

Regional Maritime Security Cooperation - South Asian Perspective

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Connectivity through the sea has increased phenomenally with the globalization. Littoral states got benefit from their sea due to authorized areas of jurisdiction by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS III). The strategic importance of the seas due to its vast resources and interconnectivity also brings ahead the importance of security to the resources as well as to the lawful uses of the seas. To ensure security at sea, maritime security cooperation (MSC) among the littorals got importance. Due to the nature of the sea and its uses around the world, it is not practicable to ensure security by a single state, even if it is powerful. Littoral states around the world made tremendous efforts for MSC, mainly in terms of regional, sub-regional, and also bilateral cooperation. The ever-increasing global trade through seas and its value attract illegalities like

piracy, poaching, and unlawful uses, which constitute maritime security threats to the littorals. Thus, it became an obvious need to ensure maritime security against a wide spectrum of threats. The geophysical attributes of the sea areas of South Asia (SA), coupled with a high volume of maritime trade, have implications for regional security. SA littoral states maintain bilateral and trilateral maritime cooperation like India, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives have trilateral cooperation 'Dosti'. Bangladesh and India conduct Coordinated Patrol (CORPAT) along the International Maritime Boundary Line (IMBL), which facilitates to prevent unlawful activities. However, SA littorals are yet to form an institutionalized regional MSC platform to address maritime security issues regionally.

The challenges in the region, among others, include Inter-State Disputes, Armed Race, Extra Regional Interest, Human and Drug Trafficking, Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing, Natural Disasters, Marine Pollution, presence of Armed Non-State Actors, Terrorism etc. India, as the largest state in SA, with relative economic might and historical and cultural linkages, enjoys significant influence across the region. India's relations with its neighbours are a crucial factor for security and stability in SA. Again, the India-Pakistan rivalry has dominated the regional security scenario in SA. In recent years, India's relations with its immediate neighbours have received greater focus, except Pakistan. Again, India's desire to reinvigorate its relations with its neighbours has been influenced by a growing Chinese influence in the neighbourhood. Thus, the MSC among the SA states is directly related to the relations between India and its SA neighbours and also has an influence of China.

Map of South Asia



In the multilateral MSC architecture, SA littorals are members of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), which

is a regional forum consisting of 23 member states bordering the Indian Ocean, ten dialogue partners, and one Observer. IORA is tripartite in nature, bringing together representatives of Government, Business, and Academia for promoting cooperation and closer interaction among them. IORA Action Plan (2017-2021) was the latest initiative of IORA, which has focused on Maritime Safety and Security (MSS) as a priority area for promoting MSS in the Indian Ocean region. Short-Term, Mid-Term and Long-Term initiatives were planned with implementation guidelines. Accordingly, the IORA Working Group on Maritime Safety and Security (WGMSS) was established in September 2008. It is also important to note that the member states reviewed the first Work Plan while updating it for the next Work Plan cycle of 2022 to 2026, organizing activities in timelines of Short-Term from 2022 to 2024, Medium-Term from up to 2026, and Long-Term beyond 2026. Analyzing the IORA objectives, priority areas, and also the status of IORA Action Plan (2017 – 2021) and the reviewed plan, it is clearly identified that IORA States are giving importance to MSS and Member states are also positive in the implementation of the Action Plan.

Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) is a series of biennial meetings between the navies of littoral states of the Indian Ocean region. It provides a forum to increase maritime security cooperation, discuss regional maritime issues, and promote friendly relationships among the member states. It is a voluntary initiative among the navies and maritime security agencies of the member nations. The 25 member nations of the IONS are

grouped into four sub-regions: South Asian, East Asian, East African, South East Asian, and Australian. IONS has eight states with observer status.

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was established on December 8, 1985 and was “desirous of promoting peace, stability, amity, and progress in the region through strict adherence to the principle of the United Nations Charter and Non-Alignment”. SAARC was considered as a regional body for SA placed in a geostrategic location with an opportunity to contribute to the global goal. However, the experience of the last four decades suggests that, under its existing structure, SAARC cannot be the tool of regional integration, as it will continue to be the victim of Indo-Pak rivalry. Moreover, since its inception, SAARC is yet to discuss any issue related to maritime cooperation, and it may not be a suitable regional forum to form or initiate a regional MSC platform for SA.

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) is a regional organization where most of the SA states are Members. The member states are Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand. The BIMSTEC CHARTER Chapter I, Article 1 (Purposes) declares, "To maintain peace and stability in the Bay of Bengal region through close collaboration in combating international terrorism, transnational organized crimes as well as natural disasters, climate change, and communicable diseases". It is important to note that BIMSTEC formed the Expert Group on MSC, and

the first meeting was held from 5-7 September 2022 to prepare the Action Plan. BIMSTEC Summits and Declarations also show the importance of maritime security cooperation.

In the Bilateral Maritime Security Cooperation architecture, we find that a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed in 2006 between the Indian Coast Guard and the Pakistan Maritime Security Agency (MSA) for the exchange of information on maritime boundary violations by fishermen, intra-agency coordination on maritime search and rescue and marine environment pollution. Under the MoU, the heads of the Indian Coast Guard and Pakistan MSA meet annually and also have established a hotline link for regular exchange of information on non-military maritime issues.

Bangladesh and India maintain bilateral maritime cooperative engagements, which include regular training exchanges, staff talks, naval ships visit and senior-level interactions between both the navies and coast guards. CORPAT by ships of two navies along the IMBL is another step forward between the two countries in MSC. CORPAT builds up understanding and interoperability between both the navies. It facilitates the institution of measures to prevent and suppress unlawful activities such as IUU fishing, maritime terrorism, drug trafficking, armed robbery, and piracy. It also helps in enhancing operational synergy by exchanging information to prevent smuggling, illegal immigration and to conduct Search and Rescue (SAR) operations at sea.

India and Maldives maintain close defence and security ties. India provides regular training to Maldives National Defence Forces. Both the maritime forces also conduct exercises and surveillance in the Maldivian Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). India and Sri Lanka maintain bilateral maritime cooperation, and both the navies have regular exchanges of training, ship visits, staff talks, information exchange, supply of military hardware such as ships and aircraft, hydrographic assistance, and exercises. The Indian and Sri Lankan navies conduct an exclusive bilateral exercise named 'Sri Lanka India Naval Exercise (SLINEX)' since 2005. In October 2011, India signed a trilateral agreement with the Maldives and Sri Lanka for MSC. Under the agreement, the three countries agreed to share information on the movement of shipping through the region under a common software platform developed by India. Under SAGAR (Security and

Growth for All in the Region) vision, the Indian Navy has been proactively engaging through bilateral and multilateral exercises, joint exclusive economic zone surveillance, Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations and economic zone surveillance with countries in Indian Ocean Region to enhance regional maritime security.

In an assessment of Maritime Cooperation in South Asia, we find that India is the largest country in SA. In terms of maritime capacity as well as capability, other SA states are not comparable to India. India has the largest share of seas and oceans of SA, and from the geophysical point of view, India is in centre of SA. On the other hand, as discussed in the previous paragraphs, India is maintaining effective bilateral and trilateral maritime cooperation with SA states, with the exception of Pakistan. Present maritime cooperation with

Country	Ship Visit/ Staff Talks/ Training	Multilateral Exercise	MoU/ Agreement	Assessment of Maritime Cooperation
Bangladesh	a. Regular Navy and Coast Guard Ship Visit b. Regular Navy to Navy Staff talks c. Regular Navy and Coast Guard Training. d. Senior Official Visit	a. Navy to Navy Exercise Milan b. Bilateral Coast Guard Exercise c. CORPAT	a. Navy and Coast Guard Training b. Defence export	Good
Pakistan	Nil	Nil	MoU between Indian Coast Guard and Pakistan Maritime Security Agency	Weak
Maldives	a. Regular Navy and Coast Guard Ship Visit b. Regular Navy to Navy Staff talks c. Regular Navy and Coast Guard Training. d. Senior Official Visit e. Trilateral Exercise	a. Navy to Navy Exercise Milan b. Trilateral Coast Guard Exercise Dosti c. CORPAT	a. Navy and Coast Guard Training b. Defence export c. Trilateral Agreement for Information Sharing	Good
Sri Lanka	a. Regular Navy and Coast Guard Ship Visit b. Regular Navy to Navy Staff talks c. Regular Navy and Coast Guard Training. d. Senior Official Visit	a. Navy to Navy Exercise Milan, SLINEX b. Trilateral Coast Guard Exercise "Dosti" c. CORPAT	a. Navy and Coast Guard Training b. Defence export	Good

Prepared by author taking relevant information from available sources

Table 1: Assessment of MSC among India and other SA Littoral States

India and other SA littoral states is summarized in Table 1.

To ensure maritime security in the regional setup, challenges are common and are also potential change multipliers which could throw up complex challenges in the future, far beyond the capacity of any single littoral state to tackle. It is well understood that a common, inclusive, multilateral intergovernmental organization is necessary for effective MSC for the regional littoral states; thus, the littoral states of SA also need to establish a common and multilateral intergovernmental organization for MSC in the region. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the scope of forming an MSC forum for SA littoral states. Under the umbrella of existing

regional forums that is SAARC, IORA, and BIMSTEC where the SA states are members, IORA and BIMSTEC may be considered suitable regional forums under which an MSC platform may be formed for SA. At the same time, SA states may continue their existing Bilateral and Trilateral cooperation to ensure maritime security in their sea areas. Now, policymakers need to decide the ways ahead, considering relevant factors.

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