

Maritime Security Governance and the Future Challenges

Event Report

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Executive Summary

Maritime security in the Indo-Pacific has grown increasingly complex amid rapid technological and geopolitical change. In this context, the Institute for Security & Development Policy (ISDP), in collaboration with Murdoch University's Indo-Pacific Research Centre (IPRC), convened a lecture by Captain Sarabjeet S. Parmar (Retd), Distinguished Fellow at the Centre for Strategy and Defence Research (CSDR), on the theme Maritime Security Governance and the Future Challenges.

This report summarizes Captain Parmar's presentation and the subsequent discussion, which examined the evolving dynamics of maritime security in the Indo-Pacific. The discussion outlined the rise of both traditional and hybrid threats, the growing salience of issues such as piracy, rerouting of sea lines of communication (SLOCs), submarine cable vulnerabilities, and seabed mining. It also explored the interplay between freedom of navigation and sovereignty under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the SEA (UNCLOS), the impact of China's expanding maritime claims, and the varied responses of the United States and its allies.

The session highlighted the complexity of defining maritime security in the Indo-Pacific, noting that the absence of universally accepted definitions has allowed states to utilise the maritime security concept flexibly.

At the global level, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has increasingly debated maritime security, with India and others emphasizing issues ranging from piracy and illicit activities to environmental protection and technological innovation. Regional differences in maritime stability were also identified, with hotspots in the Arabian Sea, Red Sea, and South China Sea, and potential instability in the Bay of Bengal and Mozambique Channel.

A recurring theme was the growing importance of middle powers and mini-lateral frameworks, which can sustain order in the face of great power contestation and the erosion of consensus around the UNCLOS regime.

Key Takeaway 1: Without Maritime Security, There Can Be No Global Security

In May 2025, the UN Secretary-General stated unequivocally that without maritime security there can be no global security. This statement can be seen as a culmination of a push that begun under India's presidency of the UNSC in 2021, where Prime Minister Modi announced five principles for enhancing maritime security: the removal of barriers to maritime trade; peaceful settlement of disputes; joint responses to natural disasters and non-state maritime threats; preservation of the maritime environment and resources; and responsible maritime connectivity.

While member states, including Greece, China, and the United States, expressed differing views about the how to implement their own maritime security regimes, they nonetheless found common ground in recognizing maritime security as central to global stability. This was reinforced in August 2025, during Panama's presidency of the UNSC, where a thematic debate was held structured around eight guiding questions, specifically addressing reinforcement of regional mechanisms, illicit maritime activities, piracy, compliance with UNCLOS, environmental protection, and the governance of novel technologies.

While there is no internationally accepted definition of "maritime security", Captain Parmar suggested that it is more useful to view it as an organising principle than impose a rigid definition. This enables states to identify areas of convergence and maneuver around contested issues.

Key Takeaway 2: Increase cooperation on "low-hanging fruit"

It was recommended that countries should cooperate on "low-hanging fruit" in the maritime security domain, such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), maritime domain awareness (MDA), and non-combatant evacuation operations (NEO), even when strategic outlooks differ. It was noted that since the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami, regional mechanisms such as the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) and the Indian Ocean RIM Association (IORA) have established standard operating procedures (SOPs), while the QUAD has also issued guidelines, leading to a more coherent set of practices that facilitate interoperability of these various regimes.

On NEOs, it was also recognized that instability could quickly force states to conduct evacuations without host nation support. India alone has millions of non-resident citizens abroad, with many living in coastal states. One example that was mentioned was the case of Yemen in 2015, where the Indian Navy reportedly evacuated 1783 Indian citizens and 1291 foreign nationals from 35 Nations due to the outbreak of intense fighting following the Houthi takeover and Saudi-led coalition airstrikes. The possibility of developing joint SOPs for NEOs to prevent potential issues during evacuations due to disasters or pandemics in unstable areas was also discussed as a potential endeavour worth pursuing by like-minded countries.

Key Takeaway 3: Regional Stability Can Change – and Quickly

While assessing and categorizing the stability of subregions in the Indo-Pacific is an important exercise, the stability of these regions is subject to rapid change. For example, while the Bay of Bengal was described as stable, it is nonetheless vulnerable to instability stemming from domestic turmoil in Bangladesh and Myanmar. Similarly, the Arabian Sea was characterized as moderately unstable, subject to India–Pakistan dynamics and Houthi activity. The Western Pacific is also moderately stable, but this may change as it increasingly becomes a site of great power competition.

Other regions are inherently more unstable due to the current geopolitical climate. The South China Sea remains highly unstable due to lawfare competition between some Southeast Asian nations and China.

The Southern Indian Ocean, particularly the Mozambique Channel, risks greater instability due to shipping rerouting and resource competition. Other hotspots include the Strait of Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb Strait, where instability on land increasingly spills into the maritime domain.

There are various ways that countries can maintain stability in these subregions. For example, the presence of more than 40 navies in the North Arabian Sea conducting joint operations, ranging from anti-piracy patrols to Combined Task Force operations through initiatives like the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), helps maintain maritime security in the region. However, the proliferation of regional and extra-regional frameworks raises questions about the effectiveness of some of these institutions, especially as their overlapping mandates and lack of coordination potentially dilute their impact.

Furthermore, other concerns remain, particularly related to bases in Hambantota, Djibouti, and Diego Garcia, where questions of sovereignty, neutrality, and access are ever present. It was also suggested that China's assertive behavior in the South China Sea could soon be exported to other regions.

Key Takeaway 4: Trade and Security Seen as Inseparable Issues

Sea lines of communication (SLOCs) remain the lifelines of global trade but are under mounting pressure from both traditional and hybrid threats. It was emphasized that instability on land frequently transmits to the seas, with the Gaza conflict fueling Houthi disruption in the Red Sea as a recent example. More broadly, non-state actors can undermine maritime security by seizing control of ships, blocking trade routes at strategic choke points, degrading ocean health, and jeopardizing the livelihoods of coastal communities.

Although piracy incidents have decreased in recent years, the risk of a resurgence in pirate activity and the rise of paramilitary insurgencies were mentioned as potential threats to maritime security. It was noted that countering piracy requires different strategies than countering politico-military groups such as the Houthis in the Indian Ocean, and both cannot be tackled with the same resources. Although the High Risk Area (HRA) designation for parts of the Arabian Sea that are vulnerable to Houthi attacks was removed in 2023, concerns persist, as insurers continue to classify certain waters as high risk. Insurance premiums are again rising in the Red Sea, the Somali coast, and the Mozambique Channel. Advisories highlight instability arising from the active conflict and insurgency in Myanmar spilling into the Bay of Bengal. This could downgrade Bay of Bengal stability from "highly stable" to "moderately unstable" and potentially affect trade.

Changing SLOCs may also increase the importance of hitherto less important regions and ports. For example, instability in the Red Sea is forcing the rerouting of SLOCs via the Cape of Good Hope and southern Indian Ocean, potentially raising the profile of locations such as the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka. Other examples include the increased strategic role of the Lombok and Sunda straits. As a result, the importance of monitoring and maintaining security through areas like the southern Indian Ocean is key, potentially also leveraging bases in Perth, Australia for this purpose.

The vulnerability of submarine communications cables to disruption and sabotage was highlighted as a critical concern, particularly as digital trade increasingly becomes key to global trade. A recent cable rupture in the Red Sea caused by an anchor drag highlights these risks, while China's growing dominance in cable repair services raises dependency concerns. Indo-Pacific partners should work together to develop mechanisms for cable security and rapid repair.

Key Takeaway 5: Lawfare is Here to Stay in the Indo-Pacific

Turning to UNCLOS, discussants debated the growing conflict between the treaty's twin pillars: freedom of navigation and sovereignty. This debate was centred in particular on China's increasingly expansive claims in the South China Sea. Analytically, these claims fall into four distinct categories: the extension of sovereignty over maritime features; the drawing of straight baselines; maritime zones; and historic rights. The first category of claims is exemplified by baselines drawn around the Paracels in 1996 and later around the Scarborough Shoal in 2024.

Furthermore, China has extended an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the Senkakus and hinted at one in the South China Sea. By linking ADIZ declarations to newly established baselines, China may strengthen its claims over these contested areas. China also reinforces these claims by conducting Gray Zone tactics against various neighbouring countries across geopolitical, economic and cyber domains.

To counter China's expansive claims, the US has also engaged in lawfare, particularly by undertaking Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS) and unilaterally engaging in seabed mining in areas beyond national jurisdiction. Regarding FONOPS, it was noted that while the US has attempted to broadly exercise its right to the freedom of navigation, allied participation remains uneven, raising doubts about support in a South China Sea crisis.

The United States has also distanced itself from the International Seabed Authority's framework, in particular, rejecting the "common heritage of mankind" principle underpinning its proposed moratorium on seabed mining in areas beyond national jurisdiction, and has shown reluctance toward a regime that mandates shared profits. In April 2025, the White House issued a directive to American agencies to accelerate seabed mineral exploration in both its national waters and the high seas. It is notable that the US is only one of a handful of countries that are technologically capable of exploiting seabed resources, heightening the potential consequences of these actions.

For its part, China has also attempted to leverage its technological edge in this area. For example, it announced new seabed mining equipment that is not only capable of extraction but also of damaging undersea cables. Additionally, China has signed agreements with the Maldives and other Pacific Island states, allowing it to conduct marine research surveys. There are also indications that China may already be engaged in seabed mining in areas that are poorly monitored.

Key Takeaway 6: Mini-lateralism as a Middle Power Tool in Global Politics

Contrary to common perceptions that the world is shifting from ‘rules-based’ order to a ‘deals-based’ order, it was argued that, instead, both orders operate in parallel; the question is which framework comes to dominate in practice. It was argued that trilaterals and other mini-lateral groupings—like India-Japan-Australia, i2U2, and India-France-Australia—may be more effective in driving ‘rules-based’ cooperation. However, there was also some skepticism about the future of the groupings like the Quad, given the uncertainty in US policy.

It was stressed that middle powers such as India, Japan and Australia can act collectively to pool economic, industrial and security strengths to manage regional challenges and maintain a more rules-based order. Shipbuilding was mentioned as an example of middle powers coming together to develop economic and industrial clout, noting the example of a South Korean Ship building company signing an MoU with India’s Cochin Shipyard.

Looking more broadly, other key middle powers in the Indo-Pacific — such as Indonesia, Singapore, South Africa and South Korea, among others— were noted as having the capacity to work together to enforce norms and balance against China’s growing assertiveness. However, it was observed that China only engages others when it perceives itself to be negotiating from strength. Middle Powers, therefore, must identify China’s vulnerabilities and work together to turn those weak points into areas of leverage to negotiate effectively.

Disclaimer: This report is solely based on the discussion and does not represent the views of either IPRC or ISDP.

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