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BANGLADESH AND INDIAN OCEAN RIM ASSOCIATION (IORA): THE FUTURE DYNAMICS

Abstract

Bangladesh has become the chair of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), a 23-member regional organisation, for the period of 2021-2023. The paper investigates potential opportunities for Bangladesh from IORA and provides a few measures and initiatives Bangladesh can take during its chairmanship. The paper argues that the rising international profile of Bangladesh has created the opportunity to play a bigger role in IORA. However, the unclearness of an Indian Ocean identity, lack of political will, lack of visibility and inadequate resources are some of the major challenges Bangladesh is likely to encounter. With a view to making Bangladesh's role more effective in IORA, this paper suggests linking the IORA agenda with domestic and foreign policy goals, increasing the profile of IORA, ensuring inclusiveness, enhancing the role of dialogue partners and implementing the new IORA Action Plan.

Keywords: Bangladesh, Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), Multilateralism, Indian Ocean

1. Introduction

The end of the Cold War brought remarkable shifts in the economic and security scenario of East Asia and a steady rise of regional multilateralism in the Asia-Pacific which promoted other regions to pursue similar attempts; IORA is one of them. Nelson Mandela, South Africa's first democratically elected president, pushed the idea of the establishment of a regional organisation to strengthen socio-economic cooperation among countries along the Indian Ocean Rim.¹ Mandela's ideas were aligned with the regional vision of other key Indian Ocean states, thus allowing for the establishment of IORA's predecessor, the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC) on March 7, 1997, involving fourteen countries.

IORA underperformed as a platform for enhancing regional cooperation, notwithstanding initial enthusiasm. Even during the initial years of IORA, analysts like C. H. Allen² and S. Kelegema³ termed IORA as an ambitious project. Member states were highly diverse politically and economically; and widely dispersed

² C. H. Allen, "Regional Cooperation and Indian Ocean Rim," *The Indian Journal of Asian Affairs* 12, no. 1(1999): 1-18.

³ S. Kelegema, "Indian Ocean Regionalism: Is there a Future," *Economic and Political Weekly* 37, no. 25 (2002): 2422-2425.

geographically. Besides, there was a lack of strong leadership as the states did not prioritise the wider Indian Ocean region in their foreign policy agendas in the decade following the establishment IOR-ARC's.

However, increasing strategic and political attention to the Indian Ocean, the advent of the “Indo-Pacific” and emerging challenges have pushed the IORA back into the limelight. Robert Kaplan argued that the Indian Ocean forms the centre stage for the challenges of the 21st century.⁴ The Indian Ocean has become an epicentre of both traditional and non-traditional security threats such as great power politics, piracy, maritime terrorism, climate change, illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, human trafficking, and smuggling of arms and drugs. Many of these challenges pose serious and immediate problems for the region. These challenges require concerted and sustained partnership efforts across the region and beyond. As IORA is the only grouping with a pan-regional agenda in the Indian Ocean, the member states started prioritising IORA as a common platform. Since 2011, the IORA has been going through a revitalisation process when India, Australia, Indonesia and South Africa took the chairmanship of the organisation.

After 24 years of the establishment of IORA, Bangladesh took over the chairmanship in 2021. IORA's founding membership of 14 states had expanded to 23.⁵ China, Egypt, Germany, Italy, Japan, Turkey, the Republic of Korea, Russia, the UK and the US are included as the Dialogue partners. Besides, IORA had also increased its regional and multilateral engagement and had been granted observer status at the United Nations General Assembly, as well as been accredited to the African Union (AU).

Looking back, although Bangladesh has been actively participating in all IORA arrangements since 1999,⁶ the significance of the organisation was realised following the demarcation of its maritime boundary when maritime security and the blue economy became important priority areas for Bangladesh. The country considers blue economy as a cornerstone for achieving sustainable development and for attaining

the goals of *Vision 2041*. Bangladesh has adopted *Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100* in 2018 where the maritime economy is identified as a key priority area.⁷ Besides, the country has taken a leadership role in promoting the concept of blue economy and prioritises

⁴ Robert D. Kaplan, *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power* (New York, USA: Random House, 2010).

⁵ Australia, Bangladesh, the Comoros, France, India, Indonesia, Iran, Kenya, Madagascar, Malaysia, Maldives, Mauritius, Mozambique, Oman, Seychelles, Singapore, Somalia, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Thailand, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

⁶ “Two-day Minister Level Meeting of IOR-ARC Begins in Muscat Today,” *The Daily Star*, January 22, 2000.

⁷ General Economics Division (GED), Bangladesh Planning Commission, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, *Bangladesh Delta Plan* (Dhaka: General Economics Division, 2018), <https://oldweb.lged.gov.bd/UploadedDocument/UnitPublication/1/756/BDP%202100%20Abridged%20Version%20English.pdf>

maritime cooperation which has been manifested in its engagement with IORA as well. A major policy deliberation on maritime cooperation was reflected in the speech of the honourable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina when she attended the IORA's first Leaders' Summit in 2017. During the summit, she urged IORA leaders to promote maritime cooperation for a peaceful and prosperous Indian Ocean region.⁸ In 2019, Bangladesh was officially designated as IORA vice chairman and successfully arranged a high-profile conference on the blue economy namely "the 3rd IORA Blue Economy Ministerial Conference" which came out the "Dhaka Declaration on Blue Economy." Besides, Bangladesh provided monetary contributions with a view to strengthening the IORA Secretariat. In 2021, on the occasion of assuming the chairmanship of IORA, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina called upon IORA member states to make best efforts to develop blue economies.⁹ The Foreign Minister of Bangladesh A K Abdul Momen announced that Bangladesh has aspirations to leave a mark during its chairmanship of IORA over the next two years.¹⁰ Some commentators have identified Bangladesh as one of the member countries that need to play a bigger role in IORA.¹¹ Needless to say, Bangladesh has assumed the chair at a crucial juncture as the 2022 marks the 25th anniversary of IORA's foundation. Therefore, it is pertinent to look into the opportunities IORA provides for Bangladesh and how Bangladesh can play an effective role in IORA. The article will deal with three questions: What opportunities does IORA provide for Bangladesh? What are the constraints that will determine the future dynamics in IORA? How can Bangladesh play an effective role in IORA?

Methodologically, the paper is qualitative in nature based on both primary and secondary data. For primary data, it relies on semi-structured interviews. The interviewees from academics and practitioners are purposively selected based on their expertise. Besides, speeches of high officials, IORA Charter, IORA Action Plan and IORA Declarations are important sources of information for the current research.

⁸ Statement made by the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina at the first IORA Leaders' Summit in Jakarta, Indonesia, March 07, 2017.

⁹ "Make all-out efforts to develop blue economies: PM to IORA member states," *The Daily Star*, November 17, 2021.

¹⁰ "Bangladesh Assumes the IORA Chairmanship," *The Daily Star*, November 18, 2021.

¹¹ Gurjit Singh, "Build a Strategic Role for IORA in Indo-Pacific," *The Tribune*, September 8, 2022.

It also includes secondary data culled from different sources, e.g., government and nongovernment documents, academic journals, seminar/webinar reports, books and newspaper articles.

The paper is divided into seven sections. After the introduction, the second section discusses the analytical framework. The third section explores the IORA's journey. Section four discusses the opportunities IORA provides for Bangladesh. Section five identifies the challenges. Section six provides the policy options for Bangladesh followed by the conclusion.

2. Bangladesh's Rising International Profile

It is important to raise the discussions whether Bangladesh can play an effective role in IORA. There is an increasing number of literatures that highlight Bangladesh's rising economic and diplomatic profile in the international arena.¹² Bangladesh's transition can be analysed based on the combination of its physical features, and the growing influence it has in the global political arena. From the perspective of material capabilities, some basic indicators like population, gross domestic products (GDP) and geographical location can be enumerated. Bangladesh with its estimated 165 million population stands as the 8th largest among the world.¹³ A closer evaluation of the population reveals its young and dynamic nature which is argued by most analysts to be an important asset for Bangladesh.

The country that started with foreign aid for its recovery and reconstruction has emerged as one of the fastest economies in the world within the span of 50 years.¹⁴ Bangladesh's GDP per capita stands at US\$2,734, higher than its other South Asian counterparts.¹⁵ With a GDP of over US\$460 billion, Bangladesh has become the 35th largest economy in the world and the second largest in South Asia, only behind India.¹⁶ Bangladesh has been able to ensure a steady food supply during the COVID-19 pandemic and able to keep the growth momentum.¹⁷ Bangladesh is projected to be the world's 28th largest economy by 2030.¹⁸

¹² Anu Anwar and Michael Kugelman, "America Should Bet on Bangladesh," *Foreign Policy*, December 1, 2021; Lailufar Yasmin, "Foreign Policy of Bangladesh: From Chrysalis of a State to an Emerging Middle Power," *Journal of International Relations* 14, no. 1-2 (2022): 23-53; David Brewster, "A Rising Bangladesh Starts to Exert Its Regional Power," *The Interpreter*, June 10, 2021, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/theinterpreter/rising-bangladesh-starts-exert-its-regional-power>.

¹³ "Population and Housing Census 2022 Preliminary Report," Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, August 2022.

¹⁴ Jasim Uddin Haroon, "Bangladesh among Likely 'The Fastest Growing' Economies in 2021," *The Financial Express*, March 12, 2021.

¹⁵ "World Economic Outlook Database 2022," *International Monetary Fund*, October 11, 2022, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/weo-database/2022/October/weo-report?c>

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ "How Bangladesh Managed to Feed 170mn Citizens without a Glitch during a Pandemic," *The Business Standard*, March 1, 2021.

¹⁸ "World Economic League Table (WELT 2022)," *The Centre for Economics and Business Research (CEBR)*, December 26, 2021.

Bangladesh's economic success has led scholars to brand it as "Bangladesh Miracle" or a "Bangladesh Surprise."¹⁹ Even, improvements in social indicators namely life expectancy, infant and maternal mortality, fertility and female labour force are noteworthy.

Besides, Bangladesh is also considered as an important actor due to its geopolitical position as a bridge between South Asia and South East Asia. The gaining of large sea territory following the maritime dispute settlement with its neighbour, has created opportunities for ocean-based economic growth and development. The Bay of Bengal is now regarded as Bangladesh's third neighbour. This location has enhanced the geopolitical significance of Bangladesh to the rest of the world²⁰ and it is considered as an important ground for great power rivalry.

From the perspective of foreign policy behaviour, Bangladesh has achieved a certain degree of manoeuvrability. Under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh promotes stable and peaceful regional order. Even with its moderately sized armed forces, Bangladesh is the leading troop-providing country in the UN Peacekeeping Missions with presently 7, 261 peacekeepers.²¹ Bangladesh currently holds the Chair of the United Nations Peacebuilding Commission.²² Its commitment is not only limited to contributing personnel but also to the ideational level of UNPKOs.

On the other hand, Bangladesh has emerged as one of the climate leader countries. Bangladesh has been very actively raising its voice for the miseries of countries disproportionately impacted by climate change. Bangladesh has successfully completed its second tenure as the Chair of the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF), and the Vulnerable Twenty (V20) Group. It has used its position as the Chair of CVF to strengthen climate actions and established the first Trust Fund of CVF. Bangladesh is also identified as the "Champion" country for implementing the Global Compact for Migration (GCM).²³

In addition, given the nature of the crisis, Bangladesh did not hesitate to open its border to provide shelter to the forcibly displaced people. The country is

¹⁹ M. N. Asadullah, A. Savoia and Wahiduddin Mahmud, "Paths to Development: Is There a Bangladesh Surprise?," *World Development* 62, (2014:138-154); Hemayetuddin Ahmed, *Crafted by History: An Interpretive Review of the Emergence of Bangladesh*, (Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 2014), 105; Ahrar Ahmad, "Development in Bangladesh: A Most Pleasant Surprise," *The Daily Star*, March 28, 2021.

²⁰ Lailufar Yasmin and Md. Rezwanaul Haque Masud, "Maritime Security in the Indian Ocean: Bangladesh Cognition," in ASM Ali Ashraf (ed.), *Intelligence, National Security and Foreign Policy: A South Asian Perspective*, (Dhaka: BILIA, 2016), 177-190; Rashed Uz Zaman, "Can Bangladesh Turn its Burdensome Geography into a Blessing?" *East Asia Forum*, September 01, 2017.

²¹ "Uniformed Personnel Contributing Countries by Ranking," United Nations, updated on November 30, 2022, https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/02_country_ranking_56_november_2022.pdf

²² "Ambassador Rabab Fatima elected chair of UN Peacebuilding Commission," *The Daily Star*, February 02, 2022.

²³ "Bangladesh Identified as Champion Country for GCM Implementation," *Dhaka Tribune*, July 22, 2020.

sheltering around a million forcibly displaced Rohingyas on humanitarian grounds. Its humanitarian approach to the Rohingya people has famed Bangladesh as a responsible international actor. All these have contributed to serving the maintenance of international peace and security. Bangladesh is also a strong advocate of regional cooperation. In this regard, Bangladesh's active engagements in multilateral platforms such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and IORA bear significance. There are certain challenges on the economic and foreign policy fronts of Bangladesh but undoubtedly, the recent developments and Bangladesh's role in global peace and security have created more space for playing roles in regional organisations such as IORA.

3. IORA's Journey: From Inefficacy to Reinvigoration

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 inspired other regions to pursue similar attempts, the IORA being one of them.²⁴ 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.²⁵ 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 cooperation and other peaceful endeavours. Recent changes in the international system demand that the countries of the Indian Ocean shall become a single platform.²⁶

This is the sentiment and rationale that underpinned the necessity of IORA. On 29-31 March 1995, the Mauritius Government convened a meeting with representatives from the government, business sectors and academia of seven countries to discuss the enhancement of economic co-operation among nations of the Indian Ocean Rim. The IOR-ARC was formally launched at the first Ministerial Meeting in Mauritius on 6-7 March 1997.²⁷ This meeting adopted the Charter and determined the administrative and procedural framework within which the organisation would develop. As mentioned earlier, since 2011, IORA has been going through a revitalisation process when India, Australia, Indonesia and South Africa took the chairmanship of the organisation.

²⁴ G.V.C. Naidu, "Prospects for IOR-ARC Regionalism: An Indian Perspective," *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 8, no. 1 (2012): 25.

²⁵ Denis Venter, "The Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Co-operation: Reality or Imagery?," 1.

²⁶ Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire*, (London, England: Harvard University Press, 2006), 281.

²⁷ V. Jayanth, "IOR-ARC Meeting Ends in Consensus," *World Focus*, April 1997.

During India’s chairmanship, IORA was able to agree on identifying six priority areas of cooperation, namely maritime safety and security, trade and investment facilitation, fisheries management, disaster risk management, academic and science-technology cooperation, and tourism promotion and cultural exchange.²⁸ The renaming of IOR-ARC as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) in 2013, as Australia took up the position of chair from India, was intended to represent a substantive effort to break with the organisation’s underwhelming past. In addition, women’s economic empowerment and the blue economy were later added as two key cross-cutting focus areas.²⁹ Indonesia’s chairmanship of the IORA was marked by the implementation of the first-ever IORA summit in Jakarta in 2017, held 20 years after the inception of IORA. The summit produced three relevant IORA documents, namely the Jakarta Concord, the IORA Action Plan, the IORA Declaration on Prevention and Combating Terrorism and Violent Extremism.³⁰ Subsequently, South Africa consolidated the achievements of the past chairs by strengthening IORA’s institutions and expanded ties between member states, other partners and important regional bodies like the African Union (AU).³¹ The UAE during its Chairmanship (2019-2021) was enthusiastic to uphold the spirit of the Association amidst the pandemic by hosting a number of virtual meetings especially the IORA Virtual Meeting of the Committee of Senior Officials and Dialogue Partner Engagement on COVID-19. This led to the first ever intersessional Joint Statement, emphasising IORA’s Solidarity and Cooperation in Response to COVID-19.³² The periodic adoption of such accords, declarations and communiqués must be rigorously evaluated based on concrete results. However, in the case of IORA, as observed by Alex Benkenstein, “these agreements have facilitated increased cooperation and brought a clearer focus.”³³

As far as the structure of the Association is concerned, the Council of Ministers (COM), comprising the foreign ministers, constitutes the highest decision-making body. The council meets annually. However, the Committee of Senior Officials (CSOs) that oversees the overall functioning is the real force behind the association. The work of the organisation is supported by a Secretariat based in Mauritius and is headed by the Secretary-General, who is appointed by the Council of Foreign Ministers. Currently,

²⁸ Bengaluru Communique, 2011.

²⁹ Mauritius Declaration on Blue Economy, 2015; Declaration on Gender Equality and Women’s Economic Empowerment, 2016.

³⁰ Ankit Panda, “Indian Ocean Rim Association Concludes First-Ever Leaders’ Summit,” *The Diplomat*, March 8, 2017.

³¹ Timothy Walker and Denys Reva, “Africa’s Chance to Boost Maritime Security in the Indian Ocean,” *Institute for Security Studies*, August 17, 2018, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/africas-chance-to-boost-maritime-security-in-the-indian-ocean>

³² Virtual Meeting of the Committee of Senior Officials (CSO) and Dialogue Partner Engagement on COVID-19: Responses, Cooperation, and Partnerships, May 25, 2020.

³³ Alex Benkenstein, “South Africa’s Indian Ocean Rim Association Legacy: A More Inclusive and Open IORA,” *South African Institute of International Affairs*, Policy Briefing 175, 2018.

Salman Al Farsi is appointed as the Secretary General of IORA. Besides, cooperation is facilitated through various substructures, including the Indian Ocean Rim Academic Group (IORAG), the Indian Ocean Rim Business Forum (IORBF), the Working Group on Trade and Investment (WGTI), the Working Group of Heads of Mission (WGHM), Working Group on Women's Economic Empowerment (WGWEE), the Working Group on Maritime Safety and Security (WGMSS), the Working Group on Disaster Risk Management (WGDRM), the Working Group on Blue Economy, the Working Group on Science, Technology and Innovation (WGSTI). The IORA Charter also allows for the establishment of specialised agencies. There are currently two such agencies: the Regional Centre for Science and Transfer of Technology, established in 2008 and it is situated in Iran, and the Fisheries Support Unit, established in 2003 and it is situated in Oman.

The Action Plan of IORA clearly reflects the enhanced engagement and focus of member states. It is the road map of the priorities of IORA with its target and time frame. The first Action Plan (2017-2021) was formulated by Indonesia. Bangladesh was assigned the duty to prepare the Second IORA Action Plan (2022-2027) which foresees the extension of the structure discussed above. Specifically, the plan calls for the establishment of Institutional Arrangements and Broadening Engagement (IAEB) as a functional body. Besides, the second Action Plan has set clear strategic objectives for each priority area with a specific timeframe divided into short-term, medium-term and long-term goals.

Here, it is important to discuss the role of the Chair of IORA. The Council of Ministers, on voluntary offer by the Member States, elects a Chair of the Association for a period of two years. If there is no voluntary offer, the Chair is elected on the basis of geographical consideration. Bangladesh was formally appointed as the IORA vice chairman in 2019 on a voluntary offer. The role of the Chair is to arrange, coordinate, host and preside over the meetings of the Council, the meetings of the Committee of Senior Officials and any other meetings as mandated by the Council.³⁴ Besides, the Chair also plays a leading role in agenda-setting and consensus-building within IORA. Sri Lanka's chairmanship (the current Vice-Chair) in 2023-2025 does not mean Bangladesh will no longer have a role to play. IORA has one special system named "Troika" which consists of the Chair, the Vice-Chair and the previous Chair who is assigned to report to the Member States, on any important matters relating to the Association, including a review of progress, the establishment of additional mechanisms, policy direction to IORA institutions, and the appointment and term of office, mandate, duties and the termination of the services of the Secretary-General.³⁵ Therefore, Bangladesh will remain in Troika and be part of the leadership up to 2025.

³⁴ "IORA Chair," Official Website, updated on 01 January 2023, <https://www.iora.int/en/about/iora-chair>.

³⁵ IORA Charter, 2018, p. 4.

4. Bangladesh and IORA: Opportunities

4.1 *Increasing Geo-Strategic Significance of the Indian Ocean*

The strategic position of the Indian Ocean is undoubtedly the first consideration for Bangladesh's involvement in the region through the mechanism of the IORA. From a geostrategic perspective, the Indian Ocean is a highly potential ground for power politics. Due to the shifting of the world's centre of gravity from Transatlantic to Indo-Pacific, the geopolitical significance of the Indian Ocean has increased as projected by strategic analyst Robert Kaplan, which signals a paramount shift in the locus of strategic rivalry among the big powers.³⁶ Fuelled by a naval arms race, the Indian Ocean is at risk of strategic competition between the big powers like the US, China and India similar to what is occurring in the South China Sea.³⁷ Since 2020, there are certain developments i.e., the US Indo-Pacific Strategy, the formation of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), AUKUS, and the European Union (EU) Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific have heightened the tensions in the Indian Ocean. This competition is fuelled by freedom of navigation exercises as well as competition to access the Indian Ocean's vast undersea mineral resources, fish stocks and network of commercial ports. Inevitably, these developments have projected the littorals of the Bay of Bengal including Bangladesh at the forefront of big power contention for influence.³⁸ Worryingly, there is a heightened risk of a skirmish at sea between increasing numbers of naval vessels which could spiral into a crisis and disrupt regional trade for the countries of the region including Bangladesh. Notably, almost 90 per cent of the export of Bangladesh depends on sea trade as well as 100 per cent of its energy requirements travels by sea.³⁹ Here, multilateralism can be an effective strategy for Bangladesh to minimise the challenges emerging from the new geopolitical order in the Indo-pacific region.

G.V.C. Naidu⁴⁰ and Ruchika Rishi⁴¹ have pointed out the potential role of IORA in the Indo-Pacific Region. One important point here to highlight is the presence of most of the prominent actors of the Indo-Pacific in IORA either as member states

³⁶ Robert D. Kaplan, *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power*.

³⁷ David Brewster, "Australia's Second Sea: Facing Our Multi-Polar Future in the Indian Ocean," *Special Report*, Australia Strategic Policy Institute, 2019.

³⁸ Anu Anwar, "Positioning the Bay of Bengal in the Great Game of the Indo-Pacific Fulcrum," *Journal of the Indo-Pacific Affairs*, March April 2022; David Brewster, "The Bay of Bengal: The Indo-Pacific's New Zone of Competition," *The Strategist*, December 2, 2014; Tariq A. Karim, "Understanding the Importance of Bangladesh in the Bay of Bengal and the Indo-Pacific," *The National Bureau of Asian Research*, May 21, 2022.

³⁹ Speech by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at the Dhaka Global Dialogue, Organised by Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS) and Observer Research Foundation (ORF), on November 10, 2019.

⁴⁰ G.V.C. Naidu, "Envisioning IORA's Role in the Indo-Pacific," *Journal of Indian Ocean Rim Studies* 2, no. 2 (2019):102-111.

⁴¹ Ruchika Rishi, "The Indo-Pacific Construct and IORA: A Perspective," *Journal of Indian Ocean Rim Studies* 2, no. 2 (2019):112-143.

or dialogue partners. The competitive scenario in the region discussed earlier calls for the IORA member states to work together to maintain the stability of the Indian Ocean Region. Foreign Minister A. K. Abdul Momen stated during the 21st COM, “given widespread interest about Indo-Pacific, we expect that IORA will chalk out its own vision of the Indo-Pacific, a vision for a free, open, peaceful, secure and inclusive Indo-Pacific region, based on international law and with shared prosperity for all.”⁴² Subsequently, IORA adopted the “IORA’s outlook on the Indo-Pacific (IOIP)” in 2022 which was led by India.⁴³ Besides, the IORA Action Plan (2022-2027) has emphasised ensuring freedom of navigation in accordance with international law. For example, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) is mentioned as one of the strategic goals and developing guidelines on an integrated IORA Maritime policy.⁴⁴ Furthermore, initiative has been taken to initiate the guidelines for strategic management and criteria for Dialogue Partners which is expected to pave the way for cooperation with and support from the Dialogue Partners to the fullest extent.⁴⁵ Some strategic analysts are optimistic that Bangladesh as the Chair of IORA will be able to engage with the more complex geostrategic and security challenges the region is facing. According to Delwar Hossain, “Bangladesh has sufficient credibility on the international stage. If Bangladesh manages to reduce tension in the region and bridge the gap between member countries, it will be possible for IORA to solve new and traditional problems that plague the region.”⁴⁶ This in turn will help Bangladesh to portray the country’s adherence to the principle of multilateralism and cooperation. However, one challenge for Bangladesh here is that IORA’s Charter stipulates that “decisions on all matters at all levels must be taken on the basis of consensus and that issues ‘likely to generate controversy and be an impediment to regional cooperation efforts’ would be excluded from deliberations.”⁴⁷ This has arguably prevented IORA from serving as a platform to engage with the more complex geostrategic and security challenges prevalent in the region which is obviously a missed opportunity.

4.2 *Increasing Economic Interest*

The economic potentials are among the considerations that encourage increased participation of Bangladesh in IORA. The geo-economic significance of the Indian Ocean continues to grow to this day. It is home to emerging economies like India, Indonesia, South Africa, Bangladesh etc. IORA countries own about 12 per cent

⁴² Speech by Dr. A K Abdul Moemen at the 21st Meeting of the Council of Ministers (COM) of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), 2021, <https://mofa.gov.bd/site/page/35aaad95-a7b2-4ca5-9823-944e9244bca1>.

⁴³ The Dhaka Communique 2022, November 24, 2022.

⁴⁴ IORA Action Plan 2022-2027, 1.

⁴⁵ Official Press Release: 21st IORA Council of Ministers Meeting on 17 November 2021 held by the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, <https://www.iora.int/en/events-media-news/news-updates-folder/official-press-release-21st-iora-council-of-ministers-meeting-on-17-november-2021-held-by-the-peoples-republic-of-bangladesh>

⁴⁶ “The IORA meetings are more important than you think,” *The Business Standard*, November 18, 2021.

⁴⁷ IORA Charter, 2018.

of 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 it as one of the largest potential labour force and massive market. 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).”⁴⁸ In 1997, the intra-regional trade numbered 21.3 per cent which increased to 35.9 per cent in 2016.⁴⁹ Bangladesh’s recognition of the Indian Ocean’s strategic value has been realised in more sensible policies. Bangladesh has been strengthening bilateral economic ties with the major countries of the Indian Ocean. Bangladesh’s trade with the major rim countries numbered only US\$40.5 million in 1995⁵⁰ which has increased to approximately US\$15 billion in 2016 and US\$27 billion in 2021 (Table 1). Besides, foreign direct investment flows from these countries to Bangladesh occupy an important place in Bangladesh’s economy as well.

Table 1: Volume of Trade of Bangladesh with Major IORA Member States, 2016 and 2021

Country	2016	2021
India	US\$5.7 billion	US\$10.46 billion
France	US\$3.1 billion	US\$3.48 billion
Australia	US\$1 billion	US\$2.5 billion
Malaysia	US\$2.4 billion	US\$2.6 billion
Indonesia	US\$1.4 billion	US\$1.8 billion
Thailand	US\$1.18 billion	US\$1.25 billion
Singapore	US\$1.5 billion	US\$2.96 billion
Sri Lanka	US\$75 million	US\$160 million

The Second Action Plan (2022-2027) focusses on three areas: increasing the volume of intra-IORA trade, the movement of people and business people within the IORA Member States and strengthening the Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). Although it is challenging to envision greater regionalism and economic integration in an age of rising populism, post-pandemic and a looming global recession, however, Bangladesh can take the advantage of IORA forums like Indian Ocean Rim Business Forum (IORBF) and the Working Group on Trade and Investment (WGTI) which are working as a platform to share information on trade and investment and business

⁴⁸ 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.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ “Annual Export and Import Receipts, 1995,” Statistics Department, Bangladesh Bank.

updates with a view to expanding cooperation with the business community and private sectors. One opportunity for Bangladesh here is the election of Sheikh Fazle Fahim, a former president of the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI), as the Chairman of IORBF.⁵¹ At the 23rd meeting of the Committee of Senior Officials, he noted “strategic roadmaps are needed to identify strong economic sectors for greater trade and investment among the member countries of the IORA.⁵² Bangladesh has undertaken a range of activities to reinvigorate the IORBF. Recently, it hosted a Leadership Summit in Dhaka on 20-21 November 2022 with the theme of “Roadmap for Post-Pandemic Progress.” The Leadership Summit covered all priority areas and cross-cutting issues of IORA, global inflation and stagflation, supply chain disruption and value chain integration, and energy, food and currency security. A key outcome of the Summit was the IORBF policy declaration.⁵³ The forum provided an opportunity to network with business people and policymakers from around the Indian Ocean Rim to discuss solutions to economic challenges faced regionally. Arguably, creating new businesses and new investment opportunities is crucial for Bangladesh to sustain the momentum of economic development. With the potential economic opportunities in mind, IORA becomes an institutional vehicle that could maximise Bangladesh’s economic interests.

4.3 *Blue Economy Opportunities*

Another impetus for Bangladesh in IORA is its drive toward sustainable growth based on blue economy. The Blue Economy has become important to IORA activity. This special focus area was recognised at the 14th IORA Ministerial Meeting in Perth, Australia, on 9 October 2014.⁵⁴ The First IORA Ministerial Blue Economy Conference (BEC) was held in Mauritius on 2-3 September 2015 where the Blue Economy Declaration was adopted.⁵⁵ In the Indian Ocean region, enthusiasm for the blue economy has been palpable. The Jakarta Summit in 2017 established 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 the sustainable development of blue economy sectors, including training and capacity-building programmes.⁵⁶

⁵¹ “Sheikh Fazle Fahim New Chairman of IORBF,” *The Financial Express*, November 17, 2021, <https://today.thefinancialexpress.com.bd/print/sheikh-fazle-fahim-new-chairman-of-iorb-1637085076>

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ “Indian Ocean Rim Business Forum Meet to Focus on Food Safety, Renewable Ocean Energy,” *The Business Standard*, November 20, 2022.

⁵⁴ Perth Communique, 2014, https://www.iora.int/media/8228/communiqu_final.pdf

⁵⁵ Mauritius Declaration on Blue Economy, 2015, <https://www.iora.int/media/8216/iora-mauritius-declaration-on-blue-economy.pdf>

⁵⁶ Jakarta Declaration on Blue Economy, 2017, <https://www.iora.int/media/8218/jakarta-declaration-on-blue-economy-final.pdf>

It is to be noted that the enormous potential has driven Bangladesh to pursue “Blue Economy” outlook for its economic development. Bangladesh has a pragmatic Blue Economy policy that focuses both on growth and sustainability. Bangladesh has been playing a leadership role in promoting the blue economy concept. However, the country is normally dependent on foreign technologies for exploring natural resources especially exploring petroleum and natural gas in the Bay of Bengal. It requires comprehensive technological and technical know-how for effectively exploring, drilling and extracting marine resources. Therefore, Bangladesh can use the opportunity to promote the blue economy and make the themes of the Blue Economy at the centre of the IORA activity. Bangladesh is playing a key role in this regard. When Bangladesh was Vice Chair of IORA, it hosted the third ministerial conference of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) in Dhaka in 2019, where participants unanimously called for sustainable use of the blue economy resources resulting in the “Dhaka Declaration on Blue Economy.”⁵⁷ The Dhaka Declaration included ideas, principles and norms of blue economy, to ensure a balanced approach between conservation and development. The chairmanship of IORA has provided Bangladesh to expand the blue economy agenda within IORA. In 2022, the International Seabed Authority (ISA) and IORA signed an MoU to expand collaboration in marine scientific research and deep-seabed exploration in support of the blue economy of the IOR.⁵⁸ Bangladesh played an important role in this regard, as it is the President of the 26th Session of the Council of the International Seabed Authority (ISA).

4.4 *Emerging Security Issues*

IORA provides a forum to address the emerging security threats that are vital for Bangladesh namely non-traditional maritime security issues, climate change and natural disasters and marine pollution, etc. IORA can help Bangladesh by providing a platform to discuss maritime issues exclusively. Indeed, in recent times, ensuring the safety and security on the sea has become the topmost priority of IORA. 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.⁵⁹ Subsequently, it resulted into the signing of an MoU on Search and Rescue Cooperation to expand the channels of communication and cooperation among the search and rescue agencies of the 16 member states namely Australia, Bangladesh, Union of Comoros, France, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Maldives, Malaysia, Madagascar, Mauritius, Seychelles, Singapore, South Africa, Thailand,

⁵⁷ “Dhaka Declaration on Blue Economy,” 2019, https://iora-sa.saeon.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Dhaka-Declaration_Sept-2019.pdf

⁵⁸ “ISA and IORA Sign MoU to Expand Collaboration in Marine Scientific Research and Deep-Seabed,” March 18, 2022, <https://isa.org.jm/news/isa-and-iora-sign-mou-expand-collaboration-marine-scientific-research-and-deep-seabed>

⁵⁹ Padang Communiqué, 2015.

Tanzania.⁶⁰ In 2022, IORA Search and Rescue exercises were hosted by Seychelles and Bangladesh with Australian support.⁶¹ These initiatives are particularly important to coordinate the collection and dissemination of information and data on maritime issues and sharing of maritime information on a regional basis.

Bangladesh is exceptionally vulnerable to climate change. Similarly, the Indian Ocean Region, tagged as the “World’s Hazard Belt,” is always at the forefront of vulnerability to natural disasters, including cyclones, floods, earthquakes and tsunamis. Here, Bangladesh can play a significant role as Bangladesh is regarded as a role model for tackling climate change.⁶² Considering the gravity of the crisis and the unifying role of IORA in this regard, Bangladesh proposed to include climate change as a cross-cutting issue of IORA during the 22nd COM.⁶³ It has the intention to align IORA’s initiatives and projects with the outcomes of the COP to tackle climate change in this region.⁶⁴ Member states have agreed in principle to adopt climate change as a cross-cutting issue. Bangladesh will provide a concept note/terms of reference and draft modalities for establishing a Working Group on Climate Change for finalisation.

The countries of the Indian Ocean region have expertise and experience in disaster risk management. Knowledge and information sharing and capacity building under the auspices of IORA will mitigate the risk and effect of the disasters in the region.⁶⁵ During the 21st COM in Dhaka in 2021 certain progress was made in this regard.⁶⁶ The establishment of the Working Group on Disaster Risk Management (WGDRM) is a noteworthy step in this regard. The adoption of the MoU between the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI) and the IORA for promoting resilience of new and existing infrastructures to reduce and eliminate climate and disaster risks within the Indian Ocean region. Besides, the IORA Guidelines for Human Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) was adopted. The guidelines for HADR will play an important role in Disaster Risk Management cooperation. As a disaster-prone country, Bangladesh could benefit from the expertise and assistance from IORA. At the same time, experience and expertise of Bangladesh can also be shared with the member states as Bangladesh is regarded as a role model for disaster management.⁶⁷ It has turned into one of the best countries in the world for minimising the losses of lives

⁶⁰ “Australia Leads Search and Rescue Exercise in the Indian Ocean,” Australian Maritime Safety Authority, September 23, 2022, <https://media.amsa.gov.au/media-release/australia-leads-search-and-rescue-exercises-indian-ocean>

⁶¹ “Australia Leads Search and Rescue Exercise in the Indian Ocean,”

⁶² “BD role model in climate change adaptation: Ban Ki-moon,” *The Financial Express*, October 17, 2018.

⁶³ The Dhaka Communiqué 2022, November 24, 2022.

⁶⁴ Statement by A K Abdul Momen, Foreign Minister of Bangladesh at the 21st Meeting of the Council of Ministers on November 17, 2022.

⁶⁵ Statement by Md. Khurshed Alam, Secretary, Maritime Affairs Unit, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bangladesh at the 14th Meeting of the Council of Ministers of IORA on 9 October 2014.

⁶⁶ The Dhaka Communiqué, 2021.

⁶⁷ Pinaki Roy, “Bangladesh Role Model for Disaster Management,” *The Daily Star*, May 24, 2022.

and property due to natural calamities by undertaking different disaster risk reduction and preparedness activities.

Marine pollution is another maritime security concern for Indian Ocean littorals including Bangladesh. Particularly, plastics pollution is a major concern. The littorals of the Indian Ocean generate high amounts of plastic waste every year. Besides, COVID-19 is worsening the problem and several studies show that there are clear linkages between marine plastic pollution and COVID-19.⁶⁸ Some experts have argued that protection of marine environment should be included in the agenda of IORA.⁶⁹ And, the issue of marine pollution has been highlighted in IORA in recent times. Indonesia and Germany have initiated a project titled “IORA Action Against Marine Debris,” which aims at developing an “IORA Declaration on Combating Marine Debris” and a “Strategic Framework of Action on Marine Debris in the Indian Ocean” which is expected to be adopted in 2023.⁷⁰ Bangladesh, as chair of IORA, should fully support the initiative. Notably, the Territorial Waters and Maritime Zones (Amendment) Act, 2021 of Bangladesh⁷¹ incorporates the gamut of ocean governance including marine pollution.

5. The Future Dynamics

There are several key challenges of IORA that will affect Bangladesh-IORA’s future dynamics. The first challenge is diversity. IORA is populated by countries with varying degrees of progress. It is hard to find other regions politically, economically, and culturally more diverse than this region.⁷² For instance, India has population around 1.4 billion, Indonesia over 273 million and Bangladesh over 169 million, in contrast to Mauritius with population of only around 1.3 million, Comoros just over 821,000 and Maldives around 522,000. Member states belongs to three different continents. Besides, three economies i.e., India, Australia and Indonesia dominate the region. This diversity is undoubtedly a potential obstacle in creating regional identity and realising more functional cooperation in the future.

⁶⁸ Dave Ford, “COVID-19 has Worsened the Ocean Plastic Pollution Problem,” *Scientific American*, August 17, 2020; Tony Mosley and Serena McMahan, “Covid-19 Pandemic Has Led to More Ocean Plastic Pollution,” *Wbur*, 12 October 2020; Ashifa Kassam, “More Masks than Jellyfish: Coronavirus Waste Ends up in Ocean,” *The Guardian*, June 8, 2020.

⁶⁹ Interview with Abul Kalam Azad, Professor, Department of International Relations, Jahangirnagar University, on October 21, 2022.

⁷⁰ “3rd Workshop on Development of IORA Declaration on Combating Marine Debris,” September 28, 2022, ora.int/en/events-media-news/events/priorities-focus-areas/blue-economy/2022/3rd-workshop-on-development-of-iora-declaration-on-combatting-marine-debris-and-a-strategic-framework-of-action-on-marine-debris-in-the-indian-ocean

⁷¹ “Territorial Waters and Maritime Zone (Amendment) Act, 2021,” Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, December 7, 2021.

⁷² 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.

The second challenge is that the IORA lacks the political will to set up an effective regional institution. IORA leadership in the past lacked the capacity to realise the opportunities for the region.⁷³ The initiatives are mainly led by a core group consisting of South Africa, India, Australia and Indonesia. The highest-level meeting held by the IORA at present is a council of foreign ministers; the summit of heads of government took place only once in 2017. The various IORA working groups are handled by senior officials or at even more junior levels.

The third challenge is the lack of visibility. Knowledge about the IORA is still not so high among the IORA countries. Part of the lack of priority for IORA by national governments comes from a lack of awareness and knowledge. People do not readily see how IORA impacts their lives, nor do they realise what potential it has to affect their lives for the better. This is partially true because the association has not communicated or marketed itself well enough to its citizens, since IORA itself has not focused on people as much as it focuses on states.

The fourth challenge is the lack of resources. 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. Salman al Farsi, the Secretary General of IORA has highlighted the variety of obstacles faced by the secretariat which hinder its effectiveness including budgetary and staffing limitations.⁷⁴ The matter of resourcing the secretariat has been a long-running concern within the association and remains a major drawback.

IORA's loosely organisational nature with the basic principles of consensus-based decision-making creates obstacle. The provision of consensus-based decision-making has arguably prevented IORA from serving as a platform to engage with the more complex geostrategic and security challenges exist in the region. Although maritime safety and security is now included in IORA's agenda, the focus has been predominantly on the less controversial matters of cooperation around safety at sea, search and rescue, and similar matters.

Another important challenge is the lack of engagement with other regional policy and research-oriented organisations. Although IORA has been granted observer status at the UN General Assembly and accredited to the AU, there has been limited engagement with other regional policy and research-oriented organisations. The struggle for Bangladesh as Chair of IORA, however, will be to continue to build on the momentum that the organisation has achieved since its revival and to implement the targets set in the Second Action Plan (2022-2027).

⁷³ Moutusi Islam, "Indian Ocean Rim Association at 20: An Assessment," *BIISS Journal* 38, no. 2 (2017): 164.

⁷⁴ Salman al Farsi, "25 Years of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA): Working towards a Prosperous, Sustainable and Peaceful Indian Ocean Region," paper presented in the 39th Sapru House Lecture, India, September 30, 2022.

6. Making Bangladesh's Role Effective

Bangladesh should seek to strengthen linkages between IORA Agenda with Bangladesh's domestic and foreign policy goals of maritime security. For instance, Indonesia and South Africa sought to align the IORA Agenda with Global Maritime Fulcrum and Africa's Integrated Maritime Strategy 2050 respectively. In this regard, Bangladesh could think of aligning it with Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100 and Blue Economy Development Work Plan.⁷⁵

Bangladesh needs to concentrate on increasing the visibility of the IORA with a view to raising the profile of IORA globally. The 25th anniversary should be regarded as an opportunity to raise the profile. In this regard, the celebration of the annual foundation day as IORA Day, the Secretary General's media familiarisation visits to Member States and the implementation of the IORA Champion Awards could enhance and enrich the IORA's profile. However, member states need to participate actively in promotional campaigns and activities. Besides, the academic community needs to be engaged more. Bangladesh should encourage greater Track 2 interactions among analysts in IOR which include using platforms of the Indian Ocean Dialogue (IOD) and IORAG. Besides, Bangladesh could propose to hold another summit-level meeting. The first summit-level meeting was held in 2017 which was seen as an important step in encouraging political will among IORA members. It is worth noting that IORA will shift from the project-by-project strategy it has been pursuing for years to a more organised and coherent strategic focus with a regular summit.

Bangladesh could try to ensure inclusiveness in IORA. Foreign Minister of Bangladesh A K Abdul Momen, rightly pointed out, "Our aim will be to move together as a region. To do that Bangladesh will prioritise the capacity building of SIDS, LDCs and Developing States with the help from other Member States and Dialogue Partners."⁷⁶ The motto is rightly framed by Bangladesh focussing on inclusiveness. Capacity building is prioritised which can be seen in proposing the Dhaka Development Initiative renamed as IORA Development Initiative (IDI) which is a means to share expertise and build capacity among members. The proposed establishment of the IORA Development Fund is expected to narrow the gap between the advanced economies and LDCs of IORA. However, there is a need for more people-centred and concrete development projects.

⁷⁵ Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Maritime Affairs Unit, *Blue Economy Development Workplan* (Dhaka: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021).

⁷⁶ A. K. Abdul Momen, Foreign Minister of Bangladesh, Statement Made at the Curtain Raiser event of the 23rd Meeting of the Committee of Senior Officials (CSO) and 21st Meeting of the Council of Ministers of the Indian Ocean Rim Association, on November 14, 2021, <https://mofa.gov.bd/site/page/35aaad95-a7b2-4ca5-9823-944e9244bca1>

Bangladesh needs to bring IORA's dialogue partners into its broader cooperation projects. According to the Bangladeshi perspective along with some other member states, these ten countries cannot be viewed just as observers but rather must be actively involved in IORA's activities. An excellent first step in that direction is the Ministerial "Strategic Dialogue" held between IORA Member States which is conducive to enhanced engagement of Dialogue Partners and strengthened cooperation. IORA is in the right direction to formulate the "Guidelines on the Strategic Management of IORA's Engagement with Dialogue Partners."

On a similar note, strengthening IORA's relations and engagement with other international and regional organisations needs to be given priority. In this regard, IORA Action Plan has identified Association for South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), European Union (EU), Indian Ocean Commission (IOC), etc. However, Bangladesh together with the Vice Chair Sri Lanka should pursue IORA's closer engagement with BIMSTEC to enhance its profile in the Bay of Bengal area as well. Key areas for the engagement should include maritime security, the blue economy and climate change.

In addition, it is necessary to focus on strengthening the secretariat. IORA Action Plan (2022-2027) intends to strengthen the secretariat. The Dhaka Communiqué (2022) acknowledged Bangladesh's effective leadership in finalising and implementing a new salary scale for IORA staff.⁷⁷ However, Bangladesh could push the idea of empowering the Secretary-General. Reputation and status are key characteristics that allow a secretary general to drive the organisation forward through direct and personal links with leaders across the region. Appointing a former high-level leader (head of government or state) assisted by a deputy with a bureaucratic background would help ensure future secretary generals to have more scope to engage member states' bureaucracies at a higher level.

Most importantly, Bangladesh needs to create a mechanism to monitor the implementation of the IORA Second Action Plan (2022-2027). As mentioned earlier, the formulation of the plan was assigned to Bangladesh when it was vice-Chair of IORA. Overall, the new Action Plan seems inclusive, comprehensive and aligned with the objectives of the IORA. However, there is an absence of a formal mechanism through which monitoring the implementation of the Action Plan will be ensured. One option could be assigning the Working Group of each priority area to periodically monitor and evaluate the implementation of the Action Plan.

⁷⁷ The Dhaka Communiqué 2022, November 24, 2022, 4.

7. Concluding Remarks

Bangladesh's chairmanship of IORA is a great momentum for the country to look at the Indian Ocean region. IORA is a vehicle that could maximise Bangladesh's strategic and economic interests. It is an opportunity for Bangladesh to play a bigger role in the Indian Ocean region. Besides, Bangladesh as chair has a chance to set agendas and closely work with the other member states specifically on the areas i.e., maritime security, blue economy, climate change and marine pollution, etc. Bangladesh could bring together some countries from three continents to create tangible outcomes and benefits for the people.

While there is room for optimism, Bangladesh as chair of IORA is going to face a number of major constraints. Diversity poses a major challenge to developing a sense of regional identity and bolstering future cooperation. Moreover, the political will is a pre-requisite to establish a successful regional entity which is still lacking in IORA. The association has been struggling for a long time with the issue of funding the secretariat, which is still a significant flaw. The lack of collaboration with other international and regional organisations focused on policy and research is a significant obstacle. Nevertheless, Bangladesh's challenge as IORA's Chair would be to maintain the momentum that the organisation has gained since its revival and to implement the Second Action Plan.

To make its role more effective, Bangladesh needs to enhance synergies between the IORA Agenda and its domestic and foreign policy objectives of maritime security. Bangladesh should work to boost the IORA's profile internationally by enhancing its visibility. Besides, Bangladesh should seek to deepen and broaden IORA's interaction with the Dialogue Partners to elicit their greater involvement in and support for the work program of IORA. Furthermore, priority should be given to developing IORA's connections with other international and regional organisations. In addition, establishing a mechanism with a view to tracking the implementation of the IORA Second Action Plan is essential. There is no doubt that it will be difficult to accomplish these goals and priorities, however, Bangladesh together with the other member states, could truly push the organisation to play a more significant role in the region and beyond.