

PUTTING THE SAGAR VISION TO THE TEST

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Indian Ocean Island nations

In March 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited three small but significant Indian Ocean island states — Seychelles, Mauritius, and Sri Lanka. During this tour, he unveiled India's strategic vision for the Indian Ocean: [Security and Growth for All in the Region](#) (SAGAR). SAGAR seeks to differentiate India's leadership from the modus operandi of other regionally active major powers and to reassure littoral states as India's maritime influence grows. As External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar signalled at the fourth Indian Ocean Conference in September last year, India's SAGAR vision is intended to be "consultative, democratic and equitable". India's recent admission as observer to the [Indian Ocean Commission](#) (IOC) will put this vision to the test.

Following a request from New Delhi, the IOC granted observer status to India on March 6 at the Commission's 34th Council of Ministers. Founded in 1982, the IOC is an intergovernmental organisation comprising five small-island states in the Western Indian Ocean: the Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius, Réunion (a French department), and Seychelles. Though Réunion brings a major power, France, into this small-state equation, decisions in the IOC are consensus-based, and while France's foreign policy interests are represented, the specifics of Réunion's regional decision-making emerge from its local governance structures. Over the years, the IOC has emerged as an active and trusted regional actor, working in and for the Western Indian Ocean and implementing a range of projects.

More recently, the IOC has demonstrated leadership in the maritime security domain. Since maritime security is a prominent feature of India's relations with Indian Ocean littoral states, India's interest in the IOC should be understood in this context. However, India has preferred to engage bilaterally with smaller states in the region. What India will not find in the IOC is a cluster of small states seeking a 'big brother' partnership. The IOC has its own regional agenda, and has made impressive headway in the design and implementation of a regional maritime security architecture in the Western Indian Ocean.

In 2012, the IOC was one of the four regional organisations to launch the MASE Programme — the European Union-funded programme to promote Maritime Security in Eastern and Southern Africa and Indian Ocean. Under MASE, the IOC has established a mechanism for surveillance and control of the Western Indian Ocean with two regional centres. The Regional Maritime Information Fusion Center (RMIFC), based in Madagascar, is designed to deepen maritime domain awareness by monitoring maritime activities and promoting information sharing and exchange. The Regional Coordination Operations Centre (RCOC), based in Seychelles, will eventually facilitate joint or jointly coordinated interventions at sea based on information gathered through the RMIFC. These centres are a response to the limitations that the states in the region face in policing and patrolling their often enormous Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs). They deliver an urgently needed deterrent against unabating maritime crime at sea, only partly addressed by the high-level counter-piracy presence of naval forces from the EU, the Combined Maritime Forces, and Independent Forces. Seven states in the region have signed agreements to participate in this multilateral maritime security architecture, and once ratified, will provide its legal foundation. Many major powers have expressed interest in accessing the RMIFC.

The IOC has also wielded a disproportionate degree of convening power. In 2018 and 2019, it served as Chair of the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia (CGPCS). Leveraging the CGPCS Chair, the IOC held ministerial meetings in 2018 and 2019 on maritime security in

the Western Indian Ocean, drawing state representations from the region plus major powers such as India, the EU, the U.S., the U.K., Australia, and Russia. These meetings, resulting in formal declarations, facilitated convergence around common, sub-region-specific definitions of maritime security threats and the legal way of dealing with them.

The IOC's achievements offer an opportunity for India to learn, and also to support. The IOC style of 'bottom-up regionalism' has produced a sub-regional view and definition of maritime security problems and local ownership of pathways towards workable solutions. A 2019 policy brief published by the IOC (with inputs from this author), 'Strengthening Maritime Security in the Western Indian Ocean', sets out how the counter-piracy response off the coast of Somalia delivered unprecedented regional and international cooperation in the domain of maritime security. However, it resulted in multiple players, the duplication of actions, and regional dependence on international navies. The IOC has been seeking more sustainable ways of addressing maritime security threats in the region, with the RMIFC and RCOG as part of this response. Its regional maritime security architecture is viewed locally as the most effective and sustainable framework to improve maritime control and surveillance and allow littoral States to shape their own destiny. Moreover, with proper regional coordination, local successes at curbing maritime threats will have broader security dividends for the Indian Ocean space.

The IOC's maritime security activities have a strong foundation, but they require support and buy-in from additional regional actors. India has already signalled a strong interest in the work of the IOC through its request to be admitted as an observer. The view from Ebène, where the IOC is headquartered, and from where its maritime security strategy is directed, is that major powers are warmly invited to support its initiatives. Nearly all littoral states in the Western Indian Ocean need assistance in developing their maritime domain awareness and in building capacity to patrol their EEZs. All would benefit from national information fusion centres that can link to those of the wider region. With its observer status, India will be called upon to extend its expertise to the region, put its satellite imagery to the service of the RMIFC, and establish links with its own Information Fusion Centre.

If India seeks to calibrate its Indian Ocean strategy away from outdated, neoimperialist conceptions of great power and spheres of influence that are costly to regional followership, one route will be to learn from and support sub-regional efforts such as those of the IOC. As a major stakeholder in the Indian Ocean with maritime security high on the agenda, India will continue to pursue its interests and tackle maritime security challenges at the macro level in the region. However, as an observer of the IOC, a specific, parallel opportunity to embrace bottom-up regionalism presents itself. There are those in the Western Indian Ocean who are closely watching how India's "consultative, democratic and equitable" leadership will take shape.

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