



The Iran War and the Indian Ocean: Time to Rethink Regional Security

Arvind Raj



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By Arvind Raj

SYNOPSIS

The Iran War has shown that the Indian Ocean is no longer insulated from conflicts beyond its shores. The war has exposed the fragility of the rules-based order that littoral states have built to ensure security and prosperity. Regional organisations must strengthen the fragmenting international order, and ASEAN has a direct stake in this.

COMMENTARY

On 28 February 2026, the United States and Israel launched [Operation Epic Fury](#) – a coordinated strike on Iran's military facilities, political leadership, and nuclear sites. [Iran retaliated](#) against Israeli and US bases, and [energy infrastructure](#) in several Gulf states.

Although not the conflict's epicentre, the Indian Ocean has been significantly affected. On 4 March, a US Navy submarine sank the [Iranian frigate IRIS Dena](#) off Sri Lanka. On 20 March, Iran launched ballistic missiles at [Diego Garcia](#), a US-UK military base in the Indian Ocean. In April, the US Navy intercepted [at least three Iranian-flagged tankers](#) in Asian waters near India, Malaysia, and Sri Lanka. Most critically, the effective closure of the Strait of Hormuz – through which about [20 per cent of the world's seaborne oil](#) passes – has [sharply increased energy and food prices](#) across the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

The implications are clear: the IOR is entering a period of turbulence. The United States, the principal security guarantor, has taken unilateral actions that undermine regional security. India, the regional net security provider, has failed to fulfil its self-assigned role.

An Absence of Regional Leadership

Under the US-led post-World War II order, American power in the IOR provided regional public goods: secure sea lanes, freedom of navigation, transit rights, and extended deterrence. This framework underpinned a stable balance of power and the rules and norms that sustained regional stability.

However, American actions under Donald Trump, culminating in the Iran War, have raised serious questions about Washington's reliability as a security partner. For example, Iranian strikes on US facilities in the Gulf have challenged the long-held assumption that hosting US bases enhances deterrence. More fundamentally, the chief architect of the post-war order has become its primary disruptor.

This American unreliability must be weighed against India's inability to provide regional leadership. India has long regarded the Indian Ocean as its strategic backyard, an outlook rooted in geography, history, and naval primacy.

Since 2014, Modi's India has operationalised this through deeper regional engagement. India's multi-alignment strategy has strengthened partnerships with the United States, Israel, the Gulf states, and Iran. Through the 2015 SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) and the 2025 MAHASAGAR (Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions) initiatives, India has also positioned itself as a benign net security provider.

While these efforts have yielded gains, the Iran War exposed their limits. India remained silent about the initial US-Israeli strikes and the sinking of IRIS Dena. IRIS Dena, in particular, raised sharp [questions](#) about India's role as a net security provider: the ship, returning from an Indian-hosted naval exercise, was torpedoed in the Indian Ocean.

The incident exposed a deeper gap: India has no clear strategy for managing hard power, especially when a partner acts against its regional interests. It also failed to use its Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) chairmanship to convene littoral states and articulate a regional position.

Multi-alignment should, in theory, have enabled India to leverage its ties with all sides and to mediate more actively to reduce tensions. Instead, it prioritised its growing bilateral relationships with the United States and Israel and focused on immediate national interests, including safe passage for Indian-flagged tankers under [Operation Urja Suraksha](#).

In the absence of strong regional leadership and clear crisis-management rules, several Indian Ocean states negotiated directly with Tehran to secure safe passage. These arrangements implicitly accepted Iran's framing of transit through an international strait as a privilege to be granted or withheld, rather than a right of all nations under international law. This risks eroding the very principles on which they depend on for security and prosperity.

Revitalising Regional Frameworks – Does ASEAN Have a Role?

The war has underscored the importance of the IOR to ASEAN. Through various statements, including at the [48th ASEAN Summit](#), ASEAN has expressed concerns about unilateral actions that impede transit through the Strait of Hormuz and emphasised adherence to international law, especially UNCLOS. Some fear that condoning such actions would set a precedent for similar measures in Southeast Asian waters. This is why Singapore and Malaysia [reacted firmly](#) to suggestions of tolls in the Straits of Malacca.

ASEAN should not address the war's challenges in isolation from the broader Indian Ocean, as a stable IOR is indispensable to ASEAN's security and economic viability. ASEAN could promote a functioning security architecture through IORA, the most obvious vehicle, given that four ASEAN countries (Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand) are members.

There have been encouraging signs of institutional leadership within IORA. At the 9th Indian Ocean Conference, India emphasised the need to restore IORA's strategic importance by setting clear goals, including an IORA Action Plan for 2028-2032, and a possible IORA Leaders' Summit in 2027. At the 10th Indian Ocean Dialogue, Mauritius, which hosts IORA's headquarters, signalled its interest in serving as IORA Vice-Chair (2025-2027) and Chair (2027-2029).

However, IORA still faces financial and institutional constraints that limit its crisis response. A well-resourced secretariat would enable IORA to sustain peacetime work – confidence-building measures, working groups on shared challenges, and regular dialogue – thereby improving readiness for future crises.

ASEAN could invest more substantively in IORA's secretariat through personnel, funding, and political support. It could also establish IORA-ASEAN Working Groups on overlapping challenges – energy security, chokepoint management, maritime crime, and humanitarian assistance – to reinforce the rules and norms needed for a stable IOR. These initiatives could begin at the Track 1.5 or 2 levels, with policy-oriented proposals eventually advanced to Track 1.

At the minilateral level, ASEAN should engage middle powers with enduring interests in the IOR. Australia's engagement, through initiatives such as [AUKUS and stronger defence ties with India](#), reflects recognition that the IOR is no longer peripheral. France, with its territories of Réunion and Mayotte, has built [maritime ties with India](#) through its Maritime Cooperation Dialogue and various forms of logistical and operational cooperation.

Drawing on its tradition of “omni-enmeshment”, ASEAN should work with these like-minded states to build a denser web of regional partnerships, raise the stakes for multiple actors in the IOR, and foster a more rules-based security architecture.

Arvind Raj is an Associate Research Fellow at the Centre for Multilateralism Studies, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU).

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798

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