

*Moutusi Islam***INDIAN OCEAN RIM ASSOCIATION (IORA) AT 20: AN ASSESSMENT****Abstract**

The paper attempts to assess the performance of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) in the last 20 years since its birth in 1997 and foresees future challenges and opportunities for member states including Bangladesh. As a bridge between Asia and Europe, the Indian Ocean has become the new centre of global strategic and economic salience. IORA is the prime regional organisation devoted to the governance of this area. Despite its relative success, the potentials of IORA are believed to be remarkable. The organisation has provided a platform for cooperation in the areas of maritime safety and security, trade and investment facilitation, fisheries management, disaster risk management, academic, science and technology cooperation, tourism and cultural exchanges and blue economy, etc. Moreover, IORA has immense potential to become an effective regional forum, as observed in its 2017 Leaders' Summit. However, the paper argues that vast area and diversity of the region, presence of numerous sub-regional and regional groupings, absence of influential leaders, exclusion of potential member states and lack of resources are some of the key challenges for IORA to become an effective regional organisation. At the end, the analysis exhibits some ways to strengthen IORA, *i.e.*, increasing the role of major powers of the Indian Ocean littorals, creating a distinct identity, engaging the dialogue partners and greater grassroots involvement.

1. Introduction

The end of the Cold War has witnessed a shift in the focus of global attention to the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). It has become one of the hubs for political, strategic and economic activities in today's world. Strategic analyst like Robert Kaplan has identified the Indian Ocean as the centre stage of twenty first century.¹ The most important trade routes pass through this region. The Indian Ocean provides the predominant passage for oil from the Persian Gulf to various destinations all over the world. Hence, it is not surprising to see the Indian Ocean to be filled by more naval and coast guard ships of those belonging to the resident countries as well as those belonging to external countries who have traditionally maintained their presence in this sea. The Indian Ocean Region also hosts non-traditional security threats such as

Moutusi Islam is Research Officer at Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS). Her e-mail address is: moutusi.ir63@gmail.com

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¹ Robert D. Kaplan, *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power*, New York, USA: Random House, 2010.

piracy, smuggling and transnational crime. The region is highly susceptible to natural disasters and will be at the forefront of future food and water security issues. Besides, it will be among the regions of the world that might be dramatically affected by the consequences of climate change, including rising sea levels and warming ocean temperatures.

Due to a plethora of challenges, regionalism in the Indian Ocean Region remains underdeveloped compared to other regions. While there are a number of sub-regional groups, the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) remains the only grouping with a pan-regional agenda. It is due to the differences in national priorities and wide asymmetries in capacities that underpinned the Indian Ocean Rim Initiative in March 1995 and the creation of the IORA (then known as the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation) two years later, in March 1997. It consists of coastal states bordering the Indian Ocean and brings together representatives of government, business and academia for promoting co-operation and closer interaction among them. IORA countries encompass about a third of the world's population and are responsible for about 10 per cent of global Gross Domestic Product (GDP); 40 per cent of worldwide trade passes through the Indian Ocean and trade among IORA members amounts to approximately a quarter of their world trade.²

Ironically, IORA could not make significant contributions so far in terms of achieving something noteworthy. Christian Wagner observes that the actual impact of IORA had been relatively small.³ Nevertheless, if recent developments are considered, there are reasons to be optimistic because conditions are far more favourable now than ever before to strengthen the organisation and to significantly boost its role. In a marked departure from the original charter, six priority areas were identified including security issues which signified a paradigm shift in the perception of the forum members. Moreover, the first ever meeting of the leaders of IORA member states was held in March 2017 celebrating its twentieth anniversary. The event prompted much attention from the media, academics and policy makers worldwide that some analysts remarked that "2017 might be the year of recovery of IORA emerging as a proactive regional organisation".⁴ The Prime Minister of Bangladesh also attended the first IORA Leaders' Summit in Jakarta projecting an important statement of Bangladesh's intent to be an active player in the Indian Ocean Region.

Against this backdrop, the paper seeks to understand what IORA is all about, what are the opportunities it may offer to the member states including Bangladesh and what are the challenges it is facing? The paper is divided into six

² Jivanta Schottli, *Power, Politics and Maritime Governance in the Indian Ocean*, New York, USA: Routledge, 2015, p. 4.

³ Christian Wagner, "The Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Co-operation (IOR-ARC): the Futile Quest for Regionalism?", *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, Vol. 9, No. 1, June 2013, pp. 6-16.

⁴ Barana Waidyatilaka, "The Indian Ocean Rim Association", *ISAS Working Paper*, No. 262, July 2017, p. 1.

sections. After introduction, the second section traces the background of IORA and highlights its institutional structure. The third section analyses the opportunities for IORA and illustrates how member states including Bangladesh can benefit from the organisation. Challenges for IORA to become a successful regional organisation are identified in section four. The possible options to strengthen IORA are discussed in section five followed by concluding remarks in section six. Methodologically, the paper is qualitative in nature based on both primary and secondary data. The paper reviews literature comprised of books, journal articles, news clipping, seminar papers and internet based articles, etc. Besides, it includes data and ideas collected from expert interviews.

2. Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA): An Overview

The end of the Cold War brought remarkable shifts in the economic and security milieu of East Asia and the steady rise of regional multilateralism in the Asia-Pacific. Consequently, it promoted other regions to pursue similar attempts, IORA being one of them.⁵ In 1994, Nelson Mandela suggested the creation of a single platform for socio-economic cooperation and other peaceful endeavours for countries of the Indian Ocean Rim.⁶ As Nelson Mandela put it during a visit to India in 1995:

“The natural urge of the facts of history and geography should broaden itself to include the concept of an Indian Ocean Rim for socio-economic co-operation and other peaceful endeavours. Recent changes in the international system demand that the countries of the Indian Ocean shall become a single platform.”⁷

This is the sentiment and rationale that underpinned IORA. On 29-31 March 1995, the Mauritian Government convened a meeting with representatives from the government, business sectors and academia of seven countries to discuss the enhancement of economic cooperation among nations of the Indian Ocean Rim. The IOR-ARC was formally launched at the first Ministerial Meeting in Mauritius on 6-7 March 1997.⁸ This meeting adopted the charter and determined the administrative and procedural framework within which the organisation would develop. Bangladesh applied to become a member in 1998 during the second Ministerial Meeting of the body held in March in Maputu, Mozambique. Bangladesh’s application for membership was accepted in September 1999.⁹ Since then Bangladesh has been playing a significant role in the forum.

⁵ G. V. C. Naidu, “Prospects for IOR-ARC Regionalism: An Indian Perspective”, in Dennis Rumley and Timothy Doyle (eds.), *Indian Ocean Regionalism*, New York, USA: Routledge, 2015, p. 25.

⁶ Denis Venter, “The Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Co-operation: Reality or Imagery?”, *African Quarterly*, Vol. 41, No. 3, 2001, p. 1.

⁷ Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire*, London, UK: Harvard University Press, 2006, p. 281.

⁸ V. Jayanth, “IOR-ARC Meeting Ends in Consensus”, *World Focus*, April 1997.

⁹ “Two-day Minister Level Meeting of IOR-ARC Begins in Muscat Today”, *The Daily Star*, 22 January 2000.

Presently, IORA has 21 members, including Australia, Bangladesh, Comoros, India, Indonesia, Iran, Kenya, Malaysia, Madagascar, Mauritius, Mozambique, Oman, Seychelles, Singapore, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Somalia, Tanzania, Thailand, United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Yemen. Taking cue from Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to gainfully engage certain major outside powers with strong stakes in the region, seven states including China, Egypt, France, Japan, Germany, the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US) are made dialogue partners. There are two observers namely, Indian Ocean Research Group (IORG) and Indian Ocean Tourism Organisation (IOTO).¹⁰



Source: Available at <https://yourfreetemplates.com/free-indian-ocean-map-template/>, accessed on 28 February 2017.

As far as the structure of the association is concerned, the Council of Ministers (COM), comprising foreign ministers, constitutes the highest decision-making body and meets biennially. However, the Committee of Senior Officials that oversees the overall functioning is the key force behind the association. The Indian Ocean Rim Academic Group (IORAG) is designed to be its intellectual arm and the Indian Ocean Rim Business Forum (IORBF) represents the private sector. The Working Group on Trade and Investment (WGTI) comprises representatives from governments for trade and economic cooperation.¹¹ The IORA Secretariat is located in Mauritius and is headed by the Secretary General, who is appointed by the Council of Foreign Ministers.¹²

¹⁰ Members of Indian Ocean Rim Association, Official Website, available at <http://www.iora.net/about-us/Members.aspx>, accessed on 28 February 2017.

¹¹ Indian Ocean Rim Association, Official Website, available at <http://www.iora.net.aspx>, accessed on 28 February 2017.

¹² IORA Secretariat, Official Website, available at <http://www.iora.net/secretariat.aspx>, accessed on 28

In recent years, IORA has gained tremendous momentum. The breadth and depth of regional cooperation has been continually expanded. The IOR-ARC was renamed as the IORA at the 13th COM in Perth on 01 November 2013 when Australia took over as the chair.¹³ This marked an important step signifying the renewed resolve to strengthen the association and its activities. According to the Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh, Md Shahidul Haque:

“The 13th Council of Minister in Perth is indeed a milestone in the history of IORA. Today, we have adopted a new name for our Association. The new name is not just a simplification of pronunciation; but it signifies a reorientation of our Association towards a more effective, efficient and functional way forward.”¹⁴

Indonesia hosted the first ever IORA Leaders’ Summit on 07 March 2017 in Jakarta to commemorate the 20th anniversary of IORA under the theme of “Strengthening Maritime Cooperation for a Peaceful, Stable and Prosperous Indian Ocean”.¹⁵ The Jakarta Summit dubbed as a landmark in the renewal of commitment by IORA countries to intensify IORA cooperation. Indonesian President Joko Widodo remarked “... the convening of the Summit is a strategic and progressive step by IORA Leaders to realise an IORA that is able to move faster, able to face the current situation and able to deal with future challenges”.¹⁶ The Summit produced Jakarta Concord - a strategic vision document - setting important standards and objectives that could eventually be transformed into a rule-based framework for the IOR. An Action Plan (See annex 1) setting out numerous initiatives for short, medium and long terms across IORA’s six priority areas was another outcome of the Summit. Furthermore, a Declaration on Preventing and Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism was adopted by the member states. In the declaration, IORA leaders decided to support one another’s efforts to counter the threat from terrorism and violent extremism, including through enhancing cooperation and coordination of efforts, dialogue and sharing of information, expertise, best practices and lessons learned, including on stemming the financing of terrorism.¹⁷ The member states also stressed on the need to work together in order to address the conditions conducive to the growth and spread of terrorism and violent extremism in the society.¹⁸ This is the first time IORA member

February 2017.

¹³ V. N. Attri, “Growing Strength of Indian Ocean Rim Association”, paper presented in the Seminar on *Growing Strength of Indian Ocean Rim Association and Emerging Development Paradigms*, organised by HSRC, Pretoria, South Africa, on 29 January 2016.

¹⁴ Md. Shahidul Haque, Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh, Statement Made at *the 13th Meeting of the Council of Ministers of IORA* in Perth, Australia, on 01 November 2013.

¹⁵ Ankit Panda, “Indian Ocean Rim Association Concludes First-Ever Leaders’ Summit”, *The Diplomat*, 08 March 2017.

¹⁶ Joko Widodo, President of Indonesia, Statement Made at *the First IORA Leaders’ Summit* in Jakarta, Indonesia, on 07 March 2017.

¹⁷ Ajay Kaul, “IORA Nations Decide to Support Each Other to Counter Terrorism”, *India Today*, 07 March 2017.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

states have addressed the issue of terrorism, which marks a significant departure from its narrow focus on economic issues. The outcomes of the Jakarta Summit may be symbolic, nevertheless, a necessary step towards greater regional cooperation.

Notably, the IORA brings a brand of regionalism in the ocean which is different from regionalism observed in the territorial domain. Karolina Klecha-Tylec defines maritime regionalism as “the institutionalisation of cooperation in sea territories”.¹⁹ This phenomenon is related to the process of codifying maritime laws, the development of technologies for the use of sea and ocean resources, and the growing political and strategic significance of sea areas in connection with sailing and regular supplies of goods.²⁰ Dennis Rumley *et al.* identify five interrelated elements of the Indian Ocean maritime regionalism.²¹ First, it is ocean-based in which issues associated with the use of the Indian Ocean are critical considerations. Second, it is a holistic security paradigm which takes into consideration of the notion that security is a multidimensional concept. Third, it is less contrived and more natural as it is based on an ecological concept of Indian Ocean and its various interactions. Fourth, it is a people-centered concept which ensures that the voices of Indian Ocean peoples and communities have more of a say in their human security. Finally, it is a concept that implies a much greater degree of regional cooperation to collectively solve common problems rather than a concept that is solely state-based and grounded primarily in competition. Hence, this maritime regionalism paradigm is primarily designed to facilitate confidence building and to effectively deal with a wide range of ‘non-traditional’ security challenges.²²

3. Opportunities for IORA

The opportunities for IORA stem from the Indian Ocean itself. It is emerging as a major centre of global activities. The economic vibrancy in most part of the region is apparent. However, numerous non-traditional security threats are posing major challenges as well. It is proven that these challenges are best tackled within the ambit of regional multilateral framework.²³ Timothy Doyle, former Chairman of IORAG, observes “as a regional institution, the IORA could potentially become the platform to evolve and coordinate joint efforts”.²⁴ Basically, the recent renewal of interest in IORA comes at a significant and possibly opportune time in global politics. As remarked by one strategic analyst, “due to both the long-term structural transformations and

¹⁹ Karolina Klecha-Tylec, *The Theoretical and Practical Dimensions of Regionalism in East Asia*, London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, p. 34.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 34-35.

²¹ Dennis Rumley *et al.*, “Securing the Indian Ocean? Competing Regional Security Constructions”, *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2012, p. 5.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 4.

²³ G. V. C. Naidu, 2015, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

²⁴ Authors' interview with Timothy Doyle, Former Chairman of IORAG and Professor of International Relations in Adelaide University, on 12 October 2016.

the more recent geopolitical developments, there is more space for a previously low-profile grouping like the IORA to play a greater role in ensuring growth, peace, and stability of the region".²⁵ This section identifies the issues that motivate IORA member states for more cooperation and elaborates how they are cooperating. These issues include: maritime safety and security; trade and investment facilitation; fisheries management; disaster risk management; academic, science and technology cooperation; tourism and cultural exchanges; blue economy; etc.

3.1 *Maritime Safety and Security*

Today, the Indian Ocean is an economic highway of the world. It is fast emerging as the global "centre of gravity" as 66 per cent of the world's oil shipment, 33 per cent of the bulk cargo and 40 per cent of the world's container trade pass through its water.²⁶ The region is, nonetheless, witnessing an ever increasing variety of security threats to maritime peace and stability. The strategic significance of the IOR has resulted into the competition for regional influence by China, India and the US. The maritime road component of China's One Belt One Road programme passes along the Indian Ocean. Meanwhile, India is aiming to counterbalance China by building a 200-warship fleet by 2027.²⁷ The country is also deepening its relationship with ASEAN region via its 'Act East' policy.²⁸ In addition, the US has an established role in the Indian Ocean Region.²⁹ It has been undergoing a reassessment of the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean Region since the growing economic and military importance of both China and India in the region challenges the US dominance in the region.³⁰ This competitive scenario calls for IORA member states to work together to maintain stability and neutrality of the IOR.

On the other hand, non-state actors have become today's most pervasive threat in the IOR. These non-state actors have a relative anonymity of individuality and intent, both of which impact policy options, especially on the maritime safety and security.³¹ Maritime piracy, maritime terrorism, illegal drug trafficking, armed robbery, human trafficking, etc. not only threaten the shipping industry but also the well-being of the people in land areas of the IOR.³² The coasts of the two member countries, *i.e.*,

²⁵ Barana Waidyatilaka, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

²⁶ Md. Khurshed Alam, Secretary, Maritime Affairs Unit, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bangladesh, Statement Made at the 14th Meeting of the Council of Ministers of IORA, on 09 October 2014.

²⁷ "Indian Navy Aiming at 200-ship Fleet by 2027", *The Economic Times*, 14 July 2015.

²⁸ Sampa Kundu, "India's ASEAN Approach: Acting East", *The Diplomat*, 08 April 2016.

²⁹ Jan Hornat, "The Power Triangle in the Indian Ocean: China, India and the United States", *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 29, No. 2, p. 425.

³⁰ Dennis Rumley *et al.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-4.

³¹ Martin N. Murphy, "The Abundant Sea: Prospects for Maritime Non-State Violence in the Indian Ocean", *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 2012, pp. 173-187.

³² Rupert Herbert-Burns, "Countering Piracy, Trafficking, and Terrorism: Ensuring Maritime Security in the Indian Ocean", in David Michel and Russell Sticklor (eds.), *Indian Ocean Rising: Maritime Security and Policy Challenges*, Washington D.C., USA: Stimson, 2012, p. 24.

Indonesia and Somalia, host the most pirate prone areas in the world. The numbers of actual and attempted attacks have dropped due to the increased patrols by the littoral states in recent years (see table 1). However, it still remains a severe threat to the countries of the IOR.

Locations	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Bangladesh	7	9	10	15	11	3
India	6	6	7	10	7	14
Indonesia	30	51	68	72	86	33
Malacca Strait	-	2	1	1	5	-
Malaysia	14	8	5	15	11	5
Singapore Strait	7	6	5	8	9	1
Somalia	130	44	4	3	-	-
Tanzania	-	2	1	1	-	-
Total	194	128	101	125	129	56

Source: International Maritime Bureau

A vital maritime stake for Bangladesh is to ensure maritime security, particularly to curb irregular security threats in the sea waters. According to Md. Khurshed Alam, “armed robbery, petty theft and piracy remain major concerns for Bangladesh in the Bay of Bengal region”.³³ The safety of both seaborne trade and energy transportation are fundamental for Bangladesh’s economy, since almost 90 per cent of the export depends on sea trade as well as 100 per cent of its energy requirements travels by sea.³⁴ The menace of piracy is threatening fishermen’s income and merchant ships, as around 2500 merchant ships arrive at Chattogram and Mongla ports every year. Besides, trafficking of arms and drugs via sea routes, illegal and unregulated fishing and other living resources are also present. Thus, IORA can help Bangladesh by providing a platform to discuss maritime issues exclusively. Md. Khurshed Alam observes, “there is not much discussion on maritime issues in other regional grouping like the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). But this is the only forum where maritime issues are exclusively discussed”.³⁵

Indeed, in recent times, ensuring the safety and security at sea has become the topmost priority of IORA. In 2015, Indonesia chose the theme of its chairmanship as

³³ Md. Khurshed Alam, “Maritime Piracy and Bangladesh Perspective”, paper presented in the Seminar on *Maritime Piracy and Human Response*, organised by BISS, Dhaka, on 05 March 2013.

³⁴ “Bangladesh Free to Explore Resources in Bay: PM”, *The Daily Star*, 11 December 2012.

³⁵ Author’s interview with Md. Khurshed Alam, *op. cit.*

‘Strengthening Maritime Cooperation in a Peaceful and Stable Indian Ocean’. In October 2015 at the 15th COM of IORA, a maritime declaration was adopted which highlighted the need for greater coordination and cooperation among search and rescue services in the Indian Ocean region.³⁶ Subsequently, it resulted into signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Search and Rescue Cooperation to expand the channels of communication and cooperation among the search and rescue agencies of the nine member states namely Australia, Bangladesh, Union of Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius, Seychelles, Singapore, South Africa and Thailand.³⁷ This initiative is particularly important to coordinate the collection and dissemination of information and data on maritime issues and sharing of maritime information on regional basis.

The Jakarta Summit (2017) endorsed the establishment of an IORA Working Group on Maritime Safety and Security. The Summit also emphasised on enhancing cooperation with the United Nations offices and agencies to support the IORA Working Group in addressing common safety and security challenges. Moreover, it advocated the establishment of the Maritime Institute of Malaysia as an IORA Centre of Excellence for Maritime Safety and Security.³⁸ These efforts will establish a regional mechanism for cooperation to ensure secure maritime trade routes in the IOR. Furthermore, it will provide a common platform to discuss cooperation on maritime issues and best practices and enhance collaborations by forging regional partnership.

3.2 Trade and Investment Facilitation

Trade and investment is an area that directly impacts upon job creation, poverty alleviation and economic development. It contributes to the objective of promoting sustainable and balanced economic growth. In the upcoming decade, the IOR will become the world’s strongest economic area. It is home to the emerging economies, viz., India, Indonesia, South Africa, Bangladesh, etc. IORA countries are responsible for about 10 per cent of the global GDP, trade among IORA members amounts to approximately a quarter of their world trade and a third of the world’s population live in the region, signifying one of the largest potential labour forces and massive markets.³⁹ Professor Narnia Bohler Muller noted, “despite no formal framework, intra-regional trade signifies considerable economic expansion in the region better than many Regional Trade Arrangements (RTAs)”.⁴⁰ In 1997, the intra-

³⁶ Padang Communiqué, 2015.

³⁷ Vijay Sakhuja, “Indian Ocean and the IORA: Search and Rescue Operations”, IPCS, 2014, available at <http://www.ipcs.org/article/navy/indian-ocean-and-the-iora-search-and-rescue-operations-4724.html>, accessed on 30 March 2017.

³⁸ IORA Action Plan, 2017.

³⁹ Jivanta Schottli, *op. cit.*

⁴⁰ Narnia Bohler Muller, “Rule Based Regionalism in the Indian Ocean”, paper presented in the 3rd Indian Ocean Dialogue: Addressing Maritime Security Challenges in the Indian Ocean through Enhanced Regionalism, organised by IORA, Padang, Indonesia, on 13 April 2016.

regional trade numbered 21.3 per cent which increased to 35.9 per cent in 2016.⁴¹ By taking advantage of the complementarity in the economies of the rim countries, Bangladesh has increased the volume of its trade. Bangladesh’s trade with the major rim countries numbered US\$40.5 million in 1995,⁴² which has increased to approximately US\$15 billion in 2015-16 (see table 2). Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) flows from these countries to Bangladesh occupy an important place in its economy as well.

Table 2: Volume of Trade of Bangladesh with Major IORA Member States (2015-16)

Country	Australia	India	Indonesia	Malaysia	Singapore	South Africa	Sri Lanka	Thailand	UAE	Iran
Total Bilateral Trade Volume	US\$ 1 billion	US\$ 5.7 billion	US\$ 1.4 billion	US\$ 2.4 billion	US\$ 1.57 billion	US\$ 110 million	US\$ 75 million	US\$ 1.18 billion	US\$ 1.11 billion	US\$ 50 million

Source: Compiled from different sources

IORA has become a platform which provides opportunity to build global businesses, promote international trade and investment and achieve sustainable and market-led economic growth that would contribute to job creation in the region. There are opportunities to establish effective trade linkages between member states on existing sectors, e.g., food sector, Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), financial services, mining, tourism, the ocean economy and renewable energy, etc. Besides, IORA continues to pursue the feasibility of establishing a Preferential Trade Arrangement (PTA) for the member states. Undoubtedly, implementation of such an arrangement would assist in bringing about immense benefits to member states by removing trade/tariff barriers, and thereby expanding the total volume of the trade flows among member states.⁴³ However, the greatest challenge would be how to reconcile IORA PTA with the trade regimes of the existing Free Trade Areas (FTAs) and Regional Economic Communities (RECs) in the region.⁴⁴

To expand cooperation with the business community and private sector, IORA created forums like the IORBF and the WGTI which are working as a platform to share information on trade and investment and business updates. In addition, the forums have strengthened linkages of IORA chambers of commerce and private sectors facilitating regional trade and commerce. IORA has conducted important studies on trade and investment, i.e., ‘Trade and Investment Prospects of the IOR-ARC in the New

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Bangladesh Bank, *Annual Export and Import Receipts*, 1995.

⁴³ Mohammad Masudur Rahman, “Assessing the Economic Impact of the Proposed IORA-PTA”, *Global Trade and Customs Journal*, Vol. 9, No. 10, 2014, pp. 478-492.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

Millennium’ and ‘Institutional Mechanisms for Promoting Intra-regional Investments and Trade in the IOR-ARC Region in Strategic Sectors: Cooperation in Knowledge-based Industries’.⁴⁵ At the Jakarta Summit (2017) the member states supported the establishment of the IORA Business Travel Card (IBTC) to facilitate movement of the business community and boost trade and investment. Furthermore, they emphasised on strengthening regional cooperation for the promotion of SMEs.⁴⁶ Therefore, IORA can become a platform for SMEs to share expertise, innovations and encourage collaboration between public and private sectors.

3.3 Fisheries Management

Indian Ocean coastal states share a keen interest in the management and conservation of the region’s rich fish resources, as more than 800 million people around the IOR rely on fish as a major source of protein.⁴⁷ So, fisheries and related industries are critical in ensuring food security of the region. Nevertheless, Illegal, Unlicensed, Unregulated (IUU) fishing is costing Indian Ocean countries billions of dollars in lost revenue. Estimates of the cost of IUU fishing suggest that it may account for as much as one-fifth of the total global catch, valued between US\$10 billion and US\$23.5 billion per year.⁴⁸ This illegal practice makes it difficult to manage fishery quota, harms local fishermen who have to head deeper for their daily catch and is also linked to other crimes such as trafficking of drugs, weapons and humans.⁴⁹

In order to tackle the challenges facing regional fisheries management, IORA established Fisheries Support Unit (FSU), hosted by the Sultanate of Oman, in 2004.⁵⁰ It manages and spearheads IORA efforts to identify and discuss key fisheries-related issues. It also serves to study proposals and facilitate research in areas that are of practical use to member states. Basically, the FSU acts as a regional centre for knowledge sharing, capacity building and addressing strategic issues related to fisheries and aquaculture sectors.⁵¹ The FSU has organised several training workshop programmes⁵² on different fisheries-related issues, which has helped IORA member

⁴⁵ V. N. Attri, *op. cit.*

⁴⁶ IORA Action Plan, 2017.

⁴⁷ Dennis Rumley, “The Indian Ocean Region: Security, Stability and Sustainability in the 21st Century,” Australia India Institute, 2013.

⁴⁸ Halea Fuller and Lindsay Dolan, “Natural Resources in the Indian Ocean: Fisheries and Minerals”, in David Michel and Russell Sticklor (eds.), *Indian Ocean Rising: Maritime Security and Policy Challenges*, Washington D. C., USA: Stimson, 2012, p. 103.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ “Fisheries Support Unit of Indian Ocean Rim Association: A Progress Report”, 2015, available at www.fsu-iora.gov.om/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/FSU_Progress-Report, accessed on 03 March 2017.

⁵¹ V. N. Attri, *op. cit.*

⁵² The Workshops on “Fisheries Biology and Stock Assessment 2011” and “Fishes Otolith-based Ageing and Stock Assessment 2013” were hosted by the Sultanate of Oman, in Muscat, Oman.

states to be exposed to the latest perspectives from different segments (e.g., academics, government and the private sectors). During the first Leaders' Summit of IORA (2017), the member states emphasised on revitalising the FSU through the implementation of the FSU Action Plan. Furthermore, the member states declared to develop a mechanism to combat IUU fishing.⁵³

From Bangladesh perspective, about 4.43 per cent of the country's GDP gleans from the fisheries sector.⁵⁴ Marine fisheries contribute 16.28 per cent of its total fish production.⁵⁵ Bangladesh has a total water area of 166,000 sq. km. including Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). But fishing is only confined within 200-meter depth. Of the total 225 industrial trawlers, only 24 are engaged in mid water fishing. Also around 68,000 mechanised and non-mechanised boats are there where approximately 0.5 million people are engaged for marine fishing with limited capacity.⁵⁶ Majority of these fishermen lack resources and capital to explore the huge potential of aquatic resources. The lion's share of them still uses small boats and traditional equipments, which prevents them from going into deep waters resulting in lower catch volumes. As a result, pelagic and deep-sea resources are still mostly untapped. If capacity of the fishermen can be enhanced as well as better technology can be introduced in marine fishing sector, it will have a significant impact on Bangladesh's economy. In this regard, IORA can be a good platform for Bangladesh to acquire more knowledge and technological know-how from the forum itself as well as from different member states, i.e., India (which constitutes about 6.3 per cent of the global fish production)⁵⁷, Indonesia (one of the most important fish and seafood producers in the world) and Malaysia (ranked 15th in marine capture fisheries in the world⁵⁸). IORA can help Bangladesh by facilitating exchange of academic knowledge and transfer of technology. For example, Bangladesh purchased a high-tech ocean research vessel (RV Meen Sandhani) from Malaysia in June 2016 and the vessel is now engaged in assessing the country's marine fish stock and suggesting potential measures for sustainable fisheries in the Bay of Bengal.⁵⁹

⁵³ IORA Action Plan, 2017.

⁵⁴ "Fisheries Sector: Prospects and Potentials", available at <http://www.fisheries.gov.bd>, accessed on 04 March 2017.

⁵⁵ Monawar Hussain, "Fisheries Statistics in Bangladesh: Issues, Challenges and Plans", paper presented in the 26th Asia and Pacific Commission on Agricultural Statistics (APCAS), organised by FAO, Thimpu, on 15-19 February 2016.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ "About Indian Fisheries", available at <http://nfdb.gov.in/about-indian-fisheries.html>, accessed on 04 March 2017.

⁵⁸ Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), *The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture Opportunities and Challenges*, 2014, p. 10.

⁵⁹ "Bangladesh Gets High-tech Marine Survey Vessel", *The Daily Sun*, 10 June 2016.

3.4 Disaster Risk Management

IOR witnesses 70 per cent of the world's natural disasters. In fact, almost 80 per cent of the human fatalities in natural disasters of the last decade have been in Asia.⁶⁰ Disasters can be substantially reduced if people are well informed of measures related to disaster prevention and resilience. This requires the collection, compilation and dissemination of relevant knowledge and information on hazards, vulnerabilities and capacities. Md. Khurshed Alam remarked, "as the countries of the IOR have expertise and experience in disaster risk management, knowledge and information sharing and capacity building in the auspices of IORA will mitigate the risk and impacts of the disasters in the region"⁶¹

So far, IORA has conducted a study on 'Risk Assessment and Numerical Modeling of Tsunami Waves in Oman Sea'. In 2013, it has arranged a Meeting of IORA Ocean Forecasting Officials in Perth, Australia, in order to build capacity to progress, validate and apply Indian Ocean forecasting system.⁶² At the first Leaders' Summit (2017), the member states declared its intent to develop an IORA Centre of Excellence for Disaster Risk Management for sharing information, expertise and best practices. Moreover, they emphasised on developing resilience through early warning systems, regional exercises and training for coordinated disaster risk reduction.⁶³

It is worth mentioning that Bangladesh aims at maintaining regional cooperation and collective actions to face climate change induced calamities, as rising sea levels caused by climate change pose a long-term security threat to Bangladesh, especially in its coastal areas. Hence, Bangladesh is very active in different global and regional forums which deal with the issue of climate change and disaster management. As a disaster-prone country, Bangladesh could immensely benefit from the expertise and assistance from IORA. In addition, experience and expertise of Bangladesh can be shared with the member states, as Bangladesh has turned into a role model for minimising the losses of lives and property due to natural calamities by undertaking different disaster risk reduction and preparedness activities throughout the country.⁶⁴

3.5 Academic, Science and Technology Cooperation

The academic, science and technology cooperation is one of the main priority areas of the organisation. The contributions of science, technology and the academia have the potential to enhance IORA's knowledge and capacities in a number of

⁶⁰ David Michel, "Environmental Pressures in the Indian Ocean", in David Michel and Russell Sticklor (eds.), *Indian Ocean Rising: Maritime Security and Policy Challenges*, Washington D. C., USA: Stimson, 2012, p. 113.

⁶¹ Md. Khurshed Alam, Statement at IORA, *op. cit.*

⁶² V. N. Attri, *op. cit.*

⁶³ IORA Action Plan, 2017.

⁶⁴ "Bangladesh is a Role Model for Disaster Management", *The Independent*, 10 March 2016.

important fields, *e.g.*, Indian Ocean phenomena, coastal zone management, renewable energy, energy efficient technologies and the development of the region-wide ocean economy, etc.⁶⁵ There are a number of centres of excellence across the regions, which can pool their resources effectively for comprehensive studies.

With a view to promoting science and technology transfer, IORA established the Regional Centre for Science and Transfer of Technology (RCSTT) in 2008 in its 7th COM held in Tehran.⁶⁶ Since its inception, the Centre has organised many international workshops and training programmes on various issues, *e.g.*, women empowerment, nanotechnology, biotechnology and ICT.⁶⁷ The Journal of Indian Ocean Rim Studies (JIORS) and the Journal of the Indian Ocean Region (JIOR) are the flagship journals of IORA. The journals were established to strengthen research and academic findings within the IOR. Besides, the IORAG has become a platform for researchers, academics, scholars, resource persons and practitioners to share their research findings, which would enrich and enhance stock of knowledge within IORA. Furthermore, the Indian Ocean Dialogue (IOD) has become an annual mechanism for multi-sectoral and 1.5 track engagements. In the Jakarta Summit (2017), the member states emphasised on strengthening the IORAG and RCSTT. They also urged to conduct a feasibility study of an Indian Ocean Technical and Vocational University in Bangladesh.⁶⁸ Bangladesh proposed setting up of a maritime university in Bangladesh, which will help to create a pool of skilled mariners for the region. Above all, it projects the goodwill of Bangladesh to jointly work with the nations of the region.

3.6 *Tourism and Cultural Exchanges*

The tourism sector has tremendous potential in the IOR. Spanning over three continents *i.e.*, Africa, Asia and Australia as well as the Middle East region, member states possess a blend of cultures and heritage which can be harnessed to further develop and diversify their tourism industry. There are certain countries whose economies have huge dependence on tourism, *e.g.*, Mauritius (11.6 per cent of total GDP)⁶⁹ and Indonesia (9.3 per cent of total GDP)⁷⁰. The direct contribution of the tourism sector to the GDP of Bangladesh was 4 per cent in 2016.⁷¹ The tourism sector of Bangladesh has not been able to reap much benefit despite the sector's

⁶⁵ "Academic, Science and Technological Cooperation", Indian Ocean Rim Association Official Website, available at <http://www.iora.net/about-us/priority-areas/academic-science-technology-cooperation.aspx>, accessed on 28 February 2017.

⁶⁶ "Regional Centre for Science and Transfer of Technology (RCSTT)", Indian Ocean Rim Association Official Website, available at <http://www.iora.net/projects/flagship-projects/rcstt.aspx>, accessed on 28 February 2017.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ IORA Action Plan, 2017.

⁶⁹ The World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC), *Travel & Tourism Economic Impact: 2015 Indonesia*, 2015.

⁷⁰ "Overview of Tourism Sector in Mauritius", Ministry of Tourism, Mauritius, 2016.

⁷¹ Md. Harunnur Rashid, "Increasing Tourism's Contribution to GDP", *The Independent*, 06 October 2016.

immense prospects. The industry has grown in a haphazard way in the last decade or so. However, a much more concerted and strategic intervention is required for the country to enter the global competitive arena and in this regard IORA could be a great platform for Bangladesh to learn the best practices from the member states about different aspects of tourism, e.g., cultural tourism, tourism and travel mart, tourism and hospitality management, heritage management, etc.

At the first Tourism Ministers Meeting held at Beau Vallo, Seychelles in 2014, member states agreed that the enhancement of tourist and marketing linkages within the region would result into substantial benefit.⁷² Besides, cultural exchanges contribute to the development of mutual understanding and goodwill, and open channels of communication that could serve the interests of the member states. To date, IORA has already undertaken a 'Tourism Feasibility Study'. Furthermore, the meetings of the Core Group on Promoting Cultural Cooperation among IORA member states have resulted into the formulation of a work plan.⁷³ At the first Leaders' Summit (2017), the member states agreed to establish a Core Group for Tourism and an IORA Tourism Resource Centre in the Sultanate of Oman in the coming years. They emphasised on the potential to develop joint capacity building projects in the tourism sector, including community-based tourism for poverty reduction, cultural heritage and eco-tourism.⁷⁴

3.7 *Blue Economy*

The development of the blue economy holds immense promise for the IOR. Marine economic activity is emerging as a common source of growth, innovation and job creation for the region. Blue economy offers a model of development that is ocean-based rather than solely land based and better suited to the challenges and opportunities of IOR economies. It highlights the role played by biodiversity, including marine life and ecosystems, in supporting marine economic activity and enhancing food security.⁷⁵ Professor Narnia Bohler Muller rightly points out, "developing the ocean economy in a sustainable manner cannot be done by one country but needs to be done at a much bigger level with close cooperation, especially in the IOR".⁷⁶ Hence, IORA is an ideal platform to encourage member states to cooperate and share their experience and expertise in harnessing the massive potential of the blue economy.

⁷² Joana Nicette and Sharon Jean, "IORA Tourism Ministers Plan Better Air and Maritime Links for Indian Ocean Tourism Growth", *Seychelles News Agency*, 23 November 2014, available at <http://www.seychellesnewsagency.com/articles/1812/IORA>, accessed on 15 March 2017.

⁷³ V. N. Attri, *op. cit.*

⁷⁴ IORA Action Plan, 2017.

⁷⁵ G. V. C. Naidu, "Indian Ocean Region: Need to Step-up Cooperation", in Vijay Sakhuja and Kapil Narula (eds.), *Maritime Safety and Security in the Indian Ocean*, Delhi, India: Vij Books, 2016, p. 20.

⁷⁶ Narnia Bohler Muller, "Blue Economy: Taking Charge of a New Frontier in the Indian Ocean Region", *Brink News*, 22 September 2015, available at <http://www.brinknews.com/blue-economy-taking-charge-of-a-new-frontier-in-the-indian-ocean-region/>, accessed on 05 March 2017.

The 14th IORA COM in Australia (2014) recognised blue economy as the top priority area. At the first IORA Ministerial Blue Economy Conference (2015), the ministers identified four areas to promote the idea, *i.e.*, fisheries and aquaculture, renewable ocean energy, seaport and shipping, and offshore hydrocarbons and seabed minerals. They reiterated the importance of IORA's cooperation and engagement with dialogue partners in developing blue economy objectives.⁷⁷ The Jakarta Summit (2017) declared its intent to establish an IORA Working Group on the Blue Economy. The member states vowed to implement the outcomes of the Blue Economy Core Group Workshops as well as Ministerial and High-level Expert Meetings. Furthermore, they emphasised on developing appropriate mechanisms of cooperation for sustainable development of blue economy sectors, including training and capacity building programmes.⁷⁸ These ventures will help develop and enhance regional cooperation in blue economy and improve member states' capacities and technical know-how. It will initiate skill development in blue economy of the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and Small Island Developing States (SIDS). Thus, IORA's activities in the field of blue economy are particularly significant for Bangladesh which is undertaking ambitious plan to develop a blue water economy. Experts argue that blue economy is a model that can provide Bangladesh a sustainable economy.⁷⁹ Bangladesh has integrated SDG-14⁸⁰ in its 7th Five Year Plan and renewed its focus towards blue economy.

4. Challenges for IORA to Overcome

There are several key challenges IORA ought to overcome if the forum wants to become a successful regional organisation. The first challenge is inherent in the geography of the IOR and its diversity. As Rahimah Abdulrahim, executive director of one of Indonesia's leading think tanks remarked, "IORA represents an extremely vast area and most of this area is covered by international water. In fact, it is hard to find other regions politically, economically and culturally more diverse than this region".⁸¹ For example, India has a population around 1.3 billion, Indonesia over 261 million and Bangladesh over 163 million, in contrast to Mauritius with a population of only around 1.3 million, Djibouti around 942,333, Comoros just over 790,000 and Maldives around 417,492. Moreover, Australia has 7.7 million square kilometers of land, whereas Singapore has only 648 square kilometers of land. Five countries have a GDP per capita of US\$20,000 or more, while six have a GDP per capita between US\$5,000 and

⁷⁷ Hema Ramakrishnan, "Indian Ocean Rim Association Looking for Opportunities in Blue Economy", *The Economic Times*, 17 September 2015.

⁷⁸ IORA Action Plan, 2017.

⁷⁹ Md. Shahidul Hasan, "Maritime Verdicts and Avenues of Resource Exploration for Bangladesh", *BIISS Journal*, Vol. 35, No. 4, July 2014, p. 229.

⁸⁰ Sustainable Development Goal 14 aims to conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development.

⁸¹ Rahimah Abdulrahim, "Rule Based Regionalism in the Indian Ocean through Enhanced Connectivity", paper presented in the 3rd Indian Ocean Dialogue: Addressing Maritime Security Challenges in the Indian Ocean through Enhanced Regionalism, Padang, Indonesia, on 13 April 2016.

US\$16,000. Besides, three economies (*i.e.*, India, Australia and Indonesia) dominate the region and account for 63 per cent of the total GDP of IORA. Hence, the disparities between them are regarded as a major obstacle to forming an effective and strong regional cooperative grouping.

The second challenge is the absence of powerful leadership to galvanise the region into an effective cooperation platform. There is no single dominant country within the IORA.⁸² It does not have a leader unlike, *e.g.*, India in SAARC, Indonesia in ASEAN or South Africa in South African Development Community (SADC). In contrary, there is a core group consisting of South Africa, India, Australia and Indonesia that takes the lead in many initiatives. IORA leadership in the past lacked the capacity to realise the opportunities for the region. Besides, absence of political commitment on the part of member states is a challenge as well.

The third challenge is the presence of other sub-regional and regional groupings. Countries in the IOR belong to various sub-regional and larger regional groupings.⁸³ They include SAARC, SADC, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), ASEAN, ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the East Asia Summit (EAS) and Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). There are also organisations with an issue-specific focus, *i.e.*, the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC). In addition, the interests and objectives of these various organisations overlap to some degree with those of IORA. For some countries, those institutions are more important and relevant than IORA.

The Fourth challenge stems from its membership. IORA does not currently encompass all the key players. Some Middle Eastern countries are included, but not Saudi Arabia. The East African participants do not include Sudan, Eritrea or Tanzania. Pakistan and Myanmar are also not members. Some analysts identify it as a major drawback.⁸⁴ David Brewster observes, “the exclusion of Pakistan in particular, undermines efforts for regional consensus on security issues”⁸⁵ Under the IORA charter, admission of new members takes place by consensus. In other words, a single member can effectively veto the admission of a new member, as India has done so on the pretext that Pakistan did not extend Most Favoured Nation (MFN) status to India.⁸⁶ On the same token, if Saudi Arabia wants to become a member state, Iran can potentially say no by exploiting the consensus issue of the organisation.

Another important challenge is the lack of resources. According to a report published by Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee of Australia, “active

⁸² Christian Wagner, *op. cit.*

⁸³ Saman Kelegama, “Indian Ocean Regionalism: Is There a Future?” *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2002, pp. 2422-2425.

⁸⁴ Lee Cordner, “Progressing Maritime Security Cooperation in the Indian Ocean”, *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 64, No. 4, 2011, pp. 1-21.

⁸⁵ David Brewster, “IORA Summit: The Challenges of Building a Region”, *The Interpreter*, 03 March 2017.

⁸⁶ Asif Ezdi, “The Rise of the Indian Ocean Rim”, *The News*, 15 June 2015.

participation in, and support for, a regional organisation such as IORA requires commitment on the part of its members including funds to help the organisation carry out its work.⁸⁷ Lack of resources not only places constraints on the ability of member states to participate in or to fund IORA activities but also limits the ability of the Secretariat to serve the association adequately. The matter of resourcing the secretariat has been a long-running concern within the association and remains a major drawback.

5. Strengthening IORA

Both in theory and practice, no regional organisation will succeed unless it is fully backed by major powers of that grouping. IORA's success would depend, to a large extent, upon what the major powers of the Indian Ocean littorals, like Australia, India, Indonesia and South Africa, can do. These countries can play a key role in charting a new course of IORA. In recent years, these countries are showing greater interest in the IORA. India has been progressively expanding the area of its strategic interest, while Australia's stakes, both economic and strategic, have been on the rise. In addition to India and Australia, the other two major powers of the association - Indonesia and South Africa - are also beginning to look beyond their immediate regions.⁸⁸ Together the four countries have already breathed new life into the organisation.

Probably one of the best ways to bring the association into the limelight and mould it as a mutually beneficial venture is to create a distinct identity. That is the route of several successful regional organisations has taken most prominently the EU and ASEAN.⁸⁹ IORA needs to begin projecting an identity which shows that, despite the vast cultural diversity of the IOR, its people are united in the common and historically-rooted understandings of freedom of navigation, trade and the peaceful dissemination of ideas. Rahimah Abdulrahim rightly noted that "regional identity would only come into existence through an enhanced connectivity in state-level, business-level and people-to-people contact".⁹⁰ Therefore, it is important that IORA recognises its Indian Ocean identity and promotes it through conferences, educational partnerships, exhibitions, cultural show and similar forums.

IORA needs to encourage the dialogue partners to engage more in its activities. As G.V.C. Naidu observes, "while aping ASEAN to enlist dialogue partners is a good idea, there is no evidence to suggest that IORA has evolved a well thought out strategy to fruitfully engage these states as ASEAN has been doing".⁹¹ Both the UK

⁸⁷ Department of Senate, *The Importance of the Indian Ocean Rim for Australia's Foreign, Trade and Defence Policy*, Canberra, Australia: Senate Printing Unit of Parliament House, June 2013, p. 40.

⁸⁸ C. Raja Mohan, "Choppy Waters, Unsure Navigator", *Indian Express*, 07 March 2017.

⁸⁹ G. V. C. Naidu, 2015, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

⁹⁰ Rahima Abdulrahim, *op. cit.*

⁹¹ G. V. C. Naidu, 2015, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

and France have a long history of involvement in the region, while China and Japan are the world's second and third largest economies and have expanding interests in the entire region from the eastern Indian Ocean to Middle East and East Africa. The US has substantial interest in the stability of the IOR as a whole. Certainly, the economic and technological strength of the dialogue partners can be exploited to advance the interests of the IORA.

On a quite similar ground, there is also a considerable merit in encouraging the EU, as a key external stakeholder in the region, to join IORA as a dialogue partner.⁹² Having the EU as a dialogue partner would, among other things, help to reinforce linkages between Indian Ocean states and the anti-piracy work being done off the coast of Somalia by the EU (Operations Atlanta and Ocean Shield) and the development assistance provided to regional states by the EU.

In addition, there needs to be a much greater grassroots involvement of Non-government Organisation NGOs and others in the process of identifying areas in which collaboration could actually take place. There are a great will for greater collaboration among some states around the region, not in IORA, that would like to be a part of IORA and should be encouraged to do so.

If the Indian Ocean Region is to have a fully inclusive regional organisation, Pakistan, Maldives, Saudi Arabia and Myanmar should also be included in IORA, if not as participating member states, then at least initially as dialogue partners. Nevertheless, one strategic commentator argues that IORA could see political deadlock like SAARC if Pakistan becomes a member state.⁹³ Despite the inevitable protests that will emanate from India over bringing Pakistan into IORA, the two countries are already both members of SAARC and IONS and the difficult bilateral relationship would continue beyond the remit of IORA.

Finally, a closer connection is needed between the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS)⁹⁴ and IORA in addressing maritime confidence-building measures in the region. Potential for cooperation was highlighted at the Trilateral Dialogue on the Indian Ocean.⁹⁵ Furthermore, as IORA suffers from proliferation of project proposals which are overlapping, few and carefully selected robust projects are needed for long-term and sustainable impact on the member states. Moreover, emerging issues,

⁹² Leighton G. Luke, "The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA): Replace, Reduce or Refine?", *Future Directions*, 2014.

⁹³ Author's interview with Md. Khurshed Alam, *op. cit.*

⁹⁴ The 'Indian Ocean Naval Symposium' (IONS) is a voluntary initiative that seeks to increase maritime cooperation among navies of the littoral states of the Indian Ocean Region. There are 35 members - navies of the IONS namely Australia, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritria, France, India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Kenya, Kuwait, Madagascar, Malaysia, Maldives, Mauritius, Mozambique, Myanmar, Oman, Pakistan, Seychelles, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Somalia, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Sudan Tanzania, Thailand, Timor Leste, UAE and Yemen.

⁹⁵ Anthony Bergin, "The Indian Ocean Rim Association: A Progress Report", *The Strategist*, 2014.

i.e., protection of marine environment should be included in the agenda of IORA. In the South East Asia, there is now the contingency plan under the aegis of ASEAN to combat marine pollution in the region. In a similar fashion, the IORA can adopt a contingency plan for each of the regions to fight marine pollution.

6. Concluding Remarks

As the Indian Ocean begins to gain considerable strategic and economic salience, the global maritime centre of gravity is gradually moving to the Indian Ocean.⁹⁶ IORA happens to be the main organisation engaged in governance in this region. IORA has received greater attention in recent years under the successive championing by India, then Australia and now Indonesia as the chair. Achievements are on the growing, as seen especially in the expansion of agendas as well as the increasing number of members. In the wake of its 20th anniversary, the first ever Leaders' Summit (2017) produced three key documents that will define the IORA's vision for the future: the IORA Concord, the IORA Action Plan and the IORA Declaration on Countering Violent Extremism Leading to Terrorism. While these gatherings often produce such documents, IORA's effort cannot be underestimated. The IORA Concord is expected to provide a platform to boost regional economic partnerships and provide a code of conduct to address common problems in the world's third-largest ocean. Besides, the IORA Declaration on Countering Violent Extremism Leading to Terrorism will mark a significant departure from its previous narrow focus on economic issues. For a regional organisation that has been described as underdeveloped and underutilised, the move towards greater regionalism marks a significant progress.

IORA remains important to Bangladesh's institutional engagement in the Indian Ocean Region. As the only pan-regional political grouping, IORA is a significant tool for Bangladesh's regional engagement for both economic and security reasons. It is, among other things, a key forum for engagement with the littoral countries in its neighbourhood. Active participation in regional groupings such as IORA is an important signal to the neighbours of Bangladesh's role as a player in the Indian Ocean. Moreover, Bangladesh has the opportunity to cooperate with the member states, especially in the areas of trade, blue economy, maritime security, academic knowledge sharing, tourism, fisheries management, and disaster management, among others.

While the recent developments have created a room for optimism, the effectiveness of IORA is still constrained by many weaknesses. One of the basic difficulties of creating a sense of identity is the vast area and divergence of the IOR. Moreover, the group does not represent the entire region. Particularly, the exclusion of Pakistan undermines IORA's efforts for a regional consensus on security issues. The

⁹⁶ G. V. C. Naidu, 2016, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

presence of other sub-regional and regional grouping undermines the relevance of IORA to some member states. The matter of resourcing the secretariat has been a long-running concern within the association and remains a major drawback.

To make IORA an effective regional multilateral organisation, major countries have to take tangible steps to promote greater cooperation. A partnership with and involvement of extra-regional powers, in particular China, Japan and the US, are essential. These countries have vital interests at stake in the Indian Ocean and without their active participation it is difficult to bring much progress in regional cooperation. They are already a part of IORA as dialogue partners, and hence the existing institutional mechanism needs to be geared to take full advantage of the strengths of these powers. Furthermore, existing sub-regional multilateral mechanisms could be brought together on issues of common interest under the aegis of IORA. Besides, IORA needs to promote greater interaction among the member states in creating a distinct Indian Ocean identity and a sense of belongingness without which it would be difficult to realise the full potential of this region. These goals and priorities will not be easy to achieve. Nevertheless, the goodwill of the member states, together with their strong political commitment, could push the organisation towards playing a more significant role in the region and beyond.

Annex 1: IORA Action Plan (2017-2021)			
PRIORITY AREA	SHORT TERM	MEDIUM TERM	LONG TERM
MARITIME SAFETY AND SECURITY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish an IORA Working Group on Maritime Safety and Security • Enhance cooperation with the United Nations Officials and Agencies to support the IORA Working Group in addressing common safety and security challenges • Encourage member states to sign the IORA MoU on Search and Rescue • Explore the establishment of the Maritime Institute of Malaysia as an IORA Centre of Excellence for Maritime Safety and Security 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement training and capacity building programmes • Implement IORA MoU on Search and Rescue • Explore further proposals for establishing IORA Centres of Excellence for Maritime Safety and Security 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore a regional surveillance network of existing member states institutions including sharing of data and exchange of information on maritime transportation systems
TRADE AND INVESTMENT FACILITATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organise capacity building and technical support on regional trade and investment with a focus on the facilitation and reducing of barriers to trade including through closer collaboration with the Working Group on Trade and Investment (WGTI) • Strengthen regional cooperation for promotion of SMEs • Establish IORA online platform to provide information on tariffs and rules of origin to assist and improve trade and business facilitation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revitalise Indian Ocean Rim Business Forum (IORBF) as a platform to share information on trade and investment and strengthen linkages between WGTI, IORA Chambers of Commerce and private sector • Explore the possibilities of promotion and cooperation in the field of financial services among member states 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore the feasibility of an IORA Business Travel Card (IBTC) to enhance economic integration amongst IORA member states

<p>FISHERIES MANAGEMENT</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revitalise the FSU through implementation of the FSU Action Plan • Sign an MoU with Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) and IOTC to develop regional fisheries management and information sharing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement joint capacity building projects with FAO and relevant organisations including aquaculture to address food security 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore the IORA Mechanism to combat Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing
<p>DISASTER RISK MANAGEMENT</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhance cooperation with the Inter-governmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC-UNESCO) and other multilateral organisations and agencies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creation of an IORA Centre of Excellence for Disaster Risk Management for sharing information, expertise and best practice • Implement training and capacity building programmes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop resiliency through early warning systems, regional exercise and training for coordinated disaster risk reduction
<p>ACADEMIC, SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COOPERATION</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen the Indian Ocean Rim Academic Group (IORAG) • Strengthen Regional Centre for Science and Technology Transfer (RCSTT) • Institutionalise the Indian Ocean Dialogue as an annual mechanism for multi-sector and 1.5 track engagement • Create a data base of higher educational institutes recognised by IORA member states 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen cooperation with universities in the Indian Ocean, including the University Mobility in the Indian Ocean Region (UMIOR) • Support RCSTT to promote science and technology • Strengthen the Indian Ocean Rim Academic Group (IORAG) through the sharing of information and knowledge • Implement training and capacity building programs • Conduct a feasibility study of an Indian Ocean Technical and Vocational University in Bangladesh 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore cooperation projects with the International Solar Alliance and IRENA

<p>TOURISM AND CULTURAL EXCHANGES</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a Core Group for Tourism Strengthen the Core Group for Cultural Exchange 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct feasibility studies to explore the potential of cruise tourism • Establish an IORA Tourism Resource Centre and Website in the Sultanate of Oman 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop joint capacity building projects in tourism including community-based tourism for poverty reduction, cultural heritage and eco-tourism
<p>BLUE ECONOMY</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish an IORA Working Group on the Blue Economy • Implement the outcomes of the Blue Economy Core Group Workshops as well as Ministerial and High-level Expert Meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop appropriate mechanisms of cooperation for sustainable development of blue economy sectors, including training and capacity building programmes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve livelihoods of coastal communities through capacity building programmes