

The Indian Ocean Rorschach test

*The Rorschach test asks viewers to describe their interpretations of a series of inkblots. Like the psychological test, how observers interpret what is taking place in the Indian Ocean depends on their strategic orientation, argues **Nilanthi Samaranayake (CNA, Washington)**.*

A map of the Indian Ocean evokes a wide range of potential interpretations. A vast sea-lane highway connecting the Middle East to East Asia? The engine of the global economy, ranging from hydrocarbon to container shipping? A series of ports operated or built by China that could someday become military bases? The core of the “Indo-Pacific” region? Its periphery? The Indian Ocean provides a [Rorschach test](#) for watchers of the region. The Rorschach test asks viewers to describe their interpretations of a series of inkblots. Like this psychological test, how observers interpret what is taking place in the Indian Ocean depends on their strategic orientation because so much continues to unfold dynamically here in the realms of security, economics, and governance. At the end of the second decade of the 21st century, it is important to take stock of developments in the Indian Ocean — from smaller, developing resident countries to larger countries with geostrategic ambitions — to consider where the region stands in this dynamic period of evolution.

First, developments in Indian Ocean security have had unexpected impacts. Specifically, transboundary, non-traditional security challenges such as natural disasters and piracy have had impacts on traditional security and major-power relations. In the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami that ravaged Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and Thailand, the US, India, Japan, and Australia formed the Tsunami Core Group to provide disaster relief. This grouping evolved into the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or Quad. At its height, the four countries participated in a naval exercise called MALABAR in 2007 that China saw as threatening. The [Quad disbanded](#) by the next year. More than a decade later, this grouping of countries has restarted [quadrilateral consultations](#) on issues of strategic importance in the region.

Counterpiracy operations are another example of non-traditional security missions having a traditional security impact and fundamentally transforming the regional environment. In the first decade of the 2000s, pirate attacks originating from Somalia began to impede the free flow of commerce in the western Indian Ocean. As a result, many nations contributed naval forces to combat this menace. This included multinational efforts such as the US-led Combined Maritime Forces, NATO's Operation Ocean Shield, and the EU's Operation Atlanta. Independent deployers included India and China. An under-appreciated outcome is that this deployment provided China with a rationale for recurring presence in the Indian Ocean. Its first counterpiracy forces arrived in 2009, and the country has continued to deploy forces to the region, including submarines, despite the decline in piracy incidents. Moreover, this non-traditional security mission has been put forward as a rationale for China's first overseas [base in Djibouti](#).

Second, the first two decades of the 21st century have seen the dramatic expansion of regional architecture to help disparate stakeholders — in African, Asian, and Middle Eastern countries as well as in Australia — navigate complex challenges within the region. Established in the 1990s, the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) has been revitalised over the last decade and now numbers 22 members after Maldives' entry in 2019. The organisation focuses on promoting economic growth and sustainable development and has taken on a greater role in regional maritime security and safety. In 2017, IORA convened a Leaders Summit for the first time with presidents and prime ministers, thereby heightening the importance of the biennial gathering.

Meanwhile, the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) was launched in 2008 under the leadership of the Indian Navy and rotates its chair every two years like IORA. Unlike IORA, IONS has a clear security mandate, which culminates every two years in a meeting of naval chiefs. Illustrating its growing scope, IONS conducted its first-ever exercise at sea in 2017 in the Bay of Bengal.

Third, the last two decades have seen greater reliance on international [legal institutions and frameworks](#) to advance Indian Ocean governance, though with mixed results. In 2012 and 2014, Bangladesh, [Myanmar](#), and [India](#) were able to resolve two sets of bilateral maritime disputes in the Bay of Bengal through the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea and the Permanent Court of Arbitration. Meanwhile, India, China, South Korea, and Germany have utilised the International Seabed Authority in a manner consistent with international legal norms for seeking rights to search mostly for polymetallic sulphides in the Indian Ocean. Each party peacefully conducts exploration activities for these seabed minerals. Mauritius, however, has seen less success in relying on international institutions to bring about change in its case against the United Kingdom over the Chagos Islands. At present, the UK refuses to cede control of its Indian Ocean territory — including [Diego Garcia](#), where US military forces are based.

As we enter a new decade, many non-traditional security issues will continue to pose challenges in the Indian Ocean. The region will be prone to natural disasters that require military forces to respond, including from outside the region. The security of sea-lanes will continue to be of utmost importance for the free flow of goods and will require the coordination of multinational naval forces for their protection. Most recently, the US is leading an effort to help safeguard shipping in the Strait of Hormuz, while some European nations are planning their own operations to protect this critical chokepoint.

At the same time, traditional security issues will persist in Indian Ocean politics. Regional stakeholders question the long-term strategic intentions of China's Belt and Road Initiative and worry that Djibouti is only the first of many Chinese military bases in the Indian Ocean. Resident countries, for their part, will continue to modernise their maritime forces, heightening the risk of accidents as growing navies learn how to operate new platforms such as submarines.

In the economic domain, smaller Indian Ocean nations already concerned about the militarisation of the region by major powers will continue to seek funding for infrastructure development — from China as well as from Japan, the US, the EU, and increasingly India. For the near future, smaller nations will be reminded of their dependence on the major powers for economic development but also by these powers' military and diplomatic might. These nations will need to work to preserve their agency as smaller states while they seek to meet national development goals.

The outlook for the Indian Ocean regional order in the third decade of the 21st century will continue to depend on a variety of dynamic factors. Foremost among these are the strategic push and pull of major powers and smaller nations, the economic and energy trends of this critical waterway, and shifts in governance.

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