rising powers” in the region not to return “to the age of great-power rivalries.” He defined the *Indo-Pacific region* as stretching from “the shores of Africa to that of the Americas”—an expansive definition the United States does not share.¹

While the prime minister’s speech reflects India’s growing strategic engagements across an expanding geographical space, commensurate with its current and potential international roles, India’s stated objectives leave open the question of how to realize them, given the realities on the ground (so to speak) in both the Indian and Pacific Oceans. A common strategic framework embracing both the oceans is at an aspirational stage; the respective strategic perspectives,

instrumentalities, and capabilities have yet to crystallize, held hostage as they are to geopolitical currents and eddies and the attention spans of national leaders who mostly remain in a “firefighting mode,” internally and internationally, owing to pervasive uncertainties.

While some security architecture exists in the Pacific Ocean and force equilibriums characterize some regions of the Indian Ocean, there is no overall security architecture in the region. And in both of those situations, geopolitical headwinds are causing the existing arrangements to wobble. Loose groupings of countries are emerging either to strengthen or to weaken those arrangements, and it is inevitable that the group rivalries involved will spill over from one ocean to the other.

Common threats such as climate change, environmental degradation, piracy, and human trafficking could be addressed better through an interlocking of governance mechanisms throughout the Indo-Pacific continuum. However, the challenges to creating and strengthening maritime systems differ between the two oceans.

When India considers the Indo-Pacific strategic construct, it is the “Indo” portion that is existential. However, India feels that its strategic stakes in the Pacific are growing, causing it to attempt to leverage its regional relationships to influence the maritime system in the Pacific to suit its interests. But in comparison with the United States and, to an extent, China, India faces capacity and capability issues that impose prioritization constraints as it attempts to contribute to the fleshing out of a true Indo-Pacific strategic continuum.

Attention now focuses on the entire Indian Ocean as a maritime system. This is in contrast to the Cold War period, when the U.S.-USSR naval rivalry focused attention on the western Indian Ocean choke points, targeted at the force equilibrium prevailing in the hinterlands from Southwest Asia to the Middle East; and to the post-Cold War U.S. approach, which was limited by those hinterland requirements even as America’s attention shifted to a China-containment strategy, causing its existing strategic framework for the Indian Ocean to reflect these “localized” strategic interests.

THE INDIAN OCEAN: A CHANGING STRATEGIC PICTURE

The changes that the broader strategic picture of the Indian Ocean has been undergoing challenge the Indian Ocean littoral countries, as well as others, to conceptualize a commensurate holistic Indian Ocean maritime system. While the challenges of maintaining the equilibriums on the Middle Eastern and Southwest Asian landmasses remain, the post-Cold War situations there have metamorphosed into a much more complex interplay among a bewildering range of

actors, even as the old Cold War rivalries are reemerging, albeit under radically changed circumstances. New actors have entered the fray even as the old actors soldier on. The challenge represented by growing state fragility—even the possibility of state collapse—is perplexing national leaders and strategic analysts alike.

The challenges to the resilience of the existing force equilibrium in the Indian Ocean are complicated not just by the factors mentioned above but also by different countries’ growing concerns over issues of freedom of navigation, especially through oceanic choke points; the deepening naval competition among regional as well as extraregional navies; the nature of naval modernization; and the broader geopolitical flux. The existing Indian Ocean maritime system came into existence, or rather “accreted,” in a different era altogether, resulting from the ad hoc nature of the security challenges then faced, and suffers from multifarious limitations for functioning in the current era. The various subregions of the Indian Ocean discussed below present a picture of growing maritime system-related instabilities.

The Western Indian Ocean

In the western Indian Ocean—as in the southern and eastern Indian Ocean—the threats are rooted in inadequate enforcement capabilities. This results in human trafficking, drug smuggling, terror financing, and the movement of terrorists and criminals both on land and at sea. This region is affected by illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing activities that deprive those countries in the region that have legitimate maritime claims of an important resource for their socioeconomic progress.

The region of the northwestern Indian Ocean and the Horn of Africa is witnessing a growing competition for opening naval bases, whose establishment will enable both regional and extraregional powers to exert greater control over both ingress to and egress from the Red Sea.² The militarization of the Red Sea is expected to continue—witness the Houthi attacks on the Saudi, U.S., and United Arab Emirates (UAE) navies, as well as commercial vessels traveling between the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden; on 1 June 2018, a spokesman for the Houthis stated that Abu Dhabi was now within range of their missiles.³

This trend raises wider concerns about securing navigation routes through the Bab el Mandeb into the Red Sea and through the Suez Canal into the Mediterranean Sea. The problem is compounded by the intensifying conflict in Yemen, which has drawn in not only regional but extraregional powers. These naval port-building activities signify an intensifying contest among the protagonists to dominate this choke point during a diverse array of future precipitous contingencies. These unfolding dynamics exacerbate the trend toward the fraying of the maritime system in this strategic subregion.

Political instability in this region also is leading to the gradual reemergence of piracy, the acceleration of illegal migration along the East African seaboard, and the presence of and “rooting in” of al-Qaeda and the remnants of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

The Persian Gulf

The Persian Gulf region is witnessing deepening tensions as an overflow from the ongoing conflicts in Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq and the worsening of existing regional rivalries, primarily between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The new force alignment developing in this area involves growing activity by extraregional powers, including incipient revival of the Cold War tensions between Russia and the United States. The added element is the tension among the Gulf Arab states, contributions to which include deepening fissures between Qatar and the other Gulf states as well as the involvement of countries such as Turkey and Iran in intra-Gulf Arab rivalries. This is leading to exacerbated tensions in the region between the Iranian and U.S. navies, as evidenced by the frequent naval encounters between them. This poses a grave concern for freedom of navigation through the Strait of Hormuz—a critical artery for global trade.

Another dimension of the growing challenge is the rapid modernization of the Pakistan Navy, including its decision to acquire eight Yuan-class Type 041 diesel-electric submarines from China. This development has the potential to upset the regional balance of power, leading to further power disequilibriums. The danger of “loose nukes at sea” also increases with the Pakistan Navy’s decision to deploy nuclear weapons on its naval platforms. Al-Qaeda’s September 2014 attempt to capture PNS *Zulfikar* at the Karachi naval base provides forewarning of the vulnerability of deployed nukes to terrorists.⁴

U.S. Naval War College analysts Peter Dombrowski and Andrew C. Winner have opined that China’s future capabilities and actions in the Indian Ocean represent the most obvious potential source of U.S. policy change. This is especially so given China’s closer naval alliance with Pakistan.⁵

Indian Ocean Island Countries

The ramifications of the growing challenges to the existing equilibrium in the wider Indian Ocean are being felt by Indian Ocean island countries as well. This is partly the result of their lack of capacity to exploit their respective maritime resources and to cope with the threats of piracy and the illegal trafficking of drugs and migrants. Many of the state systems already are vulnerable owing to their economic fragility (they mostly have single-factor economic systems), to which climate change adds a growing threat. Some of this state fragility manifests itself in deepening internal power struggles, which external powers then exploit, resulting in the fragmentation and polarization of the island communities, which enhance their vulnerability to jihadi extremism.

As elsewhere, the expanding Chinese footprint is visible in the growing frequency of Chinese naval patrols, including by submarines, as well as the expanding scope of China’s Maritime Silk Route (MSR) projects. The growing Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean has balance-of-power ramifications that may destabilize the maritime system, given the inadequacies of the existing governance mechanisms. Moreover, many of the MSR projects are being carried out without regard to their true economic viability, leading the weak island economies into an inextricable debt trap. The resulting economic, then political, instability has the potential to destabilize the existing maritime system in this subregion.

The Eastern Indian Ocean

Problems related to human trafficking and drug trafficking are major concerns in the eastern Indian Ocean, as are instances of piracy. Jihadist militancy is on the rise, as are other forms of ethnic insurgency. The fragility of the littoral states on or in the Bay of Bengal contributes to these growing phenomena, and the region is prone to extreme weather events that can aggravate that state fragility. The eastern Indian Ocean also can expect certain potential disequilibriums, similar to those in other Indian Ocean subregions but for dissimilar reasons.

The force structure in the Bay of Bengal is changing, gradually. The littoral naval capabilities are growing, including in the development of submarine forces. The littoral countries are conscious of their maritime zones and are building the capability to look after them. In late 2016, the Bangladesh Navy acquired two Chinese Ming-class Type 035B diesel-electric submarines. In April 2017, Thailand, declaring its intention to better police its Bay of Bengal coastline, made the decision to acquire three Chinese Yuan-class S26T submarines. (So far a firm contract has been placed for only one of these, for delivery by 2023.)⁶ The Myanmar government also has declared its intention to acquire a submarine capability.⁷

The Indian Navy has the strongest presence here, with system-defense and policing capabilities, and is developing additional infrastructure in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands to support these functions. It also carries out coordinated patrols with Myanmar, Indonesia, and Thailand in pursuit of effective surveillance. Its deployment of a nuclear-missile-equipped submarine changes the strategic picture in this subregion, in that it draws the attention not only of China but of other major powers to the implications for their deterrence postures.

China’s naval footprint is limited but its commercial shipping activities are growing, as part of its Belt and Road Initiative projects. Assets include not only ports but gas and oil pipelines and road and railway infrastructure. The opening of the Myanmar economy has meant a greater focus on the development of special economic zones around important ports in that country. Similar plans

are afoot with respect to Thailand and Malaysia, especially the latter, which has very ambitious plans for developing its port capacity and seaboard infrastructure.

The Strait of Malacca is an important choke point that necessitates serious international attention. Other choke points include the Sunda, Lombok, and Ombai Straits. As these choke points straddle the “Indo” and the “Pacific,” their strategic salience has increased in recent times.

MARITIME SYSTEM INSTABILITY CHALLENGES

Looming Disequilibriums

The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) *Strategic Survey 2016* begins by stating that “the underpinnings of geopolitics have splintered so much in the past year that the foundations of global order appear alarmingly weak. . . . Multiple strategic earthquakes have created a situation in which world leaders are in a constant state of crisis control.”⁸

The different challenges to the existing power equilibrium in the Indian Ocean have different sources, and the evolving trends need to be evaluated across the entire region. Similarly, ongoing subregional developments need to be evaluated for their region-wide ramifications.

Political fragility and the resultant economic disarray invite external powers to manipulate domestic political processes for their own agendas; they also intensify multiple regional power struggles. State fragility at key oceanic locations, as well as in the Middle Eastern heartland, compounds in at least three ways the threats to maritime system stability posed by climate change, extreme weather events, and the structural embedding of nonstate actors—be they extremists, pirates, or common criminals—within collapsing political structures. First, the growing phenomenon of state collapse or regional political collapse renders unfruitful—even Sisyphean—any attempt to create a power structure across the region. Second, state or regional collapse would defeat any attempts by the international community to create a normative framework for the peaceful and sustainable use of the Indian Ocean. And third, such collapse also would militate against the overall vision of economic integration of the littoral economies to enable them to play their due role in the economic and technological globalization processes that are taking place in the rest of the Asian region.

Other Traditional and Nontraditional Challenges

Although the existing balance of power is tilted heavily in favor of the United States, the existing Indian Ocean maritime system faces serious challenges; its inadequacies to respond effectively to changing circumstances are numerous. The system was “designed” for different requirements, and several geopolitical factors, including changes in the power relations among the major littoral and

nonlittoral powers, have led to strategic distrust among them. Regional uncertainty regarding whether China’s entry into the Indian Ocean would be “disruptive” is compounded further by the emerging geostrategic rivalry in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf region, in addition to the rivalries already existing there.

The absence of any region-wide capability to protect fish stocks from IUU fishing, affecting a large part of the Indian Ocean littoral, means that several littoral countries have no stake in the creation of a more comprehensive, region-wide maritime system. Various terrorist entities have tried to acquire—some successfully—a maritime capability, and they continue to seek to acquire increasingly lethal capabilities, including weapons of mass destruction. The possibilities for destabilization arising from climate change are growing, both at sea and in coastal regions, affecting existing coping mechanisms for natural disasters and climate-mitigation efforts, and ultimately state stability.

MARITIME SYSTEM DEFENSE ISSUES AND INTEROPERABILITY CAPABILITIES

Force-Projection Infrastructure

In terms of existing military infrastructure, the most significant presence in the region is that of an extraregional power, the United States. Its bases in Diego Garcia, Bahrain, Qatar, and Djibouti provide the skeleton for the power structure in the Indian Ocean, fleshed out with its air, space, and other military assets. It has formidable undersea capabilities in the eastern Indian Ocean, ship-basing rights at Singapore, and troop-rotation facilities at Darwin, Australia.

Regarding other powers, both regional and extraregional, Australia has facilities at the Cocos Islands and Christmas Island, covering the Sunda Strait; this array of forces represents a significant posture for maintaining the existing power equilibrium in both the western Pacific and the Indian Ocean. France has naval and military capabilities in Réunion, Djibouti, and Abu Dhabi. The United Kingdom (U.K.), which “leased” the Diego Garcia base to the United States in 1966, also has made a comeback after a gap of four decades by opening a naval base in Bahrain.⁹

Among regional navies, the Indian Navy is the strongest, with considerable infrastructure in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and a developing one in the Lakshadweep Island chain. The Iranian navy has considerable presence in the Persian Gulf region, where its confrontations with the U.S. Navy reflect the tense relationship between the two countries.

The Chinese navy’s “logistics base” in Djibouti, ostensibly established to support antipiracy operations in the vicinity of the Horn of Africa, also serves as a

means of power projection in the region. This certainly was evident in November 2017, when visiting Chinese president Xi Jinping, dressed in full military uniform, addressed the Chinese contingent there, exhorting its members to promote “international and regional peace and stability.”¹⁰

Information-Sharing Infrastructure

The existing infrastructure for information sharing and for maintaining maritime domain awareness (MDA) is patchy and oriented toward supporting the current force-projection missions. It remains quite inadequate for fulfilling the emerging requirements for maritime system defense, as it largely is geared toward coastal security. It currently is not able adequately to support action across the entire Indian Ocean region (IOR) to combat drug trafficking and other forms of transnational crime, such as IUU fishing.

Beyond the usual ways of gaining maritime domain awareness (e.g., regular joint patrolling with naval contingents of different countries, coverage by existing shore-based radar installations, and use of space assets), the Indian Navy, with the agreement of the host governments, has installed additional radar equipment in Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, and Madagascar. There also are maritime-information-sharing centers in the western Indian Ocean in Sanaa, Yemen; Mombasa, Kenya; and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, with communication links to various countries in the region for mounting search-and-rescue (SAR) operations. The Indian Information Management and Analysis Centre, near Delhi, aggregates information to provide maritime domain awareness over almost the entire Indian Ocean. The Singapore-based Information Sharing Centre also provides significant domain awareness in the Indian Ocean. In certain information segments, capabilities are available as well within the Indian Ocean Commission; its members are Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius, Réunion, and Seychelles.

Ongoing efforts envisage the interlinking of various of these capabilities to provide a comprehensive domain picture for the Indian Ocean. However, the complexity of these efforts should not be underestimated.

Maritime System Defense Mechanisms, Established and Incipient

A broad overview of current maritime system defense mechanism efforts serves to underline their ad hoc character. The maintenance of good order at sea (to use the universally accepted naval expression) includes a role for great powers as well as multilateral collaborative activities, both well organized and incipient. The roles of the Indian Navy and Coast Guard are touched on elsewhere in this article.

The uniqueness of the Indian Ocean in this respect is the considerable experience in interoperability shared among regional and extraregional navies, including in carrying out specific missions. This may build sufficient confidence to diversify interoperability missions in the direction of system-defense functions.

Yet the creation of a holistic, resilient maritime system adequate to the full spectrum of challenges is a far more complex challenge.

Established Structures. The U.S. naval command system for the Indian Ocean presents a bit of a jigsaw puzzle. It consists of different naval commands for different subregions, without much intercommand coordination. The U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (previously the Pacific Command [PACOM]) covers the area east of the imaginary maritime dividing line between India and Pakistan. West of that line the Central Command (CENTCOM) coverage extends over the remaining part of the Indian Ocean, with the exception of the area close to the African seaboard, which the Africa Command covers. Still within the Indian Ocean, the Gulf of Aqaba (including Elat) is covered by the European Command, because Israel lies within its area of responsibility. The U.S. State Department divides the region into geographical bureaus whose boundaries do not correspond with those of the Department of Defense.¹¹ Owing to this segmented combination of responsibilities for various government agencies, including the military’s theater commands, the United States does not have a single “mind” of its own as far as the defense of the entire Indian Ocean maritime system is concerned.

With regard to antipiracy missions, especially in the Horn of Africa region, the Shared Awareness and Deconfliction system (known as SHADE) provides a mechanism for sharing information among the various interested countries, including with nongovernmental stakeholders. Discussions cover coordination of escorts for merchant shipping passing through the internationally recommended transit corridor, as well as aerial coverage of high-risk areas. These meetings take place at CENTCOM headquarters in Bahrain.

The European Union (EU) naval complement (EUNAVFOR) plans to conduct Operation ATALANTA through December 2020. Its purpose is to protect vessels of the World Food Programme and other shipping, deter and disrupt piracy and armed robbery at sea, monitor fishing activities off the coast of Somalia, and support other EU missions and international obligations to strengthen maritime security and capacity in the region. It covers the southern Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and a large part of the Indian Ocean, including the waters around Seychelles, Mauritius, and Comoros. EUNAVFOR’s current deployments involve one Italian and one Spanish frigate and a Spanish P-3C Orion.¹² The Maritime Security Centre–Horn of Africa, headquartered in Northwood, United Kingdom, provides twenty-four-hour manned monitoring of vessels transiting through the Gulf of Aden, including an interactive capability to provide current information to shippers and escorts. Non-EU members such as Ukraine, New Zealand, and South Korea also have joined EUNAVFOR.

The U.S. Navy operates three multinational combined task forces (CTFs) in the region. CTF 150 was set up in 2001 to fight the “global war on terrorism,”

including in the Horn of Africa area; CTF 151 was set up in 2009 to confront piracy off the Somali coast and in the Gulf of Aden; and CTF 152 was set up in 2004 to provide maritime security in the Persian Gulf. These assignments mean that these task forces also operate in the northern and northwestern Indian Ocean. Headquartered at the U.S. base in Bahrain, the relevant command is the U.S. Navy Fifth Fleet; a Royal Navy (U.K.) commodore assists. These different task forces incorporate units from NATO member states, non-NATO U.S. allies, and others.

Incipient Structures. Among the multilateral organizations that are still in the more formative stages are the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS).

IORA is beginning to engage its member countries to develop an extensive maritime-safety and -security cooperative enterprise with legal and regulatory underpinnings. Owing to the numerous dimensions involved in developing such a capability for the organization, the process is still in its infancy, and thus the organization's and members' capabilities mostly remain woefully limited.¹³ However, this organization could be the main agency for providing many of the functions needed to sustain a transformed maritime system for the Indian Ocean.

The members of IONS are the heads of navies and coast guards of a large number of the littoral countries. While it is an important organization with considerable potential for developing confidence-building measures (CBMs) and enhancing strategic trust among its members and observers, given those parties' diversity (and, in some cases, their adversarial relationships) IONS has yet to develop the range of interoperability templates required to overcome the various threats and challenges found in the regional maritime arena.¹⁴

PERSPECTIVES ON THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION

India's SAGAR Framework in the Indo-Pacific Context

Indian prime minister Narendra Modi articulated his vision for the IOR in a major speech at Port Louis, Mauritius, on 12 March 2015. In it he coined the acronym SAGAR, standing for the motto "Security and growth for all in the region"; as a word, the expression means "sea" in Hindi.¹⁵

The concept consists of five elements.

- India has national responsibility to safeguard its mainland and islands. Associated objectives include contributing to a safe, secure, and stable region and fulfilling a commitment to help others during natural disasters and SAR operations.

- India seeks to deepen economic and security cooperation within the region, including strengthening maritime-security capacities and maritime economies.
- India aims to achieve collective cooperation for peace and security, better preparedness for emergencies through multilateral mechanisms such as IONS, and bilateral maritime-security cooperation.
- India intends to contribute to greater regional integration on the basis of sustainable development, including for combating climate change, and building the “blue economy,” using IORA as an instrument for this purpose.
- The primary responsibility for peace, stability, and prosperity in the Indian Ocean rests with the littoral states themselves. India seeks a climate of trust and transparency, respect for international maritime rules and norms by all countries while remaining sensitive to each other’s interests, peaceful resolution of maritime issues, and increased maritime cooperation.

While Prime Minister Modi’s Shangri-La vision for the Indo-Pacific is philosophically consistent with the general concept of a free, open, and inclusive maritime order, it is the SAGAR vision that represents an actionable agenda to achieve a viable Indian Ocean maritime system.¹⁶

The Indian Navy’s 2015 articulation of India’s maritime-security strategy envisages an expanded role for the service as a “net security provider” in the country’s maritime neighborhood. It identifies primary areas of maritime interest, which include India’s coastal maritime zones, the Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal, the Andaman Sea, the Persian Gulf, the Gulf of Oman, the Gulf of Aden, the Red Sea, the southwest Indian Ocean, the east coast of Africa, and the various IOR choke points and sea lines of communication (SLOCs). Secondary areas of interest are the southeastern Indian Ocean, the South and East China Seas, the western Pacific Ocean, the southern Indian Ocean region (including Antarctica), the Mediterranean Sea, and the west coast of Africa. Other areas may become of interest, depending on national considerations.¹⁷

The increasing tactical complexity of the MALABAR series of exercises, which involve India, the United States, and Japan, illustrates a shared perspective among those countries. The U.S. government has underlined this perspective further by renaming its Pacific Command the Indo-Pacific Command, even as the theater command’s area of responsibility remains unchanged; the rechristening denotes a greater salience of the Indian Ocean (and thus of India) in this perspective. Although enhanced interoperability can be useful for any type of joint mission, conduct of the MALABAR series, with exercise locations alternating between the Bay of Bengal and the western Pacific, does signify that all three countries have

stakes in the strategic equilibriums prevailing in the two subregions. This denotes that there is a certain “buy-in” by India of the U.S. perspective on the Indo-Pacific, as represented in the latter’s own geographical definition. Even so, all three countries maintain their own respective networks of relationships in South-east and East Asia, particularly with China.

India also has shed an earlier inhibition in that it has agreed to deploy a naval liaison officer to the U.S. Naval Forces Central Command, in Bahrain. The intention is to facilitate enhanced situational awareness.¹⁸

Even given that Indian and U.S. perspectives share considerable strategic convergence toward maintaining the current strategic equilibrium, developing a composite perspective on the Indian Ocean would be necessary for a closer sharing of these perspectives. Achieving this would require creation of an American “home” for the policy somewhere within the U.S. government: a policy-coordination unit that would be charged with creating and maintaining an official, composite, strategic “picture.” This policy-coordination function would need to be mirrored at the think-tank level on both sides.¹⁹

Within the existing relationship, strong Indo-U.S. cooperation against terrorism is an ongoing process. India would expect and welcome the United States and the larger international community to weigh in—as strongly as possible—to assist in neutralizing that cross-border terrorism that has come to be identified with Pakistan.

Evolving U.S. Thinking

American thinking on the Indian Ocean continues to evolve past the Cold War era. The United States strives to respond, via both hard-power and diplomatic means, to ongoing regional developments. As regional stability increasingly becomes anchored in the Indian Ocean as a whole, the segmented nature of the U.S. approach to force engagement is exposed as inadequate. The overall U.S. force drawdown, as currently envisaged—unconnected as it seems to be to any holistic vision or grand strategy—only can aggravate the challenges to American interests and to those of others in the region. Even in terms of the country’s own national security perspective alone, there is no strong unanimity within the U.S. strategic community that the existing maritime system can be calibrated to meet these challenges effectively.

America’s existing national security perspective consists of bolstering the largely favorable political order in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf and managing the Chinese naval footprint. At the instance of the U.S. Secretary of Defense, an interagency review of the IOR was undertaken in early 2012; several high-profile American delegations visited India, Australia, and other regional players. However, beyond the Obama administration’s announcement of

a “rebalancing” toward Asia in general, no new initiatives for the Indian Ocean were reported. The expectation has been that the U.S. approach would be one of “muddling through.”²⁰

The unclassified summary of the U.S. National Defense Strategy (NDS), which the Secretary of Defense released on 19 January 2018, states as follows: “A free and open Indo-Pacific region provides prosperity and security for all. We will strengthen our alliances and partnerships in the Indo-Pacific to a networked security architecture capable of deterring aggression, maintaining stability, and ensuring free access to common domains. With key countries in the region, we will bring together bilateral and multilateral security relationships to preserve the free and open international system.”²¹ Under the same broad theme of regional defense challenges, the strategy states its objective of fostering a stable and secure Middle East that denies safe havens to terrorists, is not dominated by any power hostile to the United States, and contributes to “stable global energy markets and secure trade routes.” It also aims to consolidate gains in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere and “to support the lasting defeat of terrorists as we sever their sources of strength and counterbalance Iran.”²²

The U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS), which President Trump released in December 2017, distinguishes the “Indo-Pacific” from the “Middle East” and “South and Central Asia.” It describes the Indo-Pacific as stretching from the west coast of India to the western shores of the United States—precisely the area of responsibility of PACOM (now Indo-Pacific Command). The NSS is quite China-centric in its threat assessment, dwelling little on the situation in the IOR and its governance mechanisms. While the NSS reaffirms the U.S. military commitment to the security and stability of the Middle East, it states that “[f]or years, the interconnected problems of Iranian expansion, state collapse, jihadist ideology, socio-economic stagnation, and regional rivalries [have] convulsed the Middle East.” In its discussion of South and Central Asia, the NSS refers to the Indian Ocean only once, stating, “We will deepen our strategic partnership with India and support its leadership role in Indian Ocean security and throughout the broader region.”²³

Manifestly, the NSS anticipates the NDS in terms of the operating U.S. perspective on the Indian Ocean maritime system. Specific factors impacting on that system’s resilience—such as balance-of-power considerations, state fragility, terrorism, and the safety of navigation routes—are highlighted, but largely within the context of different regions’ strategic milieus. These documents pay no attention to the larger issue of the governance of the Indian Ocean as a maritime system. This signals a belief that the factors affecting the unified system’s resilience can be addressed effectively by focusing on specific negative phenomena

in different regions and through the normal diplomatic engagements of a superpower. In other words, the U.S. approach to the Indian Ocean, as currently constituted, lacks the attributes of a grand strategy.

Given the segmented nature of the American approach to IOR governance, that approach remains inherently reactive. By its nature it will be unlikely to shape proactively a new maritime system capable of coping with the threats that are emerging, including of the nontraditional variety, in the near-to-medium term. There is an ominous aspect to this approach, given the fast-paced developments in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf, with their grave implications for the maritime system as a whole.

The Chinese Approach

The Chinese government does not have an officially articulated policy on the Indian Ocean. However, its 2015 white paper on military strategy represents a doctrinal shift from “offshore waters defense” to a combination of that objective with “open seas protection,” as well as the abandonment of the “traditional mentality that land outweighs sea,” so that “great importance has to be attached to managing the seas and oceans, and protecting maritime rights and interests.”²⁴ According to Ryan Martinson, in the Chinese text of the white paper, the relevant concept translates more accurately as “*strategic management*.”²⁵

China clearly has come of age, in both its conception and its program (the latter covering 2016–20) to emerge as a maritime power in all dimensions. As its overseas assets multiply, expanding beyond the so-called first island chain, China also is developing its capacity to protect those islands—and indeed to fly its flag in any waters of interest to it.

An important aspect of this endeavor is to invest significantly—in a political sense—in IOR littoral and island countries, especially in the form of maritime infrastructure projects carried out under its MSR program. Some of these projects, when executed in financially weak countries, have resulted in Chinese acquisition of equity participation, yielding greater control over their management. Because of these projects’ strategic locations, there are apprehensions about them being used for military purposes, although China has not stated explicitly any intention to have naval bases in the Indian Ocean. However, given China’s tendency toward “changing the facts on the ground” in the South China Sea, such apprehensions are not groundless.

Djibouti offers an example worth considering. A July 2017 CNA study on Djibouti offers citations from the Chinese ministry of defense website in 2010 to the effect that reports of Chinese overseas bases are groundless, then presents 2015 quotations from a Chinese foreign office spokesperson that “the building of logistical facilities in Djibouti . . . will better guarantee Chinese troops to carry out

international peacekeeping operations, escort missions in the Gulf of Aden and the Somali waters, humanitarian relief, and other tasks.”²⁶ As mentioned earlier, in November 2017 the Chinese president addressed the Chinese troops in Djibouti, asking them to promote “international and regional peace and stability.”²⁷ In February 2018, a People’s Liberation Army Navy task force (consisting of at least one modern destroyer, a frigate, an amphibious assault ship, and a support tanker) then in the eastern Indian Ocean briefly entered the port. At least one observer believed that this port visit influenced the course of a political crisis then ongoing in the Maldives.²⁸

The expanding Chinese activities, diplomatic as well as naval, cannot yet be considered to be shaping the Indian Ocean maritime system, but by their nature they certainly can be interpreted as a reflection of the country’s desire to shape it in the future. They also signify that the Chinese entry into the Indian Ocean can be expected to be disruptive of the existing maritime system—unless serious efforts are made to shape the maritime system to meet the growing challenges.

The Japanese Approach

The Japanese government, led by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, has espoused a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy”; the strategy was conceptualized in Abe’s speech in 2007 to India’s Parliament. It envisages improved connectivity between Asia and Africa and the promotion of stability in and prosperity for the region as a whole; the Japanese conception defines the region geographically more broadly than does the United States. The strategy seeks to realize its goals through strengthened strategic collaboration with India as well as with the United States and Australia.

The strategy lays stress on democracy, the rule of law, and market economics in Southeast and East Asia, and on “nation-building support in the area of development as well as politics and governance” in Africa. In the maritime domain, the emphasis is on the “rule of law and freedom of navigation,” especially compliance with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Another important aspect is ensuring peace and stability, including cooperation in capacity building for maritime law enforcement and MDA.²⁹

The strategy manifested itself in November 2017 in the convening of the Quadrilateral Dialogue among the United States, India, Japan, and Australia. Another manifestation was the scaled-up Exercise MALABAR that took place in July 2017 in the Bay of Bengal with participation by India, the United States, and Japan, which served to enhance naval interoperability within the U.S.-defined Indo-Pacific construct. According to Japanese media reports, enhancement of maritime-security capabilities is being achieved through greater Japanese involvement with countries such as Djibouti (where the Japan Coast Guard has

provided training and has gifted patrol boats) and Sri Lanka (similarly, antipiracy drills and patrol boats).³⁰

Japan's strategy has the support of several countries, including India and the United States. Not yet a comprehensive approach toward shaping the Indian Ocean maritime order, the strategy still is unfolding, and so far lacks the visibility of the Chinese footprint in the Indian Ocean.

Indonesia's Global Maritime Fulcrum

Indonesian president Joko Widodo announced in 2014 his vision of Indonesia's role as the "Global Maritime Fulcrum" (GMF). The GMF concept comprises five core pillars: maritime culture, maritime infrastructure and connectivity, protection of maritime resources, maritime diplomacy, and maritime defense; two auxiliary pillars are maritime governance and the maritime environment.³¹

While this vision informs Indonesian initiatives in various international forums (especially the convening of the first-ever IORA summit in Jakarta in March 2017), its emphasis is more on economic aspects and less on hard-core military capabilities. Even as Indonesia continues to envisage cooperation with China on MSR projects, it concluded an agreement with India to develop port and related infrastructure projects in and around the Indonesian port of Sabang, on the northern tip of Sumatra.³²

Since 2014, Indonesia has been conducting the KOMODO biennial multilateral naval exercise; the latest iteration occurred in May 2018 at Lombok Island and in nearby waters, with a focus on humanitarian and disaster-response operations. These exercises are well attended, including by the navies of India, China, and the United States.

The Iranian Approach

At the 2018 Munich Security Conference, the Iranian foreign minister advanced a proposal for a Persian Gulf version of the Helsinki process that would be based on the UN Charter and on "ticket principles" and "CBM baskets," to which all Gulf countries purportedly should be able to subscribe. The process eventually was to lead to a regional nonaggression pact; it also envisaged a regional dialogue forum involving both intergovernmental and nongovernmental interactions.³³

As chairman for the 2018 IONS, the commander of the Iranian navy used his inaugural speech before the symposium to stress that it should be the countries of a particular region that ensure the security of that region; he warned that a naval presence by outsiders could impose foreign security arrangements on the region. He also urged IONS to set up a combat group, and to formulate a "common tactical language for coordinated naval measures," to contribute to stability.³⁴

The Iranian naval deterrence strategy of area denial is anchored on blocking the Strait of Hormuz by sea, air, and land should hostilities break out. Both the

Iranian navy and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN) have parts to play under this strategy, but whereas the IRGCN concentrates its activities inside the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman to conduct asymmetrical operations, the Iranian navy—the more professional, conventional, blue-water force—covers the Gulf of Oman, the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the Red Sea. Occasionally the navy ventures even beyond that; it has participated actively in antipiracy operations off the Horn of Africa.

Iranian naval capabilities are to be deployed against both certain Gulf states, such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and the United States, which has a significant presence in both the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. Incidents of military confrontation between Iranian naval forces and those of the United States are not infrequent in the Persian Gulf region. Donald Trump, during his 2016 presidential election campaign, even threatened that Iranian vessels harassing the U.S. Navy would be “shot out of the water.”³⁵ Amid rising military tension in the region, one ramification of the hardening U.S. position vis-à-vis Iran is that current access to Afghanistan—vital for both Indian and American interests—through the Iranian port of Chabahar, only recently opened to India, appears to be in jeopardy owing to the reluctance, in a volatile environment, of Indian firms and others to work there lest they attract secondary U.S. sanctions.

THE WAY AHEAD

A Broader Approach

Strengthened pan-IOR governance mechanisms and bilateral maritime diplomacy can help develop normative templates and enforcement capabilities. The stakes that littoral countries, especially small island countries, have in a holistic maritime system can be nurtured through combating climate change and other nontraditional, system-destabilizing challenges. A holistic maritime system, of the type that Prime Minister Modi envisaged, would counter, to a considerable extent, the growing—and geographically expanding—gyre of state collapse and regional instability, with its attendant flourishing of jihadist groups.

The jihadist challenge, which has critical ramifications for India because of the movement’s extensive (especially diasporal) links, is a particularly complex phenomenon in the Gulf region, as well as the Horn of Africa. India’s strategic interests do not converge foursquare with those of the United States in this sub-region, which is witnessing the hostility between the United States and Iran and between Saudi Arabia and Iran, with the added complication of a deepening rift between Qatar and the rest of the countries of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (known as the Gulf Cooperation Council [GCC]). Yet the United States, given its preeminence in the region, nonetheless can help shape a new maritime system, some elements of which are discussed below.

Ground Rules for Freedom of Navigation and Use of Littoral Harbors by Extraregional Navies. There is an urgent need to devise ground rules for freedom of navigation and the use of littoral harbors by extraregional navies. Presently, these matters are left to the devices of the individual country or countries concerned—and it is amply evident that the outcome so far has been to worsen the situation.

Although UNCLOS enjoins countries to respect freedom of navigation, certain countries base their grand strategies on closing choke points. A prime example is Iran with regard to the Strait of Hormuz; however, the same observation applies to the United States with regard to the Malacca Strait.³⁶ Extralittoral navies are engaged in setting up bases in the Horn of Africa and the Persian Gulf, implicitly threatening closure of SLOCs in the Bab el Mandeb and the Suez Canal.

Actions such as these aggravate regional tensions, potentially leading to the unraveling of the entire Indian Ocean maritime system. While naval operations in pursuit of the security interests of individual countries are sovereign activities, ground rules for both freedom of navigation and the use of littoral harbors can be developed without constraining states' security operations.

Raising Strategic Trust Levels among the Major Navies. Yet another important effort should be aimed at raising strategic trust levels among the major navies. The goal should be to stabilize their force levels so that the balance-of-power equilibrium is not disturbed.

Front-loading cooperative activities in various multilateral governance forums in the IOR and recognizing the legitimacy of relevant countries' stakes in the IOR maritime system and its stability could build up such strategic trust. This could lead to a slowing, or even a reversal, of current trends of naval buildup.

Upholding the SAGAR National Security Priorities. In both the efforts mentioned immediately above, the SAGAR conceptual framework provides a strong basis on which to conduct national and multilateral diplomacy. India's leadership believes that placing responsibility for the peace, stability, and prosperity of the Indian Ocean on the littoral states themselves will ensure that the country's maritime security and larger maritime interests are well safeguarded. This approach is consistent with the nation's sovereign right of national defense, which covers not only the mainland and the islands but also its efforts to "ensure a safe, secure, and stable Indian Ocean region that delivers . . . all to the shores of prosperity."³⁷ The framework also lays out a basis for external navies to secure their legitimate national interests.

India's policy toward the Gulf region and the Horn of Africa, at both the bilateral and the multilateral levels, seeks to persuade all the adversarial countries that they have stakes in regional stability, which is the key to economic progress and societal cohesion. All states should bear in mind that mass internal

or transborder migrations are in the interest of nobody—not countries in the region; not Europe; not other stakeholder countries, such as China, Japan, and Russia; and not countries in South Asia, Southeast Asia, or the Far East. A balance-of-power equation operates only when there are nation-states at both ends of the relationship; collapse of either triggers a very different kind of dynamic, as illustrated in the Afghanistan and Iraq experiences. As the recent U.S. moves in the Gulf region have shown, in the wake of the GCC rift over Qatar, America wants to ensure that the security architecture it has set up in that littoral region remains strong. Any instability there would make it impossible for the United States to sustain this security architecture. Instability in the Gulf region would imperil not only India’s energy supplies but also the lives and well-being of the millions of expatriate Indians who live there.

Bilateral capacity building through cultivation of relationships with countries in the region and the strengthening of pan-IOR governance mechanisms for developing the ground rules discussed above would mitigate to some extent the destabilizing effects of the hard-power pursuits of national interests revealed in the violent contestations taking place within the region. In this effort, India will find other influential countries willing to act in tandem with it, and it can leverage its own friendly relations with nearly all countries in the region. The United States would need to calibrate its regional approach according to its own sensitivity toward the possibility that increased China-Pakistan naval cooperation would upset the regional balance of power, as well as the danger represented by the “loose nukes at sea” issue.³⁸

Indian Ocean Maritime System Capacity Issues

IORA’s Charter Responsibilities. Because of its essentially pan-IOR character, IORA is uniquely suited to help shape a holistic maritime system for the Indian Ocean. Apart from economic and cultural cooperation, the organization aims to tackle maritime-security, disaster-response, and blue-economy challenges. Its action plan for 2017–21 spells out near-, medium-, and long-term initiatives.³⁹ While this has created a skeletal framework of the desired action, a stronger political will to drive the process is necessary, just as the creation of sufficient stakes for outside powers is necessary to further the organization’s institutional growth.

The IORA Summit Declaration of 7 March 2017, called the Jakarta Concord, describes the scope of the field of maritime safety and security as covering accidents and incidents at sea; the safety of vessels and the marine environment; transboundary challenges such as piracy and armed robbery at sea; terrorism; trafficking in persons and the smuggling of people, illicit drugs, and wildlife; crimes in the fisheries sector and environmental crimes; and freedom of navigation and overflight, in accordance with international law and UNCLOS. The

action plan includes, as a long-term program, a regional surveillance network that would provide information on maritime transportation systems.⁴⁰

As one of its initiatives, IORA has established the Maritime Safety and Security Working Group to build capacities, enhance cross-border cooperation and knowledge sharing, and promote harmonized implementation across the region of the relevant international regulations. The working group's terms of reference recently have been finalized as a first step toward the completion of its work plan. It needs to aim at geostrategic cooperation, capacity building for maritime awareness, human safety at sea, capacity building for law enforcement at sea, and the like.

Enhanced capacity for IORA as well as this working group is the desideratum for the organization to be able to monitor closely all security-related developments, have adequate analytical backup to draw appropriate lessons from ongoing developments, and disseminate the results to and coordinate discussions among stakeholders. It also would require the support of a mechanism analogous to the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific (CSCAP). Such an agency would be ideal for developing norms on freedom of navigation and overflight, especially at the various choke points, which are vulnerable to interdiction arising out of political instability in littoral countries or regional conflicts between them.

This agency also could contribute to developing wider norms to be applied to IOR waterways and oceanic resources; the SAGAR construct provides examples. At the levels of both the president and the prime minister, Sri Lanka has suggested a legal framework to address drug trafficking and other criminal activity while maintaining freedom of navigation in accordance with international law. The prime minister went so far as to suggest a "Code on the Freedom of Navigation" that must have an effective dispute-resolution mechanism.⁴¹

Indian Ocean Naval Symposium. As an organization representing the chiefs of the littoral navies and other stakeholder, extraregional navies, IONS can provide professional inputs to IORA as the latter engages in the important task of enhancing maritime safety and security in the Indian Ocean by developing the relevant norms. Through IONS's own committees, interoperability procedures and capabilities can be developed and habits of cooperation formalized. Maintaining this synergy between the two organizations is critical, given that the IONS membership includes countries whose bilateral relations might be described as adversarial. A communication channel also needs to be developed between IORA and IONS to function as an agenda interface, since maritime safety and security are matters of concern to both organizations.

Discussions can be encouraged within IONS on the subject of the ground rules for use of harbor facilities by extraregional navies sailing in the Indian Ocean. Alternatively, this theme can be discussed and developed within the relevant

think-tank networks. A CSCAP-like think-tank network, with a looser hierarchy and process for agenda formulation, also could provide a platform for discussion of security-related developments, both traditional and nontraditional, regarding their implications for the overall IORA security milieu.

The outcome of all this effort should be a strategic framework for the Indian Ocean. The development of habits of cooperation would lead to an element of strategic trust. Eventually, such strategic trust would result in the kind of force equilibrium envisaged in the SAGAR construct, one that recognizes the legitimate interests of all stakeholder countries but posits that the primary responsibility for peace, stability, and prosperity rests with the littoral states themselves.

IORA's Institutional Linkages. IORA is ideally suited to create capacities, considered within the littoral collectively, to put together a strategic framework for the Indian Ocean, as envisaged in the SAGAR speech. In that role, it could reach out to other subregional groups in the Indian Ocean that share a maritime element. A well-known expert on maritime geopolitics, invoking the concept of a *regime complex* for the IOR, has argued that IORA should play the role of a “systems integrator, facilitator, interlocutor, and even translator” for the Indian Ocean maritime system, in partnership with other subregional littoral organizations.⁴² Even as IORA is still developing its own ideas and capacities in the area of maritime safety and security, institutional linkages with the other subregional organizations discussed below would be beneficial.

- There is a maritime dimension to the activities of the GCC.⁴³ However, for the foreseeable future any well-coordinated and cohesive institutional naval cooperation is unlikely because of serious divisions among the key members of the council.
- The two African organizations covering the continent's Indian Ocean seaboard are the Southern African Development Community and the East African Community. These entities have ambitions to create a political/security capability, with a maritime dimension; India and IORA could help them in this.⁴⁴
- The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (known as BIMSTEC) is an organization that can provide a framework for a degree of maritime governance in the Bay of Bengal region, as most of the littoral countries are members.⁴⁵

Some gaps in the existing maritime picture can be filled in by IORA through dialogue between, coordination among, and partnership with other organizations having something to do with the Indian Ocean in the wider Indo-Pacific construct. These include the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN),

the ASEAN Regional Forum, the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus, and the relevant UN bodies. To share best practices, IORA also can conduct periodic consultations with other regional groupings of littoral countries elsewhere, such as the Arctic Council.

India's Naval Diplomacy and Thought Leadership

The Indian Navy is the second-most-powerful navy in the region and enjoys considerable convergence of strategic interests with the U.S. Navy. The U.S. Navy undergirds the current maritime order and is uniquely placed to seed and nurture the maritime system envisaged in the SAGAR construct.

Building such a system will require both bilateral and multilateral naval diplomatic engagements. The Indian Navy and its affiliated think-tank participants can play a thought-leadership role. The diplomatic engagements involved need to be nuanced and light of touch; otherwise certain other elements—not all well-disposed—may try to undermine the very diplomatic efforts attempting to create the envisaged maritime order. Certain recent developments, such as in Maldives, Seychelles, and elsewhere, suggest the need for a more nuanced Indian approach.

Naval Capacity Building

Multiple types of capability gaps in the existing maritime system—legislative, organizational, and operational—need to be closed. Judicious naval capacity building remains an important task. Accomplishing this is necessary to achieve a measure of stability by ensuring that the littoral navies themselves have the capacity to uphold the maritime system. These capacity-building efforts would need to involve and engage littoral navies, coast guards, coastal police forces, and any other maritime agencies active in the maintenance of good order at sea. Not only India but several other countries need to carry out this capacity building.

This effort would include building better capabilities to conduct maritime surveillance, so as to help meet several of the challenges the maritime system faces. Implementation is ongoing pursuant to the Indian vice president's announcement on 7 March 2017 at the IORA summit in Jakarta regarding the setting up of an Information Fusion Centre. Such a center could help to coordinate on MDA and to institutionalize existing cooperative mechanisms and efforts, such as white shipping agreements and agreements related to hydrography.⁴⁶ An important aspect of this capacity building would be to prepare state forces to neutralize the empowerment of nonstate actors by the so-called revolution in military affairs.

Closing the Capability Gaps, Including in Skills

Maritime Domain Awareness. MDA is the most relevant area of concern for the IOR. Better MDA can be achieved by combining the various facilities already existing in the region. This may entail capacity expansion for various entities to

enable them to fulfill multimission roles. This closing of domain-awareness gaps would involve not only building physical infrastructure but also developing the requisite protocols for information exchanges and finding a suitable platform on which to carry that out.

Think-Tank Capabilities. Musing over the current global geopolitical flux and the methodological conundrums that handicap analysis and scenario building, the authors of the U.S. National Intelligence Council report *Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds* spotlight numerous difficulties. Among others, they list the need for better identification of looming disequilibriums; better exploration of the relationship among trends, discontinuities, and crises; and correction of a tendency to underestimate the rate of change along trajectories of rise and decline for different states.⁴⁷

Better think-tank capabilities would help to address the entire spectrum of issues listed above and to flesh out the concept of a pan-Indian Ocean maritime system. The think-tank infrastructure should include both transnational and internal (within India) networking. Capabilities should include scenario building in the current fluid Indian Ocean geopolitical context. This think-tank activity, both at the national and transnational network levels, would need to flesh out SAGAR’s normative framework. This activity should be coordinated so as to be consistent with SAGAR’s geopolitical construct, rather than proceeding in a segmented fashion.

The Indian Ocean maritime system is becoming increasingly fragile, and the U.S. Navy’s capacity to undergird it is diminishing perceptibly. Nonetheless, America retains significant national capabilities that can help shape a new maritime system for the Indian Ocean, whereas China is not at present in a position to alter the balance of power in the Indian Ocean.

In contrast to those relating to other bodies of water in Southeast and East Asia within the Indo-Pacific construct, the Indian Ocean maritime system is fraying at the edges more than it is crumbling under intensifying great-power contestation. The Indian Ocean no longer serves as an instrument for naval force projection to achieve power equilibrium in the Middle Eastern hinterland, as was the case during the Cold War. A pan-Indian Ocean maritime system has to be devised to meet today’s context, in which the region faces multitudinous challenges to its political and economic stability.

The challenges in question are not only those that directly affect the littoral areas, with their huge populations and large proportions of global economic and resource wealth, but also those with effects felt much farther afield, in the hinterland. The stability of the Indian Ocean maritime system is critical to global

stability itself. The challenges inhere in the growing fragility of littoral states as well as the island nations. In addition, the rapidly accelerating naval rivalry in the Horn of Africa and the Persian Gulf negatively impacts any effort to create a stable Indian Ocean maritime system. Establishing a sturdy governance mechanism would encourage the development of stakes on the part of regional as well as extraregional countries.

Given the rapid pace of events, the window of opportunity to build a holistic Indian Ocean maritime system may not remain open for long. The ramping up of maritime safety and security through capacity building, interoperability, and enhanced comfort levels, and thereby the successful addressing of nontraditional threats, remains the overriding priority. This effort is critical to maintaining regional stability, and therefore should receive support from all countries even as they retain their hard-power capabilities and options. Prime Minister Modi's SAGAR perspective covers the entire spectrum of relevant challenges and offers Indian capabilities—in the form of both hard and soft power—to make a signal contribution to shaping such a maritime order.

NOTES

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Ambassador Yogendra Kumar retired from the Indian Foreign Service in 2012, after having served in ambassadorial status or holding other accreditation to the Philippines, Palau, Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, Namibia, and Tajikistan/Afghanistan, as well as ASEAN and other global and regional organizations. He served on the faculty of India's National Defence College. His book Diplomatic Dimension of Maritime Challenges for India in the 21st Century was published in 2015 (Pentagon Press). He edited and contributed to the book Whither Indian Ocean Maritime Order?, published in 2017 (Knowledge World).

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