

Strengthening Maritime Safety and Security in the Indian Ocean: The Case of Mauritius within the IORA Framework

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Maritime safety and security have become central concerns in the Indian Ocean region, where strategic sea lanes, rich marine resources, and growing economic activity intersect with complex transnational threats. The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), through its Maritime Safety and Security agenda and the IORA Action Plan 2022–2027, provides a structured platform for addressing these challenges. A compelling way to understand the practical relevance of this framework is through the case of Mauritius, a small island developing state whose economic stability and environmental sustainability are deeply tied to maritime security.

The Indian Ocean region faces a wide array of maritime threats, including piracy, armed robbery at sea, terrorism, and illegal trafficking. In addition, non-traditional security concerns—such as illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, marine pollution, and the impacts of climate change—have become increasingly significant. These challenges are inherently transboundary, requiring coordinated regional responses. IORA’s emphasis on cooperation among Member States and alignment with international legal frameworks, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, reflects the need for a unified and rules-based approach to maritime governance.

Mauritius provides a valuable case study because of its strategic location along key maritime routes connecting Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Its economy is heavily dependent on maritime sectors, including shipping, fisheries, and tourism, making maritime safety and security a national priority. Although Mauritius is not located in a high-piracy zone, it remains vulnerable to a range of maritime risks. These include drug trafficking, illegal fishing, and maritime accidents, all of which can have significant economic and environmental consequences.

A defining moment that highlighted Mauritius’ vulnerability was the MV Wakashio oil spill. When a bulk carrier ran aground off the coast, it caused one of the worst environmental disasters in the country’s history. The spill severely affected marine ecosystems, fisheries, and coastal tourism, underscoring the interconnected nature of maritime safety, environmental protection, and economic resilience. This incident demonstrated that maritime security is not limited to traditional threats such as piracy but also includes the capacity to prevent and respond to environmental emergencies.

In response to such challenges, Mauritius has increasingly engaged in regional and international cooperation mechanisms. Through its participation in IORA, the country contributes to collective efforts aimed at enhancing maritime domain awareness, improving surveillance, and strengthening legal and institutional frameworks. The Working Group on Maritime Safety and Security (WGMSS), led by Australia as Chair and India as Coordinating Country, plays a key role in implementing these initiatives. Capacity-building programs under this framework have supported Mauritius in enhancing the capabilities of its coast guard, improving information-sharing systems, and developing more effective responses to maritime threats.

One of the most pressing issues for Mauritius is the protection of its vast Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), which is significantly larger than its land territory. This maritime space is rich in resources, particularly fisheries, which are vital for food security, employment, and export earnings. However,

the EEZ is also vulnerable to IUU fishing, which undermines sustainability and deprives the country of valuable revenue. Strengthening maritime governance through surveillance, enforcement, and regional cooperation is therefore essential. IORA's focus on transboundary collaboration provides a platform for addressing these challenges collectively, as illegal fishing activities often involve vessels operating across multiple jurisdictions.

Climate change adds another layer of complexity to maritime safety and security in Mauritius. Rising sea levels, coral reef degradation, and increasing frequency of extreme weather events pose long-term risks to coastal infrastructure and marine ecosystems. These environmental changes can exacerbate existing security challenges by affecting livelihoods and increasing competition over marine resources. Integrating climate resilience into maritime security strategies is therefore crucial. IORA's approach, which encourages collaboration across different working groups, supports a more holistic understanding of security that includes environmental sustainability.

Another important dimension of maritime safety and security is the principle of freedom of navigation, which is essential for global trade and economic stability. For Mauritius, as a trade-dependent island nation, ensuring secure and open sea lanes is critical. Adherence to international law, particularly UNCLOS, provides a legal framework for resolving disputes and maintaining order at sea. Through IORA, Member States can promote respect for these principles while addressing emerging challenges in a coordinated manner.

Capacity-building remains a cornerstone of effective maritime security. As a small island developing state, Mauritius faces limitations in terms of resources and technical expertise. Regional initiatives under IORA help bridge these gaps by providing training, technical assistance, and opportunities for knowledge exchange. These efforts not only strengthen national capabilities but also contribute to regional stability by ensuring that all Member States are better equipped to respond to shared challenges.

Furthermore, Mauritius' experience highlights the importance of integrating maritime safety with broader development goals, particularly the concept of the blue economy. By promoting sustainable use of ocean resources, the country aims to balance economic growth with environmental protection. This aligns closely with IORA's objectives of fostering collaboration across sectors and ensuring that maritime activities contribute to long-term sustainability.

In conclusion, the case of Mauritius illustrates the multifaceted nature of maritime safety and security challenges in the Indian Ocean region. From environmental disasters such as the MV Wakashio oil spill to ongoing threats like illegal fishing and climate change, the need for coordinated and comprehensive responses is clear. The Indian Ocean Rim Association, through its Maritime Safety and Security agenda and the IORA Action Plan 2022–2027, provides a vital framework for addressing these issues. By strengthening regional cooperation, enhancing capacity, and promoting adherence to international law, Member States can work together to ensure a secure, stable, and sustainable maritime environment for the future.