



Seizing the Momentum: Avenues for EU-India Maritime Cooperation in a Connectivity Context

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In recent years, rising competition in the maritime spaces have pushed many actors to critically rethink their policies towards the security and governance of the high seas. In the Indian Ocean Region, China's Maritime Silk Road (MSR) as part of the broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been central to this growing sense of competition.

New, and potentially conflicting connectivity approaches are the result of this changing dynamic in the maritime domain. This has made it imperative to understand how the competing narratives are feeding into the existing policies and actions at the national, regional and global level. Amidst the growing strategic competition, the EU and India are exploring various options to not only strengthen their cooperation to tackle security challenges in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), but also to take the relationship forward based on mutually shared norms on connectivity.

In this backdrop, this paper analyses how the evolving policy approaches of the EU and India with regard to connectivity in the IOR affect potential maritime cooperation and initiatives, and which potential avenues for cooperation open up in this changed policy context. For this purpose, the paper employs a two-pronged approach by looking at avenues for cooperation in the economic and security field through bilateral and institutional lens.

For the EU, working through the existing maritime security governance mechanisms and forging new cooperative ventures currently is the most workable way of achieving balanced cooperation with its partners in Asia, including India. Security cooperation with relevant maritime actors can strengthen the EU's profile as a promising and reliable security actor in the region especially if more coordination at sea in the IOR amongst EU Member States can be set to gain clarity in India's perception of the EU's action. The recent EU-China maritime exercise shows Brussels' involvement in engaging with China – the EU's engagement with India should not lag behind.

Boosting cooperation with like-minded countries in the region is especially potent at a time that the US commitment to Asia under President Trump is either unclear or diverging from the EU's interest. This makes the EU's current momentum in pro-active policy-making towards Asia even timelier, not to say more sustainable in the medium to long run. EU policymakers realise the current vulnerability of the international order obliges them to strengthen their security profile and support partners in the region that sync with the EU's norms and interests. Although the EU being an extra-regional power in the IOR ultimately limits its options in the maritime security domain, there is more than sufficient scope to continue working on the EU's visibility, partnership profile and expanding cooperative maritime ventures.



EUROPEAN UNION

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India has responded positively to the EU Strategy on India, and although developments are going slowly and incrementally, the two actors are on a more positive track now than they have been in quite a while. On the EU side however, Brexit and the EU Parliamentary elections in May 2019 are crucial in how the room for manoeuvre in CSDP, and with that its (maritime) cooperation with India will develop. As the UK is one of the largest navies of the EU Member States, Brussels is worried that Brexit will weaken the EU as a maritime (security) actor.

Considering India's strong historic link with the UK, New Delhi is still exploring how to perceive and deal with the EU after Brexit, also in the maritime domain. India's ambition to become a net security provider and preeminent power in the IOR however pushes New Delhi to forge new partnerships and be proactive in supporting regional organizations, platforms and initiatives.

At the regional institutional level, in addition to strategic issues, several other maritime and marine issues are resonating in the joint statements and merit attention. The EU has surfaced as a more likely partner than before in this context, and EU-India maritime cooperation has become more advantageous to both actors. Both countries recognise the prospects for the development of Blue Economy, which demand newer ways to manage oceans and the seas through technology, skills and entrepreneurship.

Building on existing convergence in governance norms as well as connectivity approaches in the IOR, many concrete activities can be undertaken between the EU and India. In a multilateral order that seems more fragile than expected, this might turn out to be much needed.

Recommendations:

- Broaden the scope of CSDP engagement, namely Atalanta, to expand from the core of counter-piracy;
- Strengthen visibility of the EU as security actor in the IOR. Observer status or membership of the EU in IORA and/or IONS would be a useful step;
- Work towards a joint MSA, through a (semi-) permanent EU-representative at India's IFC-IOR and Indian visit to the MSC-HOA and IORIS platform;
- Initiate a joint exercise in counter-piracy in HADR or SAR in the Mediterranean Sea/ Indian Ocean Region;
- Invite India to cooperate and coordinate in capacity building initiatives under MASE in the Seychelles and Madagascar and/or EUCAP Somalia;
- Medium to long term: work towards a Framework Participation Agreement (FPA) with India as 'third state' in the context of cooperation in crisis response;