

# THE CHALLENGE OF MARITIME SECURITY IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

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Volunteers collect trash during a beach clean-up campaign along the coast of the Arabian Sea in Mumbai. | Photo Credit: AFP

Charles Darwin is reputed to have argued that the key to human survival is not humankind's innate superiority but its natural adaptability. He felt that it was not the strongest or most intelligent species that survived, but the one with the capacity to adapt and adjust to the changing environment. Darwin's notion of resilient adaptability has withstood the test of time. It is a truism that all human progress requires a flexible approach to dealing with emerging challenges. None more so than in the maritime domain.

In recent years, hard security challenges in the maritime domain have acquired a new, menacing dimension. Whether with Ukraine's growing use of asymmetrical tactics against Russia in the Black Sea or China's deployment of maritime militias in the South China Sea, there is an unmistakable element of improvisation. The radical new tactics at sea involve the use of grey-zone warfare, land attack missiles, and combat drones.

It is instructive, however, that the bulk of the demand for maritime security in recent years has come from states facing unconventional security threats, such as illegal fishing, natural disasters, marine pollution, human and drug trafficking, and the impact of climate change. These are difficult to fight using only military means. States must instead be prepared to commit capital, resources, and specialist personnel over prolonged periods to meet security needs. Throughout its G20 presidency, India has sought to emphasise the concerns of the Global South in discussions to find solutions to the most pressing issues in the maritime domain. Yet, there is no functioning template to fight non-traditional threats at sea. Sustainable development goals in the littorals remain unrealised, as voices from littoral states in Asia, Africa, and the Southern Pacific are ignored by the developed countries.

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There is a widespread perception in the Global South that the zero-sum competition among powerful nations in the Indo-Pacific has been to the detriment of the developing world. The contemporary security agenda is an interconnected set of objectives involving national, environmental, economic, and human security goals. The cross-jurisdictional linkages between these diverse areas make them challenging to manage. This phenomenon is particularly

pronounced in the Global South, which finds itself especially challenged in meeting the objectives of marine governance. What is more, rising sea levels, marine pollution, climate change, and natural disasters have had a disproportionate impact on less developed states, placing them in a position of vulnerability.

Worryingly, littoral states in Asia and Africa have unequal law-enforcement capabilities and lack the security coordination required to jointly combat maritime threats. Many have varying security priorities and are not always willing to leverage partner capabilities to combat threats such as piracy, armed robbery, and maritime terrorism. Some even resist maritime cooperation with partner nations in a bid to reduce reliance on foreign agencies. They are willing to share information with such states, but only enough to advance common minimum security goals.

Maritime security is more than a matter of hard military action and law enforcement. Sea power is increasingly about generating prosperity and meeting the aspirations of the people. India's Maritime Vision 2030 sets out a creative model. This 10-year blueprint for the maritime sector envisages the development of ports, shipping, and inland waterways as a way of generating growth and livelihoods. Dhaka's inaugural official document on the Indo-Pacific details guiding principles and objectives that demonstrate a developmental approach to maritime security, focused on the provisioning of goods and services, and the protection of marine resources. The talk in Africa, too, is about a thriving Blue Economy and a secure maritime domain.

This does not detract from the enormity of the task in the southern seas — in particular, the fight against illegal fishing in Asia and Africa. The sharp uptick in illegal unreported and unregulated fishing has been aided by faulty policies that encourage destructive fishing methods such as bottom trawling and seine fishing. Environmentalists highlight three specific anomalies: lenient regulations that allow for the misuse of resources; lax implementation of the law by security agencies; and the harmful impact of subsidies that states offer to incentivise smaller fishermen to shift to motorised trawling.

Among the proposals that set out ways to deal with maritime challenges is India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative. It rests on seven pillars including maritime ecology, marine resources, capacity building, disaster risk reduction, and maritime connectivity. It acknowledges that countries need collective solutions to their common problems, especially since they remain economically interdependent. It is to India's credit that the initiative has the support of major Indo-Pacific states, many from the West.

Even so, implementing a collaborative strategy is challenging since it requires maritime agencies to improve interoperability, share intelligence, and agree on a regional rules-based order. States must adapt to an integrated form of maritime security operations and overhaul regulatory frameworks to align domestic regulation with international law — an unappealing proposition for many that continue to prioritise sovereignty and strategic independence over collective action.

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Unsurprisingly, consensus eludes the Global South. Notwithstanding their espoused positions on the need for a cooperative security architecture, many littoral states are reluctant to pursue concrete solutions to the challenges at sea. It highlights a paradox of non-traditional maritime security: the collective issues that developing nations face and the creative solutions they seek are at odds with their sense of political and strategic autonomy.

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