

# **The contribution of the IORA towards maritime safety and security in the Indian Ocean: An evaluative note**

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With some of the busiest sea routes and connections to major international economies, the Indian Ocean is one of the world's most strategically important maritime basins. Piracy, trafficking, illegal fishing, and maritime terrorism are only a few of the many marine issues it encounters. A key player in advancing marine safety and security in this regard is the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), a regional organisation made up of 23 member governments that border the Indian Ocean. Despite not having enforcement powers and not being a security alliance, IORA has made small but increasing contributions in this area. Its main goals are to facilitate dialogue, build capacity, coordinate regionally, and collaborate with outside partners.

Promoting discourse and policy frameworks is one of IORA's most important achievements. The 2017 IORA Concord marked a change to more targeted engagement on marine issues by formally designating maritime safety and security as a priority area. Member nations now have a forum to coordinate efforts, exchange best practices, and pinpoint shared dangers thanks to the creation of the Working Group on Maritime Safety and Security (WGMSS). Despite being non-binding, these procedures encourage collaboration and confidence-building among a diversified membership that includes small island states such as Seychelles and Maldives as well as large countries such as Australia and India.

IORA has assisted its member governments with training and capacity building in addition to policy discussions. Under IORA's framework, nations like South Africa, France, Australia, and India have held joint training sessions and seminars with a focus on maritime domain awareness, port security, search and rescue (SAR), and counter-piracy operations. Smaller and emerging coastal states, who frequently lack the technical facilities and experience to administer their maritime zones effectively, can particularly benefit from these programs. These projects' scope and impact are still constrained, though, and they mostly rely on donations and outside collaborations.

IORA has mostly provided supportive rather than operational assistance in the fight against piracy and other maritime crimes. The group partners with the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of

Somalia (CGPCS) and supports initiatives such as the Djibouti Code of Conduct. Additionally, it promotes member nations' involvement in regional information-sharing and incident response procedures. Even though IORA doesn't conduct patrols or naval operations, it has supported regional anti-piracy frameworks, which has strengthened diplomatic support and collective norms against maritime dangers.

IORA's involvement with extra-regional partners has also improved its efficacy in advancing maritime safety. Through financial support, technical help, and cooperative exercises, dialogue partners like the United States, China, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the European Union have backed a number of maritime security initiatives. Enhancing regional maritime cooperation and strengthening member states' ability to counter maritime threats were among the objectives outlined in the IORA Action Plan (2017–2021). Although IORA's marine agenda has benefited from these alliances in terms of resources and awareness, the actual execution of programs has differed from nation to nation, frequently based on national priorities and political will.

Additionally, coordination with other regional and sub-regional organizations, like the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC), ASEAN, BIMSTEC, and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), has become more and more important to IORA. Although this kind of collaboration is still in its infancy, it has the potential to strengthen regional marine administration, prevent duplication, and coordinate activities. However, issues including conflicting strategic objectives among member states, overlapping mandates, and competition for funds still make it difficult for member states to work together seamlessly.

Despite these efforts, institutional and structural limitations continue to limit IORA's influence. The group functions by consensus and is essentially a venue for discussion without legally binding agreements or means of enforcement. It is less able to react quickly to emergencies since it does not have a permanent maritime security arm, such as a navy task force or regional coast guard. Furthermore, its membership is diverse, spanning from rich nations to vulnerable coastal states, which frequently results in varying goals and capacities, making it challenging to take coordinated action.

In summary, the Indian Ocean Rim Association's coordination and facilitation efforts have been crucial in advancing marine safety and security. Especially for smaller states, it has aided in regional collaboration, capacity building, and trust building. But because of its institutional constraints and lack of operational capability, its influence is still limited. IORA has to develop its institutional structures, give its working groups more resources, and forge strategic alliances with regional and external entities in order to become more effective. IORA is valuable because it can

serve as a regional convenor and consensus-builder for long-term maritime stability in the Indian Ocean, even though it is unlikely to develop into a traditional security provider.