

EU-INDIA COOPERATION IN THE INDO-PACIFIC REGION:  
UPHOLDING DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE, SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND RULE  
BASED ORDER AT SEA

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*“We are the world’s two largest democracies. We are two of the world’s biggest economies. We share same values and belief in freedom, equality, tolerance, and the rule of the law. Working together with a like-minded partner like India simply makes sense. It is natural”.*

- Jean-Claude Juncker  
President of the European Commission  
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The Indo-Pacific Region which stretches from ‘the shores of Africa to that of the Americas’<sup>1</sup>- has become the global geo-strategic centre stage. A region blessed with the bountiful natural resources, a history-of peace, prosperity and thriving intercontinental trade, dating back to early civilisation, has gradually lost its glory. Instead the region finds itself engulfed with a host of traditional and non-traditional maritime crime and misgovernance. The region is witnessing intense competition for centrality, energy security, and big-power rivalry. The region is undergoing ‘ocean-churn’-a dangerous storm that is building up fast and underscores the imminent need of international attention. At the same time, it offers a fertile area for multilateral cooperation.

The oceans of the world are inter-connected and act as a continuum, an invisible bridge putting the East African coast in the immediate neighbourhood of the West American coast. Oceanic exploitation at one end is more likely to affect other parts of the world as well, resulting in environmental and distributive injustice to the littoral States. The issue of environmental and distributive injustice occurs both at micro levels i.e. within societies as well as macro levels i.e. at global level. These are more pronounced in the case of poor and developing littorals and its population.

### **Why EU-India as Natural Partners?**

Peaceful and vibrant oceans are a prerequisite for the overall well-being of the mankind and as such, the region too becomes inherently important for all of mankind. It is where the interests of the European Union and India converge and become intuitively symbiotic for developing a long term equitable and enduring working relationship. The same is evident in the, ‘India-EU Partnership: A Roadmap to 2025’ enunciated during the 15<sup>th</sup> India-EU Summit held on 15 July 2020.

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<sup>1</sup> Shri Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India, keynote address at Shangri La Dialogue on 01 June 2018, accessed 20 Sep 2020.

The policy paper analyses the underlying causes of unsustainable resource exploitation, multifarious traditional and non-traditional maritime threats, and big-power rivalry. The paper also examines the viability of nurturing marine environment within the ambit of SDGs, the development of resilient structures through people's participation, and suggests contours of EU-India initiative- upholding the principles of distributive justice, sustainable development and rule-based order at sea for all in the region.<sup>2</sup>

## **CRITICAL ANALYSIS**

### **INDO-PACIFIC REGION: THE CHURN WITHIN**

The region is held back by issues ranging from traditional security threats to non-traditional maritime crimes, weak governance, and unsustainable exploitation of ocean resources. These factors have led to unprecedented misery among the affected population, created law and order issues, destabilised governments and in turn rendered the region susceptible to big power exploitative practices. The challenges faced by the region can be grouped into four major categories: distributive injustice, illegal activities, inter-state rivalry and geo-strategic competition.

#### **Distributive Injustice**

Distributive injustice arises from the circumstances wherein, the most disadvantaged people bear, and will continue to bear the repercussions of overexploitation of resources. In addition, widespread IUU fishing, illegal dumping and accidental environmental contamination are exacerbating the situation.

#### **Illegal Activities**

Illegal activities are those perpetuated by the individuals, Non-state actors or organisations working in contravention of the international and domestic laws. Trafficking operations involving drugs, human beings, arms and ammunition, pose persistent challenges for the littoral States both in the western Indian ocean and the South China Sea.

#### **Inter-State Rivalry**

Inter-State competition in the maritime domain owing to the lack of political will, are resulting in overexploitation, and surrendering of legitimate control to extra regional players by way of licencing agreements for fishing and tacit approval for waste dumping at sea. Similarly, the regional institutions and multilateral groupings, created to improve ocean governance have managed only limited success.

#### **Geo-strategic Competition**

The Indo-Pacific region is on the upward swing, with numerous littoral States becoming important 'energy' (crude oil) and raw material supplier. The region harbours critical

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<sup>2</sup> Word Count- 410

chokepoints for facilitating movement of global resources. This has made the major powers and middle powers important stakeholder in the state of affairs of the region and therefore have effectively plunged the region into recesses of big-power competition.

## The Fountain Head

In depth analysis of the above issues brought up the following salient perspectives: -

- **Dealing with Sea Blindness.** Many of the littoral States ignore the importance of sea into public policy and governance paradigm. The region has a noticeably young population, relatively poor economy, rampant unemployment coupled with abject apathy towards coastal communities. The combination of these factors is proving to be a fertile ground for social unrest.
- **Fractured and Ineffective Institutions.** The region lacks effective and strong regional institutions to deal with maritime issues. Although there are many regional and subregional organisations such as African Union, Gulf Cooperation, SAARC, ASEAN, few have security mandate and have limited capabilities and experience in dealing with maritime issues.<sup>3</sup>
- **Failed State/ Weak Governance.** The system of governance varies from mature and unstable democracies to monarchies, dictatorship, revolutionary and failing States. Other nations on the western Indian Ocean littoral suffer from poor governance and are at risk for failure in the coming decades.
- **Monitoring, Control and Surveillance (MCS) Apparatus.** The littorals lack in MCS capacity and capabilities, which has led to near absence of Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) in the western Indian ocean region.
- **Non-existent Security Apparatus.** The existing security arrangement in the region is characterised by lack of a functional region wide security regime, weak subregional security apparatus and greater reliance on bilateral rather than multilateral commitments.
- **The debt-trap Diplomacy.** The African littorals are being lured into debt-trap diplomacy in the garb of infrastructure development and there seems no stoppage to that.
- **The South China Sea.** Aggressive stance and non-adherence to the Law of the sea in the South China Sea, driven in part by the economic potential of oil and gas resources and fishing rights, is undermining the legitimacy of South-eastern littorals and attacking the spirit of 'rule based order at sea'.<sup>4</sup>

## ACTION PLAN

A stable, secure, and vibrant maritime space is a must for the littoral States as well as States outside of the region. Attaining the same will require involvement of the maritime security

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<sup>3</sup> Lee Cordner. (2010) Rethinking maritime security in the Indian Ocean Region *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 10:1, pages 67-85.

<sup>4</sup> Word Count-601

agencies, involvement the inter-governmental agencies, think-tanks, and academia. The core being strong community led movement in the region.

## Policy Options

- **Status Quo.** Maintain status quo with increased focus on the advocacy of ‘sustainable development’ and ‘rule-based order at sea’.
  - **Advantages.** Minimal resistance and ruffling of the existing bilateral and multilateral initiatives.
  - **Disadvantages.** The current state of flux and infirmities will remain exposed to the big-power rivalry-widening of the intrinsic fault lines.
- **EU-India led Regional Maritime Security Forum.** Commission a fresh EU-India led Regional Maritime Security Forum. The forum will include the littorals of the region and bring all the stake holders on a common platform with an aim to promote holistic maritime security and sustainable development programme.
  - **Advantages.** The structure can be developed by incorporating lessons learnt from the existing bilateral and multilateral structures. The forum will include the big powers as observers, thereby gaining universal acceptance.
  - **Disadvantages.** The initiative may not take off due to the competing interests of the existing multiple regional cooperation structures.
- **Community Led Whole of Government Approach.** The COVID-19 pandemic and its devastating consequences has accelerated the global polarisation and created a power vacuum. The EU and India are in a unique position to take a lead role in advocating and upholding the ideals of ‘distributive justice’, ‘sustainable development’ and ‘rule based order at sea’ that facilitates ‘Security and Growth to All in the Region’ (SAGAR).
  - **Advantages.** Neither India nor the EU are perceived as overbearing powers by most countries, thereby, positioning both the partners in a unique leadership position. Considering that both have strong and complex ties with major players like the US, Russia, and China, it brings legitimacy, capacity, and inclusiveness in the regional cooperation architecture.
  - **Disadvantages.** Both the EU and India do not have a large global mobilising power and may need longer timeline to persuade other leading powers into the fold. Also, the scope for a deeper engagement has often dogged Brussels and New Delhi owing to the placid domestic public discourse.

## Policy Recommendations

Based on the comparative analysis of the above-mentioned policy options, it is recommended to opt for initiating a 'Community Led Whole of Government Approach' whilst simultaneously promoting IONS as the forum of choice for multilateral cooperation. This initiative as indicated in Figure 1, will need multi-pronged engagement of various stakeholders: -

- **Engagement at Think Tank level.** Vigorous Policy advocacy and academic engagement among the Track 1.5/ 2.0-think tanks of the EU and India namely CRIMARIO, NMF and other such think tanks of littoral States.
- **Community Empowerment.** Community led mass educational and training effort.
- **Maritime Domain Awareness Fusion Projects.** Close interaction and sharing of MDA data between CRIMARIO II and IFC-IOR.
- **Capacity and Capability Building.** Provisioning of MCS infrastructure and its exploitation training to the maritime security agencies.
- **Establishment of Inter-Government Coordination.** Facilitated by respective think tanks and academia.<sup>5</sup>

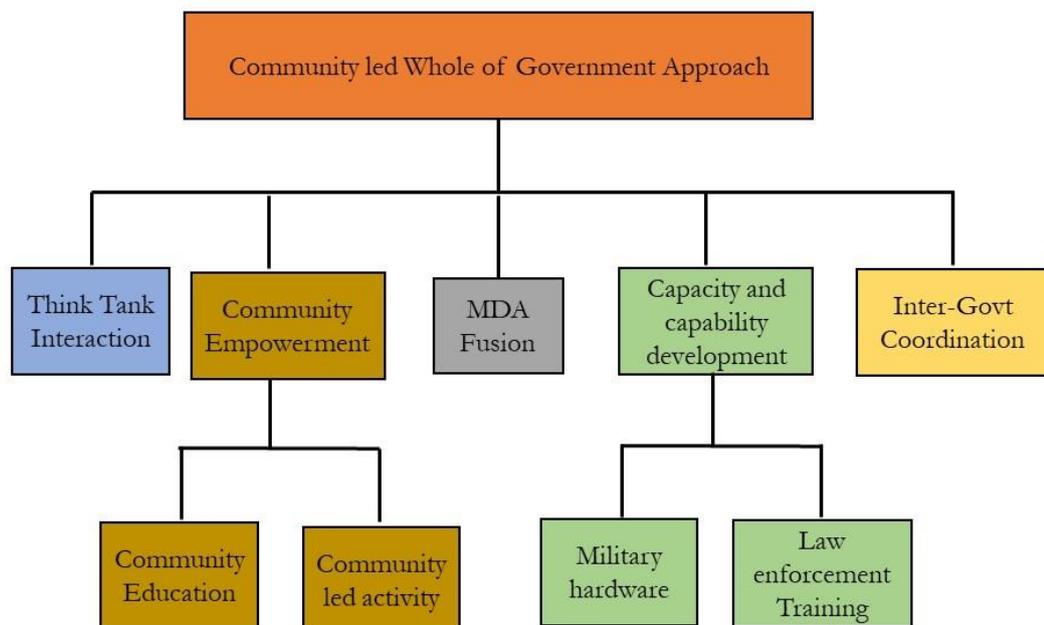


Fig 1: Source - Author

<sup>5</sup> Word count-516

## **About the Author**

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