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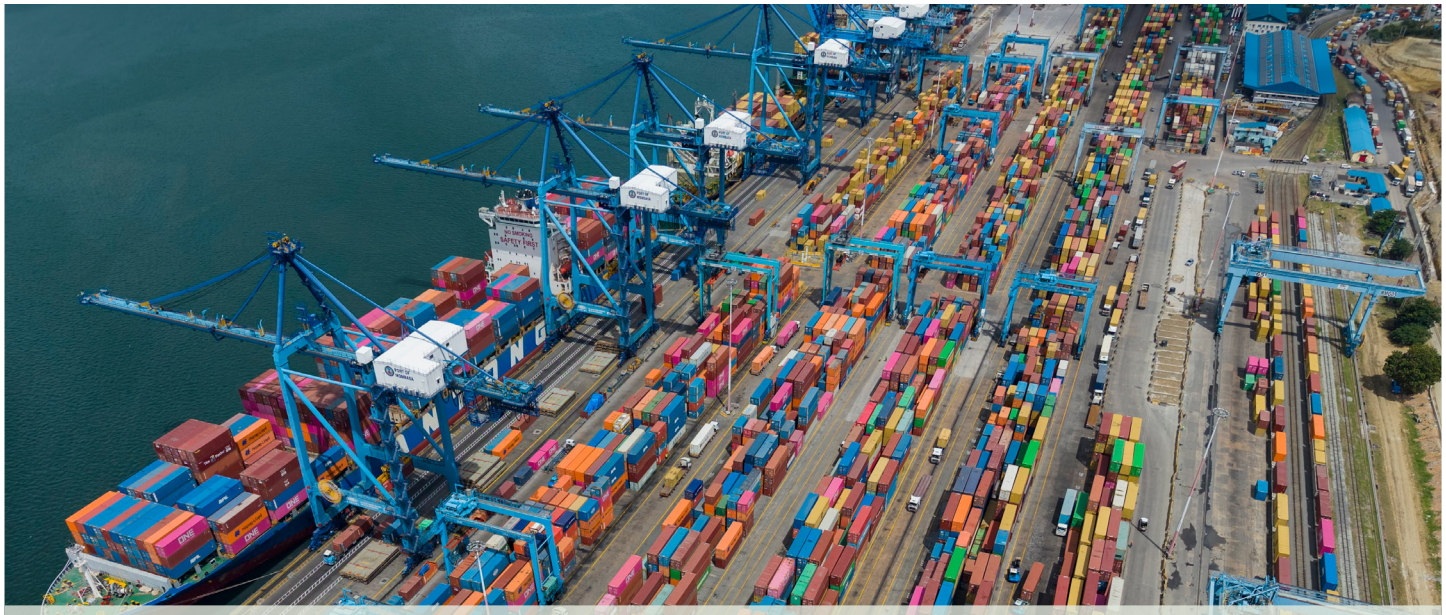

Regional maritime security networks and hybrid threats

The role of transnational cooperation in the Indian Ocean region

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Brief summary

Maritime security in the twenty-first century extends far beyond traditional naval power and territorial defence. The maritime domain is increasingly shaped by hybrid threats involving state and non-state actors, conventional and unconventional tactics, and both military and non-military dimensions. These include piracy, Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing, trafficking, illegal migration, smuggling, cyber disruptions to maritime infrastructure, and environmental degradation. Such interconnected challenges cannot be addressed through national policies alone. Instead, they require transnational cooperation and more integrated forms of networked governance.

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is where these challenges converge. As a vital artery of global trade, it is also characterised by overlapping jurisdictions, governance gaps, and evolving security risks. Maritime security must therefore be understood as a shared, transboundary challenge requiring cooperation among both state and non-state actors.

The "Spark": Shared vulnerability and the power of collective action

A central driver of transnational maritime cooperation is the inherently transnational nature of maritime security. Unlike land-based threats, maritime challenges cross national boundaries and generate consequences that rarely remain confined to one state. Disruptions in the Red Sea and Strait of Hormuz, piracy in the Gulf of Aden, and IUU fishing illustrate how threats in one region can affect trade, food security, and economic stability far beyond their point of origin. These shared vulnerabilities create a strong incentive for collective action.

Climate change, environmental degradation, and the depletion of marine resources reinforce this interdependence. IUU fishing undermines livelihoods and food security, particularly across the Global South, while disruptions to major shipping routes have cascading effects on global supply chains. Such challenges encourage cooperation among governments, regional organisations, and non-state stakeholders despite wider geopolitical tensions.

At the human level, these vulnerabilities are particularly acute for coastal communities and fishers whose livelihoods depend directly on healthy marine ecosystems and predictable access to maritime resources. Changes in fish stocks, environmental degradation, illegal fishing, extreme weather, and disruptions to maritime activity can affect communities across borders in similar ways, even when their political circumstances differ. This creates a basis for solidarity that extends beyond state interests. Indigenous and local knowledge, including practices developed by fishing and coastal communities, can therefore contribute not only to resilience but also to transnational learning. Bringing such experiences into regional maritime networks can make cooperation more inclusive while ensuring that security responses remain connected to the people whose lives and livelihoods are most directly affected.

At the same time, transnational criminal networks and other non-state actors exploit gaps in maritime governance. Recent attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea and Strait of Hormuz, China's use of maritime militia and coast guard vessels in the South China Sea, and incidents involving submarine cables and energy infrastructure illustrate how hybrid threats have become increasingly complex and technologically enabled.

Indigenous and local knowledge systems remain underutilised in formal maritime governance. Examples from Japan and the Sundarbans in India demonstrate how traditional practices and women-led community initiatives can strengthen resilience and sustainability. Preserving these experiences through shared case studies and integrating them into regional frameworks can improve policy effectiveness while giving greater visibility to the communities whose knowledge is rooted in direct experience of maritime and environmental change.

Several successful examples of cooperation through transnational networks demonstrate the potential of existing regional mechanisms. Mechanisms such as the **Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR)** have strengthened maritime domain awareness through real-time information sharing. Regional platforms including the **Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS)**, **BIMSTEC**, and the **Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)** continue to facilitate dialogue and coordination, while recent cooperation between IORA and BIMSTEC reflects growing recognition of the need for institutional convergence. Although these mechanisms remain largely state-led, they increasingly incorporate relevant non-state stakeholders.

Regional cooperation is shaped by political sensitivities around larger powers such as India. Confidence-building and inclusive leadership can help address these concerns, while India can convene smaller IOR partners around shared maritime challenges.

Ultimately, the "spark" driving transnational maritime cooperation lies in the recognition that no single actor can address these challenges alone. Shared vulnerabilities, existing regional institutions, and expanding multi-stakeholder participation provide a strong foundation for more integrated and effective maritime governance.

Mobilisation: Actors, platforms, and pathways of cooperation

While shared vulnerabilities provide the motivation for cooperation, the effectiveness of transnational maritime networks ultimately depends on how they are mobilised.

Maritime governance involves national, regional, and global actors. Governments and naval forces remain central, but are increasingly complemented by NGOs, shipping companies, port operators, and technology firms supporting logistics and information-sharing.

Large corporate actors and technological "hyperscalers" also influence maritime security through shipping, digital infrastructure, supply chains, emissions reduction, and real-time data sharing. Their inclusion can strengthen capacity and ensure governance frameworks reflect operational realities.

A 'complementary governance' layer could enable industry associations to operate under government-approved guidelines alongside mechanisms such as the Djibouti Code of Conduct (DCoC) and Yaoundé Architecture, improving coordination, efficiency, and trust among governments, industries, and local communities.

At the regional level, IORA, BIMSTEC, IONS, and IPOI provide platforms for cooperation.

Follow-through

The Indian Ocean Region does not lack institutions; rather, it suffers from fragmented governance. Multiple organisations often operate in parallel with overlapping mandates and limited coordination, reducing the overall effectiveness of regional cooperation.

The IFC-IOR illustrates both progress and limitations. Its SOPs have improved information-sharing and coordination, but implementation and standardisation remain incomplete.

Track 2 and Track 1.5 mechanisms provide alternative channels for experts, practitioners, and policymakers to exchange knowledge and develop

practical approaches where formal cooperation faces constraints.

Domestic coordination remains equally important. In India, maritime governance is spread across multiple ministries and state authorities responsible for external affairs, fisheries, shipping, and related sectors. This institutional complexity often creates regulatory inconsistencies, highlighting the need for stronger national coordination as the basis for more effective regional cooperation. Greater collaboration among civil society, epistemic communities, and international advocacy organisations could help promote more coherent maritime governance across littoral states.

Different national priorities and the absence of common operational standards make coordinated responses more difficult, particularly on issues such as IUU fishing, where livelihoods, food security, and territorial disputes intersect. Without greater convergence on priorities and standards, regional cooperation will continue to face significant constraints.

Another critical gap is the absence of standardised operational mechanisms. Although collaborative efforts to develop Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for maritime law enforcement represent important progress, their adoption remains uneven across the region. This implementation gap limits timely and coordinated responses to incidents such as search and rescue operations, Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), and enforcement against illicit maritime activities.

Regional cooperation is also shaped by sovereignty, leadership, and influence. India's expanding regional role creates leadership opportunities while raising perceptions of dominance among smaller states. Managing these sensitivities requires trust-building, adaptability, and the capacity to balance collective objectives with different national priorities.

Hybrid threats further complicate governance. Piracy, trafficking, cyber disruptions, and other non-state challenges increasingly overlap with private corporations and technology firms whose interests may not always align with those of governments or coastal communities. Balancing these interests requires inclusive governance, attention to coastal communities, and a shared regional agenda.

The experience to date suggests that the priority should not be to create new institutions but to strengthen coordination among existing transnational and regional mechanisms. Greater interoperability, standardised operational frameworks, and stronger information-sharing systems can improve practical cooperation. Equally important is the meaningful inclusion of non-state actors, coastal communities, and local knowledge alongside sustained trust-building among participating states and institutions. Track 2 and Track 1.5 mechanisms can provide alternative channels where formal cooperation faces political constraints, while existing agreements and operational frameworks can serve as a baseline for further ambition rather than a ceiling. Progress has therefore been incremental rather than linear: existing mechanisms have created foundations for deeper cooperation, but implementation gaps and political sensitivities continue to require recalibration. The central lesson is that transnational networks are most effective when they can adapt to changing threats, accommodate diverse voices, and translate shared vulnerabilities into practical forms of collective action.

Outcomes hoped for 10 years forward

Over the next decade, a more integrated and forward-looking approach to maritime security in the Indian Ocean Region should be pursued.

A central priority is an integrated regional maritime coordination mechanism building on the IFC-IOR and moving beyond information-sharing towards real-time operational coordination. Wider adoption of common legal, regulatory, and operational standards, including SOPs for maritime law enforcement, search and rescue, and HADR, would strengthen interoperability and regional responses.

Science, technology, and policy should be integrated more closely to address climate change, shifting marine ecosystems, and other environmental pressures. Maritime awareness and education should also be strengthened through simulation-based training, academic collaboration, and shared case-study repositories.

Sustainable public-private partnerships in ports could improve connectivity, economic opportunity, and regional resilience while benefiting local communities.

An Indian Ocean-wide disaster alert platform using satellite-based maritime information and real-time risk monitoring could improve regional preparedness and emergency response.

Taken together, these proposals envision maritime security as a transnational networked system in which governments, regional organisations, industry, scientific institutions, and civil society work collectively to address shared challenges.

The evolution of hybrid threats, transnational actors, and environmental pressures has transformed the maritime domain into a complex and interconnected space where traditional state-centric approaches are no longer sufficient.

Transnational networks provide an effective

framework for addressing these challenges, but their success depends on greater integration, adaptability, and collective action. For the Indian Ocean Region, the priority should be to strengthen coordination between institutions, align national and regional priorities, and foster greater inclusivity across both state and non-state actors.

This policy brief argues that a more networked and holistic maritime security framework is both achievable and in the shared interest of Indian Ocean littoral states. Rather than creating new institutions, strengthening existing mechanisms through greater integration, standardisation, and cooperation offers the most practical pathway towards long-term regional resilience.

Ultimately, the future of maritime security in the Indian Ocean will depend on the ability of regional actors to transform shared vulnerabilities into shared solutions through sustained transnational cooperation.

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