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Key Points:

- When examining security issues in the Indian Ocean region, we need to embrace a “New Indo-Pacific” concept—that is, a view of the region as including China, rather than merely the Indian Ocean and its littoral states.
- The Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC) agenda should be enlarged to include not only economic but also non-traditional security issues.
- Security needs to be understood as a multidimensional concept—that is, as including human security, economic and resources security, maritime security and environmental security as well as more traditional military concerns and seeing these different dimensions as inter-related.
- There is potential to strengthen the Australian-India strategic relationship and for both states to facilitate the development of the security agendas of the Indian Ocean and Indo-Pacific security systems.
- The main continuing areas of policy debate include: defining security; defining the term ‘Indo-Pacific’; the preeminence of the term ‘Indo-Pacific’ versus ‘Indian Ocean’; and the relative importance of each of the conclusions and recommendations.
- There needs to be a process of translating policy recommendations into policy action for the Indian Ocean Region to become more secure.

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Introduction

The Australian Government’s White Paper on Defence (2013) explicitly articulates a notion of the ‘Indo-Pacific’ as Australia’s strategic region (Department of Defence 2013; see, for example, section 6.64). In this context, the Australia India Institute’s recent report on Indian Ocean security warrants careful consideration.

In May 2011, the Director of the Australia India Institute (AII) at the University of Melbourne, Professor Amitabh Mattoo, set up a Task Force on Indian Ocean Security to bring together international relations experts from Australia and India to debate and report on policy directions that both states might consider for the future enhancement of regional security.

The principal contributors were David Brewster, Sanjay Chaturvedi, Timothy Doyle, Amitabh Mattoo, Dennis Rumley, Swaran Singh, Ric Smith and Siddarth Varadarajan. Apart from regular communication among Task Force members, preliminary meetings were also held in Melbourne and Kolkata in 2011. The final Report, launched at Parliament House in Canberra on 20th March 2013, represents the edited outcome of the last Task Force meeting held in Fremantle, Western Australia, in May 2012.

The Indian Ocean Region in context

The present reality is that the issues relating to the Indian Ocean and its littoral can be conceptualised in terms of two overlapping regional systems. The first system embraces Indian Ocean-centric issues—that is, issues that are specific to the Indian Ocean and its littoral. These include issues of economic development and human security, the environment, the seabed and fisheries management, among others. These issues are best addressed by the states with direct stakes in them, and which therefore potentially form the essential reform agenda of the current pre-eminent regional body, the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC).

The second system sees the Indian Ocean as part of an arguably wider Indo-Pacific ‘strategic system’ that embraces the trade routes and sea lanes that cross the Indian Ocean itself but also extend past the Straits of Malacca and the Sunda and Lombok Straits into the South China Sea and north to China, Taiwan, Korea and Japan, and indeed on the west coast of North America. As trade highways, these routes are arguably the most important in the world today, and the ‘choke points’ and contested waterways along the highway attract critical attention of the ‘hard
security’ kind. Given the range of stakeholders, this is an inclusive framework, and the issues embraced within it are played out at a high political level. Thus, as conceptualised in the Report, while some discussions of the Indo-Pacific security system have been exclusive (meaning that China is excluded), we argue for the concept to be inclusive (meaning that China is included) in order to maximise long-term regional security. This inclusive concept we refer to as the “New Indo-Pacific” to clearly differentiate it from the exclusive meaning.

The structure of the Report

In order to fully develop the argument for both the enlargement of the IOR-ARC agenda to incorporate an array of non-traditional security issues, and the incorporation of a new Indo-Pacific concept into higher order security thinking, the Report is divided into three major sections. The first section considers the changing security dynamics of the IOR. This section begins by arguing for the need to consider security as a multidimensional concept in the 21st century. The Report suggests that policy-makers need to incorporate a broader and more interdependent concept of security than the traditional military concept in order to maximise long-term regional security. Thus, concepts of human security, economic and resources security, maritime security and environmental security are interrelated and are critically important to 21st century state and regional stability. This section of the Report also evaluates the narratives surrounding proponents of different regional security structures. It finds that a new concept of maritime regionalism can be applied to a range of non-traditional security concerns in the Indian Ocean. Furthermore, while there is need for a new regional maritime security regime, the old exclusive Indo-Pacific security concept will not likely guarantee long-term regional stability.

The second major section of the Report provides a detailed description and analysis of the various components of the multidimensional security concept as they apply to all Indian Ocean states. It is concluded that, within the IOR, while there has been a significant increase in military expenditure among some states, and while important inter-state conflicts still remain, in reality, most conflicts actually occur within rather than between states. As a result, at the Indian Ocean regional level, greater policy attention needs to be given to aspects of human security, economic and resources security, maritime security and environmental security.

The third major section of the Report considers the roles of India and Australia in
Indo-Pacific security. This section of the Report focuses on the development of the Australia-India strategic relationship and how this can be enhanced to the benefit of both states in the context of shifts in the balance of power between the Indian and Pacific Oceans and the implications of the emergence of an Indo-Pacific strategic region. It is argued that there is considerable scope for increased bilateral cooperation between India and Australia both within the IOR and beyond. Given the current configuration of IOR-ARC, it is suggested that both India and Australia can take the lead in increasing regional awareness and cooperation among Indian Ocean rim states. Furthermore, both India and Australia can be active participants in the provision of maritime security through the entire Indo-Pacific littoral. In short, both India and Australia can together potentially take the lead in facilitating the development of the security agendas for both the Indian Ocean and the Indo-Pacific security systems.

The Report’s research and policy recommendations

In summary, the Report makes 22 specific research and policy recommendations:

1. There is a need for a new Indo-Pacific maritime security regime that involves all relevant stakeholders in matters of regional maritime security.
2. The agenda of IOR-ARC needs to be expanded beyond economic matters to incorporate a range of non-traditional security issues.
3. Due weight should be placed on the increasing geopolitical importance of the IOR in national and regional security policies.
4. Recognition should be given by all regional states to the multidimensional nature of security in the development of national and regional security policies.
5. Most conflicts occur within states, and in order to maximise human development requires appropriate attention be given to military expenditure compared with other forms of expenditure.
6. Competition for power and influence within the IOR by outside powers is unlikely to maximise long-term regional stability.
7. Regional security is especially jeopardised by five “states of concern” that are failed or failing, not free and highly repressive.
8. To ensure long-term national and regional stability, the maximisation of human security should be a central goal.
9. There is a need to develop cooperative mechanisms for collectively dealing with displaced persons, refugees and people trafficking.

10. A major regional policy target should be the “vicious circle of economic security and civil conflict”.

11. Official Development Assistance (ODA) targets and outcomes need to be more closely focused and monitored.

12. The “militarisation of energy security” is a regional cause for concern.

13. A new Indo-Pacific Maritime Energy Security (INDOMES) regime is proposed to incorporate all states that are stakeholders in maximising the security of energy flows through the Indian Ocean.

14. Integrated land-sea policies are essential to enhance maritime security.

15. Agricultural technology and other ODA need to target regional food-insecure states.

16. Water sharing, conservation and technological cooperation are essential for states that are water insecure.

17. There is a need for a regional agreement on the prevention of illegal dumping of nuclear waste.

18. The potential growth of sustainable fisheries requires a new integrated regional management framework.

19. Collective action is essential to ameliorate the adverse impacts of human-induced climate change.

20. The long-term maximisation of regional security requires the adoption and development of a new collective Indian Ocean maritime regional paradigm.

21. Both India and Australia can take the lead in increasing awareness and cooperation among Indian Ocean rim states.

22. India and Australia can also enhance their own bilateral security relationship through greater cooperation in maritime security issues both within the Indian Ocean and in the broader Indo-Pacific Region.

Conclusion – continuing areas of research and policy debate

There were at least four principal areas where debate within the Task Force was especially productively vigorous. The first was over the definition of the term ‘security’—the familiar ‘narrowers’ versus the ‘wideners’ debate. The second concerned the definition of the term ‘Indo-Pacific’—on the one hand, there were the ‘inclusionists’ (who would include China and/or Africa in the definition) versus the ‘exclusionists’ (those who would exclude China from the definition). In the Report,
the term “new Indo-Pacific” was used to indicate an inclusive concept. A third area of debate was over the preeminence of the term ‘Indo-Pacific’ versus ‘Indian Ocean’. A ‘nested’ approach was taken in the Report; that is, the Indian Ocean was seen as being linked to a larger Indo-Pacific strategic system. Nonetheless, one of the unresolved issues here is whether either the Indian Ocean Region or the Indo-Pacific Region represents a regional security complex in Buzan and Wæver’s conception of this term. Among other things, this touches on a tendency on the part of some commentators to assume that ‘economic space’ (a functional space defined largely by non-state economic interactions) is necessarily congruent with ‘strategic space’ (a functional space constructed in Buzan and Wæver’s terms by strategic commonalities which in turn are largely driven by state geopolitical interests).

It is a matter of debate whether the Indian Ocean possesses any significant level of economic coherence, although it has traditionally been viewed as “the heart of the Third World” and yet is the most important economic route in the world. As a strategic space the Indian Ocean has been organized on a sub-regional scale.

The Indo-Pacific, or “Greater Indian Ocean”, on the other hand, while being regarded by some as “a single integrated geopolitical theater”, is actually an even more highly differentiated strategic space. For example, in its Western Pacific or Asia-Pacific sub-region, the Cold War has yet to end and this sub-region is also beset by numerous significant territorial disputes. For example, Japan is in “severe dispute” with every one of its neighbours.

In terms of economic space, however, the Asia-Pacific has a degree of “economic coherence”. While the Pacific and Indian Oceans should be regarded as “strategically linked”, the Indo-Pacific Region should be viewed as a strategic space that is not “integrated”, but rather one that is evolving “gradually and partially”.

A fourth main area of debate was over the relative importance of each of the conclusions and recommendations. Inevitably, state interests, ideological differences and different worldviews, among other things, will collectively determine policy priorities. What is clear is that these and other important issues will continue to be ongoing areas for debate and discussion. While definitional and prioritisation matters are relevant, however, what is even more significant is to take the next much more difficult and important step to begin the process of translating policy recommendations into policy action. Only then will the Indian Ocean Region become more secure for all regional inhabitants.
References


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IPGRC Research Mission

A primary focus of our research agenda is on political dynamics of governance and institutional innovations in the provision of public goods and regulation especially as it relates to economic and social development in the region.

This will address issues relating to the organisation of markets and politics, and their effectiveness and fairness in addressing complex economic and social problems. It will also include an examination of the transformations of political organisation and authority at various scales – global, national, and regional – which have a bearing on the complex multilevel governance of the delivery of public goods and regulations.

The centre has a particular focus on the global and regional challenges arising from the shifting tectonic plates of economic and political power to the Indo-Pacific region.