



# INDO-PACIFIC CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM

## Webinar Report

### **The Kaleidoscope of Geostrategic Powerplay: *Assessing India's Role in the Indian Ocean Region***

July 24, 2024

*As part of the CUTS Indo-Pacific Civil Society Forum (IPCSF), the webinar addressed a wide array of topics, including India's maritime strategy, the role of collateral security dialogue, and opportunities for trilateral, multilateral, and plurilateral cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).*

#### **Background and Context**

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is a critical juncture of global trade and geopolitical significance. As one of the world's most strategically vital areas, it hosts crucial sea lines of communication that link the Middle East, Africa, and East Asia with Europe and the Americas. Historically, this region has been a melting pot of maritime cultures and trade, significantly influencing the geopolitics of numerous nations over centuries. Today, the IOR has become a focal point for global powers, each competing for influence and stability.

India, with its extensive coastline and central location in the IOR, plays a pivotal role in maintaining regional stability and security. As a prominent naval power, India views the IOR as essential to its strategic interests, including safeguarding maritime routes, ensuring regional peace, and promoting economic growth. To strengthen its strategic position, India has been an active participant in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), which has emerged as a key framework for shaping the geopolitical landscape of the IOR. This webinar will examine India's strategies and actions within this framework, exploring how it navigates the complex power dynamics of the region.

**Moderator: Mr Bipul Chattopadhyay**, Executive Director, Consumer Unity & Trust Society International (CUTS)

#### **Panellists**

**Vice Admiral Shekhar Sinha (retd.)**, Co-Founder DeepStrat. Former FOC-in-C, Western Naval Command, and Chief of Integrated Defence Staff

**Amanda Aspden**, Director, Indian Ocean Rim Association

**Kiran Pervez**, PhD, Senior Adviser, Regional Strategy, U.S. Department of State

**Grant Wyeth**, Editor, Asia Pacific Development Diplomacy & Defence Dialogue

#### **Key Takeaways**

The event began with a warm welcome and a brief introduction by Purushendra Singh, Assistant Director, Global Affairs Centre, CUTS International.

**Vice Admiral Shekhar Sinha (retd.)**, Co-Founder DeepStrat. Former FOC-in-C, Western Naval Command, and Chief of Integrated Defence Staff emphasised India's primacy in the Indian Ocean, citing its strategic location and significant economic and geopolitical influence. He highlighted that the region is home to approximately 2.7 billion people and accounts for about 15 per cent of the world's GDP. Sinha underscored highlighted the region's critical importance for global trade, noting that 80 per cent of the world's oil shipments pass through it.

Sinha discussed two major geopolitical transformations affecting the Indian Ocean viz. increasing activity of the People's Republic of China, which raises concerns for India and the U.S. and the shift in language and conceptualisation towards the broader Indo-Pacific region, often seen as a response to China's rise.

He also referred to the historical perspectives of Lord Curzon, who emphasised the strategic importance of controlling the Indian Ocean's choke points and integrating the region economically and militarily to ensure security against northern threats.

Sinha concluded by discussing the role of the Quad as a political deterrent and platform for multilateral initiatives. These initiatives include vaccine diplomacy, alternative debt financing, emerging technologies, maritime domain awareness infrastructure development, maritime security, ISR, capacity building, and logistics.

**Amanda Aspden**, Director, Indian Ocean Rim Association, addressed the role of IORA in fostering and facilitating cooperation among the countries from the region.

Aspden highlighted IORA's efforts in enhancing connectivity, trade, and energy security as well as addressing common concerns such as challenges posed by climate change. She placed IORA's vision in its historical context, recalling that it was inspired by Former South African President, Nelson Mandela's 1995 visit to India, which led to the establishment of the association.

Aspden emphasised India's leadership in IORA, particularly in developing the IORA Outlook on the Indo-Pacific. This document, led by India, outlines principles such as respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference. She highlighted India's contributions to maritime safety and security, promoting economic growth, and sustainable use of marine resources.

Aspden noted India's proactive role in the region, citing the upcoming 2025 tabletop exercise on search and rescue and the growing blue economy partnership with Indonesia as prime examples. She mentioned India's increased influence in the IOR, including its successful election for the IORA Secretary-General position and the upcoming role as IORA chair in 2025.

**Kiran Pervez**, PhD, Senior Adviser, Regional Strategy, U.S. Department of State provided insights into U.S. engagement in the IOR. Pervez emphasised the importance of building sustainable blue economies, promoting maritime security, and addressing climate resilience. She highlighted U.S. investments in sustainable fisheries, marine biodiversity conservation, and renewable energy projects in the region.

Pervez also discussed the U.S.'s strategic partnerships, including the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity and the Quad, which aims to leverage shared capacities to tackle collective problems.

During the Q&A, it was noted that the ongoing discussions about a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between BIMSTEC and IORA suggest potential future cooperation. The U.S. is keen to support BIMSTEC initiatives through its bilateral relationships with member countries, aiming to boost economic integration and development within the region.

**Grant Wyeth**, Editor, Asia Pacific Development Diplomacy & Defence Dialogue, shared insights into Australia's strategic outlook for the Indian Ocean. Wyeth emphasised Australia's deep commitment to the Indo-Pacific and its growing partnership with India. He highlighted the significance of Australia's naval capabilities and the importance of the AUKUS nuclear-powered submarine fleet for projecting power in the region.

Wyeth also underscored the increasing importance of the Australia-India relationship, driven by mutual concerns about increased Chinese activity in the Indian Ocean. He noted the expanding Indian diaspora in Australia and its role in strengthening bilateral ties.

Another speaker highlighted the significance of Turkey's membership in IORA in the context of energy security. He stressed the importance of critical minerals alongside traditional fossil fuels and noted Australia's substantial stake and interest in these resources.

Regarding regional security, the discussion focused on China's actions in the South China Sea and their implications for global maritime order, including the Indian Ocean. The need for a strategic response to China's aggressive behaviour, particularly towards the Philippines, and the broader implications for the IOR was emphasised.

IORA's focus on secure digital infrastructure in the Indo-Pacific was highlighted, with a call for collaborative efforts to counter misinformation and cybersecurity threats. Building on the US-India partnership in this domain, Aspden suggested expanding cooperation within the IOR framework.

The webinar underscored the importance of private sector contributions in driving the blue economy and marine conservation. Pervez noted that complex regional problems require a multi-faceted approach, involving not only governmental and multilateral bodies but also the private sector.

IORA's active role in combating Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing through improved fisheries management and maritime security was discussed. In this context, IORA's ongoing collaboration with the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) highlighted

recommendations to restrict port access for non-resident fishing vessels, a key strategy to combat illegal fishing activities and promote sustainable fisheries in the region.

Speakers elaborated on the comprehensive partnership between the U.S. and India in the blue economy. They mentioned ongoing initiatives and plans to foster regional economic growth, by emphasising sustainable development and employment generation in the IOR.

Participants reiterated the critical need for secure digital linkages and the potential for future initiatives to address misinformation and cybersecurity threats. She emphasised the need for a collaborative approach to counter these challenges in the IOR.

Participants underscored the need for a strategic counterbalance to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). They advocated for robust regional cooperation, enhancing India's blue water navy capabilities, and promoting alternative financing mechanisms to counter China's influence in smaller countries like Maldives and Sri Lanka.

The webinar highlighted India's pivotal role in the IOR through bilateral and multilateral initiatives. Discussions emphasised the importance of regional economic integration, strategic security, addressing misinformation, and cybersecurity.

The potential for collaboration between regional bodies like BIMSTEC and IORA was also explored, highlighting the need for cohesive strategies to ensure stability and development in the IOR. The event emphasised the importance of a collaborative approach involving governments, multilateral bodies, civil society, and the private sector to achieve sustainable development and security in the IOR.

Participants delved deeper into the complex issues facing the IOR and recognised the strategic importance of the IOR and the critical role of India in promoting stability, economic growth, and sustainable development. The webinar highlighted the collaborative efforts of IORA, the U.S., Australia, and other regional stakeholders in addressing the challenges and opportunities in the Indian Ocean.

The webinar provided valuable insights into the geopolitical dynamics of the Indian Ocean region and the pivotal role of India in shaping its future. The participants left with a deeper understanding of the importance of regional cooperation and the need for collective action to ensure peace, security, and prosperity in the Indian Ocean.

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