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## **All Roads Lead to the Indian Ocean**

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*The strategic importance of the Indian Ocean is more pronounced now than ever and it faces a growing number of challenges that may threaten its security. Malaysia, as a littoral state of the ocean, needs to examine its interests there and come up with options to safeguard them*

### **Introduction**

The Indian Ocean (IO) is the world's third largest ocean with an area of 73.5 million sq. km or 28.5 million sq. miles. It is strategically located adjacent to Asia in the North, Australia to the East, Antarctica to the South, and Africa to the West.

IO forms two large indentations in South Asia, the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal. The ocean can be accessed through several chokepoints i.e., from the West via Cape of Good Hope and the Straits of Madagascar, from the North via the Bab el-Mandeb at the end of the Red Sea; the Sunda and Lombok-Straits and the Ombai-Wetar-Straits and the Straits of Hormuz at the exit of the Persian Gulf, from the East via the Straits of Malacca and, by way of geographical extension, to the South China Sea.

The IO littoral states include Australia, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Iran, Kenya, Madagascar, Malaysia, Mauritius, Mozambique, Oman, Singapore, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Thailand, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. For the littorals, the IO has assumed an increasing and growing importance in terms of trade, social-economic development and strategic interests.

### **Strategic importance**

Admiral Alfred T. Mahan (1840-1914) said that whoever attains maritime supremacy in the IO would be a prominent player on the international scene. In his book 'Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power', Robert Kaplan described the IO as the true nexus of world power and a potential stage for conflict in the coming years.

The strategic maneuverings by naval powers in the IO is an offshoot development following the end of the Cold War. India regards the IO as its backyard and eventually desires to function as a leader and predominant influence in the region. China as an aspiring major international maritime player, views the IO as a sea that is crucial for its economic needs for the transportation of its import of raw materials and energy from the Middle East and for its exports to Europe via the Suez Canal. This has led to China's growing interest in the IO, as evidenced for example by its new naval strategy of 'far sea defense' aimed at giving Beijing the ability to project its power in key oceanic areas, including and most significantly the IO.

For the United States (US), the IO and the adjacent Persian Gulf are areas of strategic and military interest. The US Navy's Maritime Strategy, unveiled in October 2007, implies that it will seek a sustained, forward presence in the IO and adjacent western Pacific. Moreover, the US Marine Corps' 'vision and strategy' statement, unveiled in June 2008 covering up to the year 2025, also describes the IO and its adjacent waters as a "central theatre of conflict and competition".

Australia too has showed increased awareness of developments in the IO that are of strategic and economic significance to its interests. For France, the IO region at its western approaches is an area of strategic importance. As one of the leading military powers, France contributed to the European Union's *Operation Atlanta* anti-piracy task force in the Gulf of Aden and also operates a number of military bases in the region.

### **Maritime security challenges**

There are several maritime security challenges in the IO. They are multidimensional, multifaceted and trans-regional in nature and involve non-traditional or non-military threats such as maritime terrorism, drug trafficking and piracy. In addition, narco-arms and human smuggling are rampant in the IO region and further complicate the security matrix. Among those threats, piracy continues to pose a serious threat to merchant vessels transiting the IO, leading to national and international counter piracy initiatives in the area.

The security of energy transportation in the IO is also a matter of paramount international concern. According to the World Oil Transit Choke Points Energy Data, total world oil production in 2011 amounted to approximately 88 million barrels per day (bbl/d), and over one-half was moved by tankers on fixed maritime routes. The Strait of Hormuz is the leading passageway for oil shipment out of the Persian Gulf and the Straits of Malacca links oil shipment from the gulf to the Asia Pacific. Based on their locations, the two sea-lanes are the world's most strategic chokepoints for oil shipments.

Underlining the vulnerability of IO as a strategic sea-lane and the threat to its security, the warning by Iran recently to block the Strait of Hormuz sent jitters to the international community. Should oil tankers be attacked there, it would cause not only disruption to shipping traffic and oil shipment but also further depress the global economy which is still in the doldrums.

### **Malaysia's interests in the Indian Ocean**

The Straits of Malacca commands vital sea route connecting maritime traffic between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. It is thus imperative that Malaysia plays an active role in advancing its interest in the IO. It would be timely for the Malaysian government to review and assess future strategic and security challenges in the IO to safeguard its interests.

An example of Malaysia's participation in the strategic equation in the IO is its involvement in the Shared Awareness and Deconfliction (SHADE) initiative. SHADE began in 2008 as a mechanism of meetings aimed at coordinating and de-conflicting activities among countries and coalitions involved in military counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden and the western Indian Ocean. The meetings are held at regular intervals in Bahrain and are co-chaired on a rotational basis by the Coalition Maritime Forces (CMF), NATO and European Union Naval Forces (EUNAVFOR). Since its beginning in 2008, military and civilian representatives from 27 countries, 14 international organizations, the maritime industry and several governments have joined the meetings.

Malaysia also participates in the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), a colloquium of the naval chiefs of the IO similar to Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS) aimed to facilitate constructive engagement between littoral countries of the IO. Its primary objectives are to promote a shared understanding of maritime issues facing the littoral states. As a maritime nation, Malaysia needs to be aware of the evolving strategic landscape in the IO and position itself to contribute to the region's maritime security challenges both on geo-political dynamics and threats emerging from non-traditional security issues.

Piracy in the Gulf of Aden poses a threat to international trade, port activities along Red Sea, Suez Canal and has implication towards the transportation of world's 40% energy via Strait of Hormuz and 11% via Suez Canal. With the increase in piracy attacks not only in the Gulf of Aden but in the Indian Ocean challenges towards maritime security

continue to confront the maritime areas in South East Asia. Since piracy and armed robbery in the Straits of Malacca has declined, it is important that Malaysia consolidate its approaches and ideas on maritime security issues particularly on piracy so that she can contribute towards multilateral cooperation to contain piracy in the GOA and in the Indian Ocean.

### **Looking ahead**

The IO will continue to be an important sea-lane for commerce and socio-economic activities. In addition, the sea will see various strategic interests being played out by naval powers. These will see the sea being used more intensively in the years ahead, which in turn will pose multifaceted security challenges to the stakeholders. Developments related to India-China rivalry and the ever increasing interests of maritime powers in asserting their interests in IO will see more maneuverings in the sea and shape the geopolitical landscape in the region. Malaysia, being a littoral state to the IO, has to keep abreast of the developments and dynamics in this key maritime area in order to come up with the appropriate policy responses to safeguard her interests.