



RIS
Research and Information System
for Developing Countries
विकासशील देशों की अनुसंधान एवं सूचना प्रणाली



AIC COMMENTARY

No. 52, November 2024

The Future of Regional Maritime Information and Intelligence Sharing in the Indian Ocean

David Brewster*

Technological change in sensing and computer analytics is creating a new information rich environment in the maritime domain. This provides new tools and options for many countries to enhance their maritime domain awareness (MDA). These developments will have important consequences for the ways in which countries in the Indian Ocean and elsewhere share information and cooperate to provide maritime security.

The Indian Ocean is the ‘wild west’ of the world’s oceans. It is a maritime space where multiple maritime security threats and challenges have the potential to affect regional security and stability and interfere with some of the most important of the world’s trading lanes. Maritime security threats in the Indian Ocean include piracy and insurgent attacks, drug smuggling, people smuggling, illegal fishing and shipping accidents, in addition to environmental threats and the impacts of climate change.

These threats can only be addressed if Indian Ocean states are able to establish maritime domain awareness. Indeed, MDA is an essential foundation for any country to properly govern their maritime jurisdictions and contribute to maritime security in the broader region. Only by understanding what is occurring in their maritime domain can maritime law enforcement agencies do something about it.

MDA requires mechanisms for sharing of information among their maritime agencies, including navies, coast guards and numerous civilian authorities that have responsibilities in

* Senior Research Fellow, National Security College, Australian National University. This commentary is based on author’s speech delivered at the 6th EAS conference on Maritime Security Cooperation held during July 4-5, 2024. Views are author’s own.

the maritime domain (e.g. police, fisheries, shipping and environmental protection agencies). But the huge size of the oceans means that no country can act on its own. Countries can only realistically develop MDA through sharing maritime information and intelligence with their neighbours and other key stakeholders.¹

Over the last decade or more, Indian Ocean countries have given significant focus to developing regional information and intelligence sharing arrangements to achieve MDA.

The Current State of Regional Architecture in MDA

In the 20th century, MDA systems were largely naval operations, principally relying on data provided by naval sources. But events earlier this century led to changes in this traditional approach.

For Australia, 9/11 and the challenges of terrorism and illegal immigration led to a realisation that a whole of government approach was required. For one thing, all government agencies, military and civil, with responsibilities in the maritime space were brought together in a single operations room, forcing them to share information to create a single operating picture and then cooperate in a joint response to threats. Information is also sourced from many other stakeholders, such as shipping companies and international partners.

For India the turning point was the terrorist attacks in Mumbai in 2008, which led India to take a whole of nation approach in MDA, which is currently being developed into a whole of government approach.

In recent years there has also been a realisation of potential benefits from the establishment of regional information sharing centres (IFCs). Singapore was the first to create a regional information sharing centre in 2009. In the Western Indian Ocean, a regional information sharing arrangement was established in Madagascar in 2016 and India opened the Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) in 2017.

The idea is that if a whole of nation approach to MDA is good, then a whole of region approach in which nations can share information and intelligence must be even better. The approach used in the IFC-IOR and Madagascar more or less followed the Singapore model of channelling information through International Liaison Officers, rather than directly connecting partner countries through a network.

¹ See generally, David Brewster, “Give light, and the darkness will disappear: Australia’s quest for maritime domain awareness in the Indian Ocean,” *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* (2018), Vol.14, No.3, pp.296-314.

A New Information and Intelligence Rich Environment

However, this model for information sharing through regional IFCs is now facing significant disruption. Technological developments have led to a massive increase in data sources and analytical tools in respect of the maritime domain.²

This includes a massive increase in satellite based sensing, including through optical, radio frequency and synthetic aperture radar sensors from Low Earth Orbit satellites operated by governments, international organisations and private companies. These provide large amounts of data, often at relatively low cost and close to real time, making it much easier for MDA users to identify and investigate vessels of interest.

In addition, there are a range of new analytical tools, including AI, that can correlate different sources of data and analyse vessel behaviour.

This data being made available through state-sponsored web-based platforms such as SeaVision and IORIS, but also increasingly through platforms sponsored by private companies and NGOs such as Skylight, Hawkeye 360, Windward, Starboard and Global Fishing Watch.

Collectively these new web-based platforms can provide a virtual deluge of data and intelligence being made available directly to MDA users. We can only expect that the amount of satellite-based data to grow significantly and be supplemented by huge amounts of data from a new host of new surface and undersea sensors.

These developments promise to significantly change the way that maritime information and intelligence is shared in our region. The sheer quantity of data available through online platforms, much of it available in near real time and at low cost is highly attractive to national authorities.

Future of Regional Information Sharing Arrangements

What do these developments mean for the future shape of regional information and intelligence sharing arrangements? For one thing, national MDA centres and maritime enforcement agencies will have much greater access to maritime information and intelligence from a wide range of sources.

There is likely to be greater reliance on open source information and intelligence from a range of sources, including more private companies and NGOs. There is likely to be relatively reduced reliance on classified or official sources. The availability of analytical tools may also reduce the need for large numbers of intelligence analysts.

² See David Brewster and Anthony Bergin, “AI revolutionises maritime intelligence” 24 July 2024. <https://nsc.anu.edu.au/content-centre/article/opinion/ai-revolutionises-maritime-intelligence>

Indeed, future maritime governance may often rely on, say, a naval lieutenant with a laptop rather than traditional large operations rooms.

These developments could be seen as the democratisation of information and intelligence, making it easier for smaller or less developed countries to build their own MDA capabilities. Whereas MDA centres were once the province of wealthy or large countries, we are seeing many smaller countries in our region building their own sovereign national MDA capabilities. Indeed, we should welcome the development of sovereign national capabilities as the cornerstone of regional maritime governance.

What does this mean for regional information sharing centres? The future of information and intelligence sharing is likely to be more federated than hierarchical in nature. Already the regional fusion centres supply only a small proportion of information and intelligence used by national enforcement authorities, and that proportion is likely to fall.

For their part, regional IFCs will need to evolve and adapt to this new information rich environment. They are not likely to be a principal source of *operational* intelligence for national MDA centres. But regional IFCs can still play key roles in the future MDA architecture, by focusing on the things they do best. For one thing, regional IFCs can be valuable sources of *strategic* intelligence, that is in tracking and understanding broad trends in threats in the region.³

The presence of international liaison officers (ILOs) at regional IFCs also provides many opportunities. I understand that IFC-IOR currently has 16-17 ILOs and there are plans for up to perhaps 40 ILOs in future. Currently ILOs are seen as conduits of data to and from partner countries. But ILOs should perhaps be seen less as a conduits of data and more as valuable *coordination mechanism for responses*. The presence of large numbers of ILOs in Delhi, Singapore and Madagascar could provide extraordinary opportunities to enhance cooperation that need to be explored.

In short, we are seeing major changes in how maritime information and intelligence is shared among MDA users which will significantly impact the region's MDA. The new information rich environment will significantly democratise access to information and intelligence, especially for smaller or less developed countries. It also means that regional IFCs may need to evolve and adapt to new ways of supporting regional security.

³ For a discussion on the differences between operational intelligence and strategic intelligence, see Patrick F. Walsh & Mark Harrison, "Strategic intelligence practice in the Australian intelligence community: evolution, constraints and progress", *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol. 36 No. 5 (2021), pp.660-675.

About AIC



RIS

Research and Information System
for Developing Countries

विकासशील देशों की अनुसंधान एवं सूचना प्रणाली

Considering the work of the ASEAN-India Eminent Persons Group (AIEPG), and its Report with recommendations for forging a closer partnership for peace, progress and shared prosperity, the Heads of the State/Government of ASEAN and India at the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit 2012, held at New Delhi on 19-20 December 2012, recommended the establishment of ASEAN-India Centre (AIC), which was formally inaugurated by the Hon'ble External Affairs Minister of the Government of India on 21 June 2013 at RIS. AIC serves as a resource centre for ASEAN Member States and India to fill the knowledge gaps that currently limit the opportunities for cooperation. AIC works with the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Government of India and undertakes evidence-based policy research and provide policy recommendations.

AIC Commentary Series Editor: Dr Pankaj Vashisht, AIC at RIS, New Delhi

Contact us at:

ASEAN-India Centre (AIC)
Research and Information System of Developing Countries (RIS)
Zone-IV-B, Fourth Floor, India Habitat Centre, Lodhi Road
New Delhi – 110003, India
Tel. +91-11-24682177-80
Fax: +91-11-24682173-74
E-mail: aic@ris.org.in
Visit our website at: <http://aic.ris.org.in>

@AIC_aseanindia

