

Maritime Terrorism in the Indian Ocean Region

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Abstract

With the advent of growing influence of violent non-state actors coupled with the rise in political instability, there has been a rise in critical issues such as piracy, terrorism, drug trafficking, etc. in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Terrorist activities have now become multidimensional, with organisations acquiring air, water, cyber, and land attack capabilities and tactics. Traditionally, incapability and incapacity have largely hindered most terrorist groups from sea-based attack. The geographical location, maritime tradition of the state, unstable government, etc. are some of the factors that lead organisations to opt for sea-based attacks which in turn can have disastrous sequences ranging from disrupting the livelihoods of the seafarers to disrupting maritime supply chains which in turn, affects the global economy. The Indian Ocean Region has attracted much geopolitical and security interests in the twenty-first century, while also becoming a major focal point for a number of maritime security threats. The absence of a great power as well as the presence of several critical Sea Lanes of Communications (SLOCs) and choke points which the international economy firmly relies upon, have contributed to making the IOR as a breeding ground for major terror organisations. Maritime terrorism has emerged as one of the region's major and persistent challenges which has led the regional states as well as the international community to come forward with certain initiatives to combat the threats posed by it. This paper will explain the definition of maritime terrorism and throw light on why terrorists choose sea-based terrorism. This paper will also assess the maritime terror attacks and the terror organisations involved in the region. In addition, the paper aims to analyse the threat, vulnerability, and implications of maritime terrorism in the IOR. This paper also intends to examine the various counter-terrorism measures taken in the Indian Ocean Region.

Key Words: Maritime Terrorism, Indian Ocean Region, Geopolitical Competition, Terror Organisation, Political Instability, Safe Havens, Piracy and Sea Lanes of Communication

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The Concept of Maritime Terrorism

There are numerous debates about defining terrorism as a concept and scholars have struggled to produce a clear definition. Terrorism is defined in Oxford Dictionary as "the use of violent action to achieve political goals or to compel a government to act" (OED, 1989). There are numerous interpretations of maritime terrorism, just as scholars have struggled to define terrorism.

The Definitions

Maritime terrorism cannot be classified into a single watertight compartment. There is no one universal definition for maritime terrorism. Rather, it differs from the various interpretations offered by academicians. One interpretation is:

The undertaking of terrorist acts and activities within the maritime environment, using or against vessels or fixed platforms at sea or in port; or against any of their passengers or personnel; or against any of their facilities or settlements, including tourist resorts, port areas, and port towns or cities (Chalk, 2008).

In general, these are normal conditions that can be categorised under the components of maritime terrorism, such as

- Terrorist activity occurs in the maritime environment;
- The sea is used as a medium for terrorist activity;
- Terrorist attacks or hijacking of maritime assets such as ports, civilian vessels, etc.
- Attacks on naval assets such as naval bases, warships etc

Terrorism is frequently studied by examining its root causes; maritime terrorism has a similar link, but it is investigated based on two components: ideology and capacity. The ability of an organization to act is referred to as its capacity, which includes sponsorship (if the organization is large enough, it will also receive funding from state actors) and the terror group's networking (few terror groups have links with pirates, drug traffickers, etc., which they require for terror financing, or few organizations have high networking with other prominent organizations) (Hastings, 2014). When a terrorist organization has a high capability which includes high funding, networking and sea faring skills, it is more likely to conduct terrorist activities at sea. On the other hand, ideology and intentions of the terror group also plays a significant role bringing terror at the sea.

The majority of researchers regard terrorism as an ideologically motivated activity. The organisation they choose shapes 'how they speak their oath': few organisations use grievances and ideological claims to justify the use of violence. The example of Al-Qaeda attacking America is founded on a notion that, "We say that the prohibition against the blood of women, children, and the elderly is not an absolute prohibition" (Hastings, 2014) and declared war on America because America's forces oppressed and attacked Muslims. There is mounting evidence that as an ideology becomes more rigid, terrorists look for another way to counter their opponents. In general, maritime terrorism is relatively costly for terrorist organisations because the terrorist may lack the maritime capabilities to attack at sea, as well as require additional logistical and training competence (Ronzitti, 2010). Terrorist organizations choose maritime domain as an attack mode if they have the necessary capabilities and network connections. Ideology alone cannot persuade a terrorist organisation to conduct maritime attacks.

Factors Leading to Maritime Terrorism

According to Martin N. Murphy, there are seven significant factors that lead extremists to focus on sea-based terrorist attacks: legal and jurisdictional weakness, geographic necessity, inadequate security, secure base areas, maritime tradition, charismatic and effective leadership, and state support.

- **State support and authority weakness:** Political advantage necessitated certain states by providing assistance such as bases for terrorists on their land and territorial sea, as well as financial aid; such government support provided them with safe haven. In some cases, terrorists seek out weak governments and settle in areas where the government is unable to expel terrorist organisations due to domestic conditions, and these areas eventually turn out to be safe havens. These terrorist organisations will launch maritime attacks from the Exclusive Economic Zones of these countries (EEZ) (Murphy, 2007).
- **Geography:** Terrorist groups with access to these seas would look for terrorist attacks over time. Because there were several blockades inside the island, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) established a special maritime troop known as the Sea Tiger (Kadal Puli). Because of the organization's vulnerability and geographical location, they were compelled to advance their maritime capabilities, and they are now one of

the most prominent maritime terror groups, frequently attacking the Sri Lankan Navy (SLN) and engaging in criminal activities throughout the Indian Ocean (Murphy, 2007).

- **Inadequate Security:** When these regions have adequate security, it will be difficult to carry out their attacks in that region, they need to come up with new techniques as the securitisation increases. For example, due to the SLN's inability to provide adequate security in its region, the sea tigers, the LTTE's maritime wing, have dominated Sri Lanka. At the same time, Fatah, a Palestinian terrorist organization that engages in such practices, forced Israel to impose stringent measures on their ocean. Aside from these organisations, there are a few other organisations in South East Asia where the Sea Lane of Communication has become too congested to regulate and terror groups have taken over, such as the Jemaah Islamiah, Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (GAM/Free Aceh Movement) and others (Murphy, 2007).
- **Secure base areas:** Any terrorist attack would necessitate a base area where groups could plan, rest, train, and receive logistical support. The group cannot live in the sea permanently and rely on boats; they must rely on nearby bases for logistical and other support. When the 2004 tsunami struck the coasts of Sri Lanka and Indonesia, most of the equipment of LTTE and Jemaah Islamiyah got destroyed and their terror operation got temporarily halted. This demonstrates how the secure base enables such terror operations to occur (Murphy, 2007).
- **Maritime Tradition:** A maritime terror attack cannot be carried out by all terror groups; it requires specialized skills. The groups should have proper training before venturing into the sea; the best examples of such groups are the LTTE and ASG, both of which have a long history of seafaring and thus have extensive knowledge of the maritime domain (Murphy, 2007).
- **Charismatic and Effective Leader:** When it comes to maritime terrorism, Abd al-Rahman al-Nashiri is regarded as the mastermind behind the majority of the Al-Qaeda terrorist organization's maritime terror. The Al-Qaeda group, which did not possess most of the aforementioned capabilities, carried out two successful terrorist attacks at sea, while a few others did not yield the desired results; this was due to the personal charisma of the maritime strategist Al-Nashiri. Most of the sea-based attacks of

Al- Qaeda's group were drastically reduced following his and other prominent leaders' arrest. (Murphy, 2007).

Threat, Vulnerability, and Implications of Maritime Terrorism in IOR

The Indian Ocean, the world's third-largest ocean, serves as a great connector, stretching from the Cape of Good Hope in the far south to the Strait of Malacca in the east and the Gulf of Suez in the west, and is home to vital Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCS) that carry one-third of global trade. The shift in global attention from the Atlantic and Pacific to the Indian Ocean region (IOR) has increased its geopolitical significance in economic, military, political, and strategic terms. The IOR was once known as a zone of peace, but it has since evolved into a competitive, cooperative, and converging region (Khurana, 2016).

The Indian Ocean region is a closed ocean with few entry points, rich in diverse regions such as East Africa, West Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, and home to a sizable population (35.7% of the global population). It is a region with both a colonial legacy and a burden; it was formerly known as British Lake. This region is rich in natural resources and energy. It also serves as an important supply chain in the maritime industry. The Indian Ocean contains major communication sea lanes as well as major chokepoints, such as the Strait of Malacca, Bab-el Mandab, and the Strait of Hormoz, through which 80 percent of the oil and primary commodity trade passes. The global economy is built on trade, and IOR facilitates it. The presence of such a busy trade route elevates IOR to geopolitical prominence. The countries in this region are known for producing iron and oil, and it is rich in natural resources such as oil reserves, energy reserves, and the export of fishing industries to various other countries, which increases its value (Parmar, 2014).

As the classical geopolitical thinker Mahan once stated, "Whoever controls the Indian Ocean control Asia." This statement is truly relevant in the current scenario, as even Cohen, when explaining the geostrategic regions, considers the Indian Ocean Realm, along with the trade-dependent maritime realm and the Eurasian Realm, to be the emerging region. This demonstrates the Indian Ocean's importance. Where we can see China, the United States, France, and other European countries' policies attempting to influence this ocean. Despite India's efforts to influence the region through policies such as SAGAR (Security and Growth of All in the Region), net security providers, and so on, there is no single major power in this region to deal with all the emerging challenges. The lack of a dominant power in the region has

resulted in power struggles and well as terror organisations targeting the great power vessels in this region. This importance of the IOR makes it more vulnerable; the presence of the busiest SLOCS, unstable governments and having few shatter belt, a rich resource base, and the absence of a great power within this region all add to its threats and vulnerabilities. These conditions entice terrorist groups to operate in the region and carry out their criminal activities. Money laundering also occurs through the water, which is how the majority of terrorist organisations are funded (Potgieter, 2012).

The threat posed by maritime terrorists can also be seen through their *modus operandi*, which can be divided into surface threat and subsurface threat. The surface threat includes attacks on stationary maritime assets, such as high-value coastal infrastructure, suicide boats colliding with high-value moving vessels with dangerous materials such as ammonium nitrate, and the use of weapons of mass destruction. Subsurface attacks include the use of sea mines and crude improvised explosive devices (IED). The use of 'human torpedoes,' in which the sea diver places limpet-type mines on the ship's underwater section, is another method commonly used by the LTTE organisation (Khurana C. G., 2013).

An increase in maritime terrorism would have several consequences for other sectors in this region. For example, if we see economically, a blown-up ship or container could block the harbour for several days, affecting global trade. The cost of transportation is covered by insurance companies. If there is a disruption in the SLOC (Sea Lanes of Communication), it could affect global trade and have economic ramifications, because when an area is more prone to such attacks, they will demand more money, which can lead to an increase in the price of commodities in the region, as most of the countries here are either dependent on sea or developing economies. We could say that maritime terrorism has the potential to disrupt global trade. Apart from the economic implications, another area of intervention could be the presence of a great power, as there is no such great power in this region, and because it affects the global market, most of the great powers would try to dominate this region, and we could see the presence of the European Union (EU), America, China's growing presence in this region. And, because of the presence of terrorist groups, political and social instability will prevail.

One of the reasons such acts occur in this region is the region's lack of great power to regulate them. Because of security flaws, attackers believe this is the best region to plan such operations. One of the best examples is the USS Cole, which was attacked in the Indian Ocean rather than the Atlantic or Pacific Oceans. As terrorists become more technologically sophisticated,

countries' existing technologies will be ineffective in assessing and countering terrorist attacks. The use of Unmanned Underwater Vehicles (UUV) and the remotely accessed offensive capabilities makes it hard to detect any such terror operation. Another major concern is the environmental impact. When terrorists attack a ship, there is a high likelihood of oil spills, and if the ships are carrying weapons of mass destruction in the ocean, the spillage of hazardous material will impact aquatic life, as well as the rate of fish catchment for the fishers, and eventually their lives will be impacted. We could say that the implication of terrorism is a never-ending vicious cycle, which is interconnected.

Sea-Based Attacks in the Indian Ocean Region

Compared to all other terrorist activities, maritime terrorism accounts for only a small percentage. But it is really important to analyse what makes the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) vulnerable to maritime terrorism. A region with multicultural ethnicity as well as border skirmishes, unstable governments, state sponsorship of terrorism, peculiar geographical location to sea, and maritime tradition all make it appealing to terrorist groups to conduct sea-based terrorism, making the IOR vulnerable (Steele, 2017).

Certain sea-based terror attacks have occurred in the IOR, which fall under the definition of maritime terrorism. Terrorist attacks on the Pakistani Naval Ship (PNS) Zulfikar in the southern Indian Ocean in 2014 were carried out by the Tehrik-i-Taliban with the assistance of Al-Qaeda. Pakistani advanced intelligence failed to intercept the attack. This is a perfect example of how a radical organisation can attack a country's naval assets (Singh, 2019).

It is said that one of the main goals of the terrorist organization is to instil fear. This attack created fear among all the countries in the IOR. Another major incident occurred in 2011 at PNS Mehran, where the maritime surveillance aircraft was destroyed. Following these attacks, an IS terror attack detonated a bomb on Dhaka's naval base, even though the target was a mosque but ended up hitting the naval assets. Another attack occurred in India's financial capital Mumbai, where the terrorist organization Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) used the sea as a conduit to enter the coast and carry out multiple terrorist attacks that killed 160 people. Another major concern rises from the LTTE in Sri Lanka. A well-known seafaring terrorist organisation that began as an insurgent group and has evolved into a terrorist organisation. LTTE has been engaged in criminal and terrorist activity in the IOR at a large scale.

According to the RAND report, there were 200 actual and attempted attacks on ships in the Indian Ocean's south-eastern region between 2014 and 2018. The Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), a

radical Islamic group, carried out one of the deadliest terrorist attacks on the Philippine coast in 2004 on Superferry 14, killing 110 passengers and crew. ASG has been involved in several criminal and terrorist activities along the Indonesian coast. Apart from ASG, other groups with close ties to IS include Jemaah Islamiyah and GAM. In the Southwest part of the IOR, one of the incidents that drew global attention to maritime terrorism was the Al-Qaeda attack on the USS Cole in Aden harbour in October 2000. Due to the political and domestic turmoil in this region, there is a substantial risk of maritime terrorism and with the presence of two important choke points, the Bab-al Mandab and the Strait of Hormuz, this region is more vulnerable because it is one of the busiest SLOC.

The Terrorism-Piracy Nexus

This is one of the areas where scholars are conducting research, and there have been a few studies that have found a strong link between pirates and terrorist organizations. Most of the terror organizations are not well equipped with maritime capabilities, which led to operation failure. One such example was the failure of attack on the American Destroyer vessel USS Sullivan by using suicide boat. However, due to the suicide boat's heavy load of weapons, it sank, and a maritime terrorist attack was prevented. It was due to lack of seafaring experience that the operation failed. To avoid such instances, terrorist groups started to link up with pirates. The terrorist piracy link was explained by Peter Chalk as "a higher rate of pirate attacks also applies to terrorism, including inadequate coastal surveillance, lax port security, a profusion of targets, the overwhelming reliance of maritime trade on passage through congested chokepoints (where vessels are vulnerable to attacks), and an increased tendency to staff vessels with skeleton crews." We could say that the government's gap and weak policy allows for "the opportunity to move, hide, and strike in a manner that is not possible in a terrestrial theatre" (Chalk, 2008).

The ASG funded the Somali pirates with around \$1.2 million to carry out the attacks, even though their area of collaboration is uncertain. According to the United Nations (UN) 2017 report on piracy, ASG has been assisting Somalian pirates by smuggling arms and ammunition. The line between pirates and terror groups is becoming increasingly blurred.

Counter-Maritime Terrorism Measures Taken in the Indian Ocean Region

There are many measures taken by the governments to counter maritime terrorist attacks. The examination on the attack pattern and counter measures results in initiatives like global war on terrorism after such attacks. The systemic failure is however, not looked at. For example, until

the 9/11 attack, the United States was not concerned about terrorist attacks; similarly, it took certain nations in this region, such as India's 26/11 attack to raise maritime domain awareness and take certain regulative measures in the region. Fewer counter-maritime terrorism operations and initiatives have been launched in this region.

Following the 9/11 attacks in America, the International Maritime Organization put certain regulations in place to help detect and deter threats to international shipping, which resulted in the creation of the International Ship and Port Facility Security (ISPS) code. It was an addition to the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) convention. Following the implementation of the ISPS, the security of the ports, port workers, seafarers, ships, and so on was prioritised in order to avoid any security threats. According to ISPS standards, the ship has a Ship Security Alert System, which sends a security alert to the shore in the event of a threat, as well as an Automatic Identification System (AIS) that allows the ship to be tracked. This would go through subjects such as "survey, verification, certification, and control" in the event of a sea attack. Despite the fact that there are numerous international conventions on terrorism, the SUA convention focuses on combating terrorism at sea. There are regional initiatives in addition to the global initiatives (Singh, 2019).

According to the Institute for Security Studies, 'the Indian Ocean Region has complex sub-regional geopolitical and geostrategic associations.' There is still cooperation among nations, such as the Indian Navy, which conducts patrols in coordination with Indonesia, Myanmar, Thailand, and Bangladesh (CORPAT) across the IOR. The White shipping agreement is another significant initiative. Where colour codes are assigned to ships, it has aided security agencies in regulating the maritime domain as well as raising maritime terrorist awareness by sharing information from most countries. Following the 26/11 attack, India took several initiatives to ensure the safety of the IOR, including the establishment of the Information Fusion Centre (IFC) in Gurugram, which houses all information regarding the IOR with a special focus on Indian waters and is an adjunct to the Indian Navy's Information Management and Analysis Centre (IMAC), where data has been 'collated, assembled, analysed, and shared' with other countries in this region related to the maritime domain. The Indian government also mandated fishers to install a transponder system, and biometric cards were issued to fishers, who can be referred to as the "eyes and ears" of maritime security. The National Committee on Strengthening Maritime and Coastal Security (NCSMCS) was established in India to address emerging threats on the coastal front. The formation of the National Maritime Commission,

which will serve as the maritime security coordinator, as well as policies such as the Act East, Security and Growth of All in the Region (SAGAR), SagarMala project, and others, demonstrate India's commitment to maritime awareness. India has also provided certain naval assets to the IOR island nations (Singh, 2019). Because majority of recent terrorist attacks have targeted naval assets and ports, the Minister of Home Affairs has deployed the Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) to major ports as a security force. The Indian Navy has deployed the Integrated Underwater Defence and Surveillance System (IUHDSS), a network of radars, electro-optical sensors, and sonars to aid in the detection of terrorist operations. To protect the region from maritime terrorism and other types of asymmetrical threats, India has conducted naval exercises with the majority of the countries here. (Steele, 2017).

Aside from India, Singapore has an effective agency known as the Singapore Maritime Crisis Centre (SMCC) that is responsible for combating terrorist attacks both on land and at sea. SMCC collaborates with other maritime agencies to assimilate intelligence, assess threats, and improve surveillance (Singh, 2019). One of the centre's major accomplishments was its ability to increase planning and interoperability with other security organisations while avoiding operational gaps.

Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia signed a trilateral agreement in 2017 to combat maritime terrorism, particularly in the Malacca Strait region, following the 2019 IS attack on Philippine boats in Malaysia. In addition, India and the Philippines signed a bilateral agreement in 2019 to ensure maritime security, specifically to combat maritime terrorism. The US (United States) has also carried out Operation Enduring Freedom Horn of Africa (OEF-HOA) to combat maritime terrorism in the region (Singh, 2019).

As previously stated, the majority of the countries in this region are still developing. Therefore, in order to combat maritime terrorism, state actors would require more capabilities. However, just as terrorist organisations conduct sea-based terrorism based on their capabilities, a nation can only counter such operations if they possess such assets. Aside from the lack of proper intelligence facilities and data collection methods, a few littoral states also face issues such as the lack of expertise in the field of counter-terrorism. Terrorist organisations' technologies are also rapidly evolving, and in order to counter them, state actors must develop necessary intelligence and surveillance technologies, which can be difficult for small states. So, all nations need to work collectively to combat terrorism.

Conclusion

Even though there are only small-scale maritime terrorist attacks due to a lack of capability and other factors, they are still common and the implications of such an attack can be enormous, having an individual, state, and international impact. The Indian Ocean region is vulnerable to maritime terrorism due to many factors, and it must address the challenges by combating terrorism at sea. This region faces challenges in combating terrorism due to a lack of great power in this region, highly modernised technological expertise to collect data, and political and economic instability. The Indian Ocean region needs to form a regional group to combat maritime terrorism because the existing organisations are diverse and dispersed. If ignored, maritime terrorism could become one of the region's most serious challenges. India has made several efforts to bring the countries in this region together in order to raise awareness of maritime security threats and combat maritime terrorism through naval exercises, the Information Fusion Centre, and Indian Navy policing in the IOR.

Several initiatives have been undertaken to secure the region. However, with newer threats emerging from the region, all efforts thus far have remained limited effects. As most terror groups are funded by state organisations, states should refuse to fund and sponsor terror groups, and small states should collaborate with big states to fight terrorists and share intelligence with small states. Individual countries are making efforts to combat terrorism, but the question remains as to how effective they are. The nations in this region must identify their vulnerabilities and work together to develop solutions to combat maritime terrorism. It is thus clear from the counter measures that most of the initiatives are ongoing from the western world or from the extra regional powers, who are unfamiliar to Indian Ocean. This makes the initiatives less effective. Solving issues such as terrorism needs grass root level reformation. India Navy has been actively involved in the countering maritime terrorism. Most of the efforts are tackled after any attack occurs. As mentioned in the above objectives, the ground level analyses of why the such organisations have moved to terrorism is less addressed, which need one need to focus. Indian Navy along with other nations of IOR, with no extra regional powers influence need to deal such challenges but cutting off the root causes, that is by identifying the reasons for the citizens to join such organisation and indulge in such activities.

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