

## *Conference Reports...*

### **The Pathfinder Indian Ocean Security Conference, Phase II 4 March 2022**

Building on the success of the Pathfinder Indian Ocean Security Conference Phase I in 2020, Phase II was held virtually during the afternoon of 4 March 2022. Hosted by the Sri Lanka-based Pathfinder Foundation, and with the support of the Japanese and United States governments, Phase II sought to examine in more detail three thematic areas worthy of further research identified during Phase I. This conference (noting funder priorities) was premised on inclusively furthering the rules-based international order in the Indian Ocean region, consistent with the free and open Indo-Pacific strategy.

In advance of Phase II, three experts were engaged to research and draft journal-length position papers, which were presented virtually at the conference. The three themes and experts were ‘A New Security Architecture for the Indian Ocean Region’, researched by Nilanthi Samaranyake, Centre for Naval Analysis, United States; ‘Confidence Building Measures’, researched by Pradeep Chauhan, National Maritime Foundation, India; and ‘Maritime Domain Awareness [MDA]’, researched by Samuel Bashfield (author of this report). Each of the three themes comprised a session, and included a distinguished moderator and two panellists.

Samaranyake opened the first working session by analysing options for a new security architecture in the Indian Ocean. While a wide range of regional institutions operate in the Indian Ocean region, she noted the persistence of the desire for an Indian Ocean Zone of Peace, a 1970s-era proposal which has seen a resurgence in recent years, as well as rising threat perceptions of small South Asian states, especially when considering this new era of great power competition, and their search for a stable regional order. Samaranyake identified a range of institutional models which may be implemented to realize a new security architecture. These include a status quo model (e.g. IORA, BIMSTEC, ReCAAP); a regional leader model (e.g. IONS); and a small states model (e.g. Singapore’s IFC, AOSIS). She concluded that, based on historical trends and contemporary great power competition, a status quo model holds the most benefit for the majority of Indian Ocean nations. Interestingly, during the Q&A time, Samaranyake noted that these findings do not necessarily point to the need for ‘new architecture’ but are also useful in ensuring existing architecture remains strong.

My own session followed, in which I presented the key points of my paper entitled ‘Maritime Domain Awareness in the Indian Ocean Region: Cooperation for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific’. After outlining the Australia-supported Sri Lanka Border Risk Assessment Centre (BRAC) as a case study, I posited three ways Indian Ocean nations can improve regional MDA. First, bilateral capacity-building partnerships are an important and powerful way of improving MDA capabilities for Indian Ocean littoral nations. Sri Lanka’s BRAC is a relevant example, and also Australia’s support to Sri Lanka by providing naval patrol vessels. The second is the sharing of cooperative automatic identification systems (AIS) transponders. As part of Australia’s cooperation with Sri Lanka, Australia has assisted the island nation to install 4,500 transponders on multi-day fishing vessels, as well as establishing the required land-based monitoring centre. There exists great potential for extending AIS transponder coverage on fishing vessels (e.g. Indian and Bangladeshi), particularly in the Bay of Bengal area. Third is an ocean-wide collaborative network of bases and facilities to support P-8 maritime patrol aircraft operations across the vastness of the Indian Ocean. Individually, Australia and partners such as the United States, India and France already have significant capabilities, including maritime patrol aircraft and uncrewed aerial vehicles, and facilities that, if combined in a collaborative network, would allow comprehensive maritime surveillance of much of the Indian Ocean. Importantly, panellist Christian Bueger added, during his remarks, that MDA in the Indian Ocean Region will not necessarily be improved by more MDA centres, but nations should discuss the types of intelligence and the types of technologies (including algorithms) which can be shared.

In the third and final working session Chauhan outlined various confidence-building measures (political, economic, environmental, societal and cultural) among Indian Ocean nations. However, he attested that Indian Ocean states should not expend undue energy in advocating a code of conduct that re-stipulates the existing conventions, treaties, rules and regulations, to which they are already publicly committed as ratifying parties. He added that more commitments or pledges that promise predictable and lawful ‘good behaviour’ are counterproductive. Rather, and despite the importance of confidence-building measures, Chauhan advocated for a jointly prepared and properly cross-indexed ‘Guide for Seagoing Officers’, in the form of a compendium or guide, while also providing diplomats and officials with the requisite information with which to engage their counterparts.

While this conference was only three and a half hours in duration, a diversity of topics and perspectives were aired, generating realistic and implementable policy ideas. One theme consistent across the discussion was that, whether it be regional architecture, MDA or confidence-building measures, more is not necessarily better. A myriad of organisations, centres, architectures, norms and arrangements already exist in this region to further these issues. Instead, nations should invest in the existing regional infrastructure, ensuring its relevance and strength into the future, rather than create new and overlapping infrastructures.

Overall, the Pathfinder Foundation secretariat did well to ensure a wide variety of nations with an interest in this dynamic region were represented by a moderator, a panellist or a presenter. As a result, this Phase II conference, building on Phase I in 2020, further developed and fine-tuned practical and innovative solutions to advance inclusive Indian Ocean security. Readers may be interested in a recording of this conference and associated documentation (including the three full position papers), all of which can be found via the links below.

<https://pathfinderfoundation.lk/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X3Bhv0xXkRI>

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