RMN SEA POWER CENTRE ONLINE COMMENTARY ON MARITIME ISSUES

MARITIME SECURITY CHALLENGES IN THE INDIAN OCEAN: CONVERTING COMMON MARITIME PRIORITIES INTO COLLABORATIVE MITIGATION FRAMEWORK

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The Indian Ocean, often called the "cradle of globalisation," has been a pivotal conduit for centuries of trade, culture and human interaction. It remains a lifeline for international commerce, facilitating the movement of goods and resources that sustain economies and improve the quality of life for billions of people. However, as the importance of the Indian Ocean continues to grow, so do the challenges that threaten its stability and security. The Perspective on the importance of converting our common maritime priorities into a collaborative mitigation framework is not just a diplomatic buzzword but a tangible necessity. In the maritime domain of the Indian Ocean, this requires a coordinated effort involving multiple stakeholders, including coastal nations, international organisations and maritime security agencies.

Malaysia has a long history of active participation in regional and international maritime security efforts. Our nation has consistently advocated for a rules-based approach to maritime governance, emphasising respect for international law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which provides the framework for building a stable and secure maritime environment. Like the Royal Malaysian Navy, the nations of the Indian Ocean also employ naval and government ships to ensure safety and security in their respective seas, aligning with their strategies. Hence, converting common maritime security priorities into a collaborative and concerted mitigation framework in the maritime domain can be enhanced by efforts like the following:

    a.   **Establishing Clear Objectives**. We must define the specific maritime security priorities we can address collaboratively in the Indian Ocean region. These priorities must include efforts to eradicate piracy, maritime terrorism, illegal fishing, and protect the environment.

    b.   **Identifying Common Interests**. In place of establishing clear objectives, Identifying Common Interests is equally essential. Sharing experiences while working with other Maritime government agencies, internally and internationally, could facilitate open and honest discussions and identify shared interests and concerns related to maritime security. It also helps to recognise where our security interests are interlinked.

    c.   **Develop a Collaborative Strategy**. We could develop a collaborative and comprehensive maritime security Strategy that outlines the objectives, principles and actionable steps needed to address the identified priorities. In the Straits of Malacca, for instance, joint patrols between navies from neighbouring countries and combined operations with government agencies, such as the Malacca Straits Patrol and Eyes-in-the-Sky initiatives, are being conducted continuously. Concerted efforts like this can help develop a collaborative and comprehensive maritime security strategy for the Indian Ocean. Through all this, true strength lies in harmonising all operational domains. The Royal Malaysian Navy, in particular, faced a few challenges during the early stages of working with other government agencies. Fortunately, we incorporated capabilities and threats into our planning through perseverance and believing in better outcomes from

concerted efforts. Nonetheless, we advocate that whatever we plan, the strategy should consider the principles of international law, including UNCLOS.

d.   **Establishing Legal and Regulatory Frameworks**. Malaysia is always working on harmonising and strengthening national legal frameworks related to maritime security. We are Establishing Legal and Regulatory Frameworks consistent with international law and agreements. Malaysia is exploring the possibilities of formalising collaborative mitigation frameworks through multilateral agreements or conventions to provide a robust legal basis for cooperation. Through these efforts, we have learned that ensuring transparency in implementing the collaborative framework and holding participating nations accountable for their commitments is vital.

e.   **Continuous Communication and Information Sharing**. Today, we must expect the unexpected and be prepared for every eventuality, never taking anything for granted. As we live in an era of strategic competition and collective defence, it is necessary to develop and share Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) capabilities among participating nations, which is becoming more digitalised and information-driven. Intelligence sharing, joint surveillance, and information exchange mechanisms to monitor maritime activities effectively are some of the common enhancements we should work on. Hence, there is a need to create secure channels for continuous communication and information sharing on threat assessments, intelligence and best practices among participating nations and organisations.

f.   **Collaboration on Capacity Building Initiatives**. Increasing interoperability and training to enhance the capabilities of coastal states in areas such as maritime law enforcement, search and rescue and disaster response can be opted for. These **Capacity Building and Training** will boast not only our deterrence and defence posture but also the individual state, because the experience, skills, and training of ships and sailors gained, will be the feedback into national defence capabilities.

g.   **Clear Protocols**. We could establish clear protocols for responding to maritime security incidents. These protocols include developing joint response teams and exercises to ensure preparedness to encounter piracy, terrorist threats and other maritime emergencies.

h.   **Public-Private Partnership**. Engaging the private sector, including shipping companies and the maritime industry, in collaborative efforts is the only way to keep our interoperability and retain our military edge. Through a Public-Private Partnership, we encourage adopting best practices and sharing information that can contribute to maritime security. In this respect, Malaysia has adopted the concept of Total Defence, a concept that is achieved through a Comprehensive Defence strategy, as underlined in Malaysia's Defence White Paper. This concept is an approach that emphasises the involvement of every level of society, government agencies, the private sector, non-governmental organisations and the people in national defence and security through the Whole of Government and the Whole of Society Approach, also known as WoGoS. It's a continuous effort to build internal cohesion, enhance defence preparedness, improve inter-agency coordination, and boost economic capacity and other aspects of national resilience thoroughly and sustainably. Even so, achieving Total Defence is undoubtedly a costly undertaking. Both the government and the society need to invest a substantial amount of time, effort and money to make it a reality.

i.   **Environmental Stewardship**. This enhancement should also be integral to our maritime security agenda. The Indian Ocean's unique and fragile ecosystem must be protected from the perils of illegal fishing, pollution and climate change. Preserving our maritime environment is an ethical obligation and vital to ensuring long-term stability.

However, all these initiatives will not be worth it if they are not subjected to Regular Review and Evaluation. We have to be involved in numerous bilateral and multilateral meetings at different managerial levels scheduled periodically to assess the effectiveness of the collaborative mitigation framework that has been put forth. Such review and evaluation initiatives are essential so that necessary adjustments based on evolving threats and changing circumstances can be made.

Through these perspectives, it is hoped that we as stakeholders can collaborate to convert common maritime security priorities into a collaborative mitigation framework, fostering a more secure and stable maritime environment, enhancing security and promoting economic development and environmental sustainability in the Indian Ocean region.

In conclusion, no single nation can effectively secure the vast expanse of the Indian Ocean. Thus, cooperation, understanding and shared goals are vital to preserving the peace and prosperity we all cherish. Maritime security challenges in the Indian Ocean will always demand our collective attention and concerted action. It is safe to say that all nations of the Indian Ocean have their role to play in this endeavour. Working alongside regional and international partners to ensure a safer, more secure and prosperous Indian Ocean is the way ahead for future generations.