

Maritime Challenges in the Indian Ocean: Security, Environment, and South Asian Cooperation

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Abstract

The importance of the Indian Ocean in the 21st century can be gauged from the global economic activity dependence on its waters. It ensures free flow of international trade, energy transportation, and regional connectivity. For South Asian countries, with a population of more than 2 billion, the Indian Ocean is their lifeline, providing connectivity with the rest of the globe, the Indian monsoon brings changes in the seasons for the sustenance of their agriculture sector, and supports millions of livelihoods. It also directly contributes to their food security. However, the region is devoid of unity due to age-old political differences, including border disputes, and the desire to lead and control single-handedly. In the maritime arena, South Asia faces a complex array of maritime challenges, including traditional security threats, geopolitical competition, and challenges to maintain vital sea lines of communication passing through it. These challenges have increased the importance of cooperation in maritime governance among littoral states. South Asia is also facing multiple challenges in non-traditional security domains. In addition to traditional threats like piracy, maritime terrorism, narcotics, small arms, and human trafficking, the Indian Ocean region is also severely exposed to the impact of climate change, increasing temperatures, melting glaciers, marine pollution, overfishing, and degradation of coastal ecosystems, limited environmental resilience, extreme weather events, and the depletion of marine biodiversity. No single state of the region has the capacity to tackle these colossal challenges, which necessitate collaboration and cooperation for managing governance of the sea to ensure healthy oceans for future generations. Existing regional initiatives and confidence-building mechanisms offer important platforms for collaboration, but greater institutional coordination and political commitment are needed. By enhancing cooperative approaches among South Asian states and broader Indian Ocean stakeholders, the region can better address shared security risks, environmental concerns, and the long-term sustainability of maritime resources.

Keywords: Indian Ocean, South Asia, Maritime Security, Environmental Sustainability, Ocean Health, and Maritime Cooperation

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Introduction

The Indian Ocean has been a center for economic activity since time immemorial, when humans started their quest for maritime trade. The Indus Valley civilization (2600–1900 BCE) was an established maritime power trading by sea with Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf (Oman Peninsula) (Mukherjee, 2022). At Lothal (a Harappan port city of the Indian Gujrat Coast, prominent for the 1st earliest artificial docks) (World, 2018), they invented and used hi-tech maritime technologies. It was famous for exporting carnelian beads, shell bangles, cotton and ivory. Indus people were good seafarers and had figured out the monsoon winds. The importance of the Indian Ocean and controlling its access routes has always been on the menu of great powers over the centuries. Admiral Mahan is also credited with the statement, “Whoever controls the Indian Ocean will dominate Asia, and the destiny of the world will be decided on its waters” (Kaplan, 2010). Although this quest to “*Control*” the Indian Ocean is the basic root cause of today’s great power rivalry. The Indian Ocean has the potential to generate 2.3 trillion US\$ by 2030 from fisheries alone (Guibert, 2025). Similarly, over 80% of the global seaborne oil trade, around 50% of the world’s container traffic, and about 30% of total world bulk cargo travel through IOR (Hashmi et al., 2023). IOR is also a transit route for approximately 80% of global maritime trade by value and 30% by volume. Similarly, this area is known to hold roughly 58% of the world’s proven oil & 46% of gas reserves and is crucial to maritime passage for over 60% of global GDP (NEXT IAS Current Affairs Team, 2025).

South Asia (comprising five countries, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives) shares the waters of the Indian Ocean and lies along the main sea trade lanes passing through the Indian Ocean. They share more than 10,000 km of combined coastlines, and their EEZs exceed 4.5 million sq. kms, and they are heavily dependent on the sea trade (more than 95% passes through these waters). The fishery sector feeds millions and guarantees their food security. Their warm waters and beautiful beaches attract millions of maritime tourists. It is therefore safe to acknowledge that the Indian Ocean is a lifeline for prosperity for all, especially for South Asian nations. These nations benefit from nature’s bounties like monsoon winds, warm waters, rich seafood resources, minerals, and oil & gas resources.

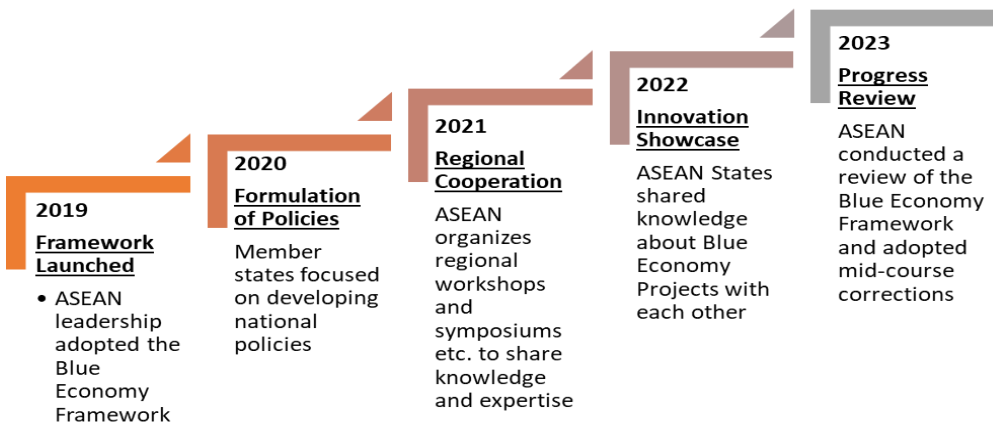
At present, South Asian Nations are facing various traditional and non-traditional challenges. The traditional challenges include the competing global powers’ Interests, Maritime Territorial Disputes & EEZ Delimitation challenges, Naval Power Asymmetry & Arms Competition, Protection of Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs), Militarization of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), Submarine Proliferation & Undersea Warfare Risks, Maritime Terrorism & threats to Port infrastructure, Security of Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs), presence of military/naval basis of extra regional states, Choke Points Politics, Shadow Fleet Operations, Limited Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA, Safety and Security of

Undersea infrastructure (Cables, Oil Pipelines, etc.) and Cyber & Hybrid Threats to Maritime Infrastructure, etc. (Haider, 2023).

The major non-traditional maritime challenges confronted by South Asia include Climate Change, Rising Temperatures & Coastal Vulnerability, Degradation of Marine Ecosystems & Fisheries Stress, Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing, Maritime Pollution & Port Environmental Risks, Non-availability of Maritime Governance / Resolution Platforms / Regional Cooperation, Implication of the Ocean Treaty at the regional level, Individualistic/nationalistic approach for resolving non-traditional maritime challenges, Competition Over Marine Resources (Blue Economy), Human, narcotics and arms smuggling, & Irregular Maritime Migration with Extreme Weather Events at Sea, etc.

Cooperation and collaboration amongst South Asian nations regarding the management and securing of the true benefits derived from the sea are, unfortunately, absent, hostage to India-Pakistan political relations. This single factor is letting all of us down and increasing the chances of further aggravating maritime challenges in the Indian Ocean. On the other hand, ASEAN, the EU, and African nations have understood the importance of shared responsibility for managing the ocean resources. They have developed joint management mechanisms without compromising their political/national interests. ASEAN leadership declared its intentions in 2019 and launched the “Blue Economy Framework”, providing a coordinated response mechanism for the sustainable use of marine and freshwater resources. Their focus for cooperation is on fisheries, tourism, renewable energy, and biotechnology, while guarding against environmental challenges.

Figure 1: *Timelines of the ASEAN Blue Economy Network*



The EU has been working jointly under the EU governance set up to manage its maritime affairs. The EU further refined its Blue Economy Framework, launched in 2021, with an aim to make ocean-related industries sustainable and align them with the European Green Deal and climate neutrality goals. The African Union's Blue Economy Strategy (2020) focuses on the sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, food security, and poverty eradication, identifying five key areas of cooperation: sustainable fishing/aquaculture; shipping/transportation; sustainable energy/minerals; environmental protection; and governance/policy frameworks (African Union – Inter-African Bureau for Animal Resources, 2019).

The question arises, *“Why allow political differences and land disputes to undermine cooperation to protect and manage our shared maritime spaces for future generations? We need to understand that “Indian Ocean is our shared lifeline... although geopolitics has divided us; the ocean unites us”, if we do not act now, we all are destined to lose with our future generations cursing us for our failures to protect the ocean health.”*

In South Asia, all is not discouraging. These states have been cooperating despite political differences. There are several initiatives within South Asia in the maritime domain that provide opportunities to work together. The majors include:

The key platforms where all South Asian nations are working together include the South Asian Seas Program (SASP), South Asia Co-operative Environment Program (SACEP), and Plastic Free Rivers & Seas for South Asia (PLEASE) (Uma Nabhi, 2023). The details of these are as follows:

- a. **SACEP:** It was initiated in 1982 to promote, protect, and manage the regional environment. This setup provided a non-political and functional platform in South Asia despite land-based tensions. It has 8 members (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka) with its headquarters in Colombo, Sri Lanka. The major areas of cooperation include climate change, waste management, and air pollution. The scope of work of SACEP is also applicable in the maritime domain, i.e., Marine pollution control (oil spills, waste, and plastics), Coastal ecosystem protection & resilience, Climate change adaptation for coastal states, and support for regional marine conventions and protocols.
- b. **SASP:** It is a UNEP-affiliated regional initiative adopted in March 1995 to protect the marine and coastal environment of South Asian nations, comprising Bangladesh, India, the Maldives, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. South Asia Co-operative Environment program (SACEP) acts as its secretariat. The Program mandate includes the protection of mangroves and coral reefs, marine litter and pollution action plans, coastal ecosystem resilience, and biodiversity, with primary focus on sustainable development. The Program is

the lead initiative launched by UNEP in marine environmental governance at the regional level and facilitates technical collaboration beyond political divides.

- c. **PLEASE:** It is another flagship cooperative program under SASP, which has helped to control the riverine and ocean-based plastic pollution at source in South Asia. The World Bank provided US\$ 37 M from 2020 to 2025 to execute the project (Group, 2020). This program focuses on the river-to-sea approach (upstream → coastal → marine), providing policy guidelines for collaboration and capacity building of the partner states. Furthermore, provide expertise/knowledge in monitoring, sharing relevant data, and advising on the best practices to be followed. It has strengthened regional cooperation on plastic waste management and helped to reduce the dumping of plastic waste into rivers, which ultimately ends up in the Indian Ocean (>10.2 million kg of plastic prevented and >626,000 kg recycled). The primary benefit of the project has been that it has provided a common platform for South Asian nations to pursue collective environmental stewardship despite political differences, a rare success story in the present-day geopolitical environment of the Indian Ocean Region. It has also helped partner states to implement global commitments on marine pollution, especially plastic litter, into a regional response based on cooperation in a formal action plan format.

In the Indian Ocean and particularly in South Asia, there are several platforms available that provide the necessary cooperative infrastructures for exchange of ideas and expertise for meeting common challenges of the 21st century. The major such organizations are:

- a. **Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA).** This is one of the largest cooperative inter-governmental organizations available in the Indian Ocean region (IOR), established in 1997, with an aim to focus on promoting regional cooperation and sustainable development of the Blue Economy. At present, it has 23 nations as its members with 12 dialogue partners, including the US, UK, and China. It has a permanent secretariat set up in Mauritius with a mandate to focus on maritime security, trade, and fisheries (Indian Ocean Rim Association, 1997). Pakistan and Myanmar are not its members despite sharing the coastal waters of the Indian Ocean. Pakistan has been denied entry because of Indian opposition, whereas Myanmar is not part of the organization, primarily due to its handling of the Rohingya crisis / human rights violations, for which Bangladesh, South Africa, and Somalia have been opposing its entry.

b. Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS). It is primarily a security-centric debate platform where members share their expertise to address their security challenges at sea. The forum provides opportunities for increased maritime security cooperation, discusses regional maritime challenges, and promotes bilateral cooperation amongst member states. The forum, launched in 2008 by India, has 25 active members and 9 observer states. This forum works similarly to the Western Pacific Naval Symposium. Navies and maritime security agencies/coastguards of member states share their knowledge during the IONS activities. Forum also provides opportunities like essay writing competitions, Webinars, Seminars, workshops, and symposiums. Pakistan has been participating in IONS despite the political differences between India and Pakistan. However, Pakistan was not invited in IONS Conclave of Chiefs, held during the 9th edition of MILAN Exercise in Visakhapatnam, India, from 15-25 February 2026. China and Türkiye were also excluded from the exercise, the Conclave of Chiefs, and the International Fleet Review (IFR).

c. Combined Maritime Forces (CMF). A coalition of 47 willing nations working together to uphold the International Rules-Based Order (IRBO) under US arrangements in the Indian Ocean region. The details are as follows:

- i. The US 5th Fleet Command Center at Bahrain acts as its nerve center; five different Task Forces (CTF 150 - Maritime Security Operations outside the Arabian Gulf, CTF 151 - Counter-Piracy, CTF 152 - Maritime Security Operations inside the Arabian Gulf, CTF 153 - Red Sea Maritime Security, and CTF 154 - Maritime Security Training) work independently for a common cause.
- ii. The CMF is responsible in area of more than 3.3 million sq. miles of the Indian Ocean, focusing on countering illegal activities of non-state actors, including counter-narcotics, counter-smuggling, counter-piracy, regional cooperation, and humanitarian and environmental challenges.
- iii. Pakistan has been an active member of CMF since 2004 and has commanded CTF 150 (14 times), whereas CTF 151 has been commanded 11 times.
- iv. India, which joined as a full member of CMF in November 2023, has commanded only once, i.e., CTF-154 in 2026(U.S. Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT), 2026).

d. AMAN Naval Exercise. Since 2007, Pakistan has been hosting an international Naval Exercise called “AMAN” with the motto "Together for Peace." The details of the exercise are as follows:

- i. The major feature of the exercise is that all major naval powers, including the US, China, Russia, UK, EU, CARs, China, Japan, Australia, African, Far &

Middle Eastern nations, and all major IOR countries except India, etc., have been participating in this exercise.

- ii. To date, nine editions of the exercise have been conducted in Pakistani waters. The last of which was conducted in February 2025, when more than 60 nations participated (ships, aircraft, Special Operations Forces, and Explosive Ordnance Disposal teams) in the exercise.
- iii. The exercise's focus is to improve interoperability among participating navies to combat the maritime security challenges and foster cooperation against terrorism and piracy.
- iv. This exercise has now become a permanent bi-annual feature of global maritime activities.

e. AMAN Dialogue. Pakistan Navy has added another feature in the Exercise AMAN by instituting “AMAN Dialogue” in its 2025 exercise. The details of the AMAN Dialogue are as follows:

- i. More than 60 naval chiefs, coast guard, and maritime security heads participated in the dialogue held in Karachi.
- ii. Dialogue is a strategic forum for global naval leadership to discuss shared challenges to foster cooperation under the theme "Together for Peace".
- iii. The areas of discussion include piracy, narco-trafficking, resource exploitation, raising awareness about the Blue Economy, socio-economic uplift of coastal communities, enhancing maritime cybersecurity, impact of AI & innovation of maritime technologies on naval warfare, and the protection of subsea infrastructure.
- iv. The beauty of the dialogue was that naval leadership from opposing schools of thought, like the US, China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Russia, Germany, etc., were present under one roof to address the common challenges faced by maritime security professionals. The key role of the Pakistan Navy, as a key regional mediator, has been formally acknowledged at the global level through the holding of both “AMAN Exercise” and “AMAN Dialogue” (Zahid, 2024).

f. MILAN Naval Exercise. The MILAN exercise is India’s initiative since 1995 under India’s "Look East" policy. The details are as follows:

- i. Over the decades, it has evolved from a regional confidence-building meeting into a massive multilateral platform for global maritime cooperation.
- ii. The exercise is now a flagship event hosted by the Indian Navy with a focus on developing collective response mechanisms against piracy and maritime terrorism while reinforcing a "rules-based" maritime order.

- iii. In its 13th edition, over 72 countries are likely to participate, and around 60+ ships & 50 naval aircraft will participate in the Fleet review.
- iv. The exercise is now being held from its new permanent base in Visakhapatnam (15-25 February 2026).
- v. The exercise Motto is “Camaraderie, Cohesion, and Collaboration”.
- vi. This exercise also includes the International Fleet Review (IFR) 2026 and the IONS Conclave of Chiefs.
- i. **Indian Ocean SAR Framework.** It is a collaborative arrangement within IOR states to provide maritime safety and rescue coordination. It has been conceived and developed through the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) platform. The details of the Framework are as follows:
 - i. This framework, the IONS SAR Working Group, has been established, which also oversees the development of the IONS SAR Manual, which helps navies in establishing coordination protocols in case of mass rescue operations in the IOR.
 - ii. It is also obligatory for all member states to establish Maritime Rescue Coordination Centers (MRCCs). Pakistan has established its JMICC at Karachi in 2013 with a mandate to act as nerve center of for coordination/information sharing for activities related to Maritime Terrorism, Piracy, Organized Crime (smuggling of narcotics, weapons, and humans), Illegal Exploitation of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), specifically fishery crimes, Marine Pollution and coordination for Search and Rescue (SAR) in assigned area in North Arabian Sea.
 - iii. India’s Information Fusion Centre (IFC-IOR) at Gurugram acts as the primary base for sharing real-time data about rescue needs. IOR is also prone to cyclones, tsunamis, and earthquake threats. The IO SAR Network also provides disaster response to such natural calamities in a pre-agreed structure for Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR).
 - iv. Pakistan has been an active member since joining IONS in March 2014. At present, Pakistan is a member of the Humanitarian Assistance & Disaster Relief (HADR) and Information Sharing & Interoperability. Pakistan has recently hosted an international workshop under the banner of IONS in April 2025 in Karachi. 42 delegates from various countries participated in the Workshop, including an Indian delegate who addressed the conference online.
 - v. Pakistan and India have been cooperating under the same arrangements to provide SAR facilities at high seas. Pakistan Maritime Security Agency (PMSA) and the Indian Coast Guard have established a hotline for coordination purposes. Similarly, heads of both organizations have been

meeting online at regular intervals for better coordination. Unfortunately, in the recent past, these interactions have been limited due to rising political tensions between the two nuclear neighbors.

h. Bay of Bengal program- Inter-Governmental Organization (BOBP - IGO).

It is a regional fisheries body of four partner nations, including India, Bangladesh, the Maldives, and Sri Lanka, with a mandate to address Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing. In addition, it also looks after the management of sustainable marine resources and focuses on the socio-economic uplift of small-scale fishing communities. It was originally a FAO sponsored project, launched in 1979, but later got independent project status in 2003(AsghAzhar17).

i. SAARC (Maritime Dimensions). The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was conceived with a continental mindset, as there is rarely a direct reference to a need of common Indian Ocean strategy or framework to keep the Indian Ocean healthy. Although all its members are heavily dependent (over 90%) on maritime trade with their global partners, as well as major trade routes passing through or near these coastal and island nations. Unfortunately, maritime cooperation amongst SAARC members has been held hostage to India - Pakistan sour bilateral relations, which have severely impacted the true spirit of SAARC. Virtually all activities of SAARC have been stagnated for ages, despite 17 summit declarations to date. However, SAARC nations are increasingly focusing on their Blue Economy potentials and trying to cooperate outside the SAARC mandate to best utilize the available marine resources, including flora and fauna.

j. Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical & Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). It is a regional forum comprising 7 states (including Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Thailand, and Myanmar). The mandate of the forum includes regional development & cooperation in maintaining regional peace to ensure stability. The forum is primarily focusing on cooperation in the fields of economy and technical support (The Newspaper's Correspondent, 2018)

The details of the recent development under the BIMSTEC banner are as follows:

- i. The 6th BIMSTEC Summit was held in Bangkok, Thailand, on April 4, 2025, under the theme "*Prosperous, Resilient, and Open*".
- ii. During the Summit, BIMSTEC Bangkok Vision 2030, a strategic roadmap, was adopted. The main feature of the vision is to transform the region into a "Prosperous (expediting the arrangements of Free Trade Agreement), Resilient (measures to reduce the impact of natural or manmade disaster, developing public health systems, and establishing Centre for Weather and Climate), and Open (promoting people to people contact, tourism and cooperation in education)" bloc by 2030(BIMSTEC, 2025)

- iii. An Agreement on Maritime Transport Cooperation was also signed to improve regional maritime connectivity on the occasion.

k. Colombo Security Conclave. It is a security-oriented organization comprising 6 states, including India, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Mauritius, Bangladesh, and Seychelles (Solanki, 2023). The details of CSC are as follows:

- i. The platform complements BIMSTEC, which is purely focused on the economy and development.
- ii. CSC is a National Security Advisor's consultative platform to develop consensus among its members to address the challenges in IOR.
- iii. It has a permanent secretariat in Colombo, Sri Lanka, and has adopted its charter since 2024. CSC areas of cooperation are as follows:

Maritime Safety and Security (Anti-piracy, illegal fishing (IUU), and maritime domain awareness).

Countering Terrorism and Radicalization (Extremist threats and maritime-based terrorism).

Combating Trafficking and Transnational Organized Crime (Drug, arms, and human trafficking).

Cyber Security and Protection of Critical Infrastructure (Ports, maritime infrastructure, and digital communication networks).

Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) (Coordinating assistance against threats like tsunamis, cyclones, and climate-induced hazards).

- iv. It is opined that India is using these organizations, including BIMSTEC, to take a lead role in the region as well as control of activities in and around its areas of interest. In 2025, Indian National Security Advisor (NSA) Ajit Doval argued for shared radar and surveillance networks to provide India with an advantage in compiling a maritime picture in real time. This will also facilitate the Indian Navy in establishing radar stations and listening posts, even naval bases, thus creating an environment for stationing the Indian Navy ("Foot on Ground") on foreign soils. These naval setups will help India in strengthening its capabilities for the role of "Net Security Provider" in the Indian Ocean.

The question that arises is "Why and how much Cooperation between South Asia is needed, and especially *why* now? Furthermore, if we do not act now, what are the likely scenarios because of our inaction or individualistic approach? The answer is very simple. No single nation or state can manage shared spaces in the Indian Ocean, nor can the bilateral arrangements between two states produce the desired result. We also know that the sea does not have any physical barrier, nor can we control the movement of water, temperature, or fish migration. Loss of maritime

environment over or under the sea in one country's EEZ or continental shelf due to climate change, pollution, or any other nontraditional security challenge will affect the neighboring state equally. The example of the *Tasman Spirit* sinking in approaches

to Karachi harbor and subsequent oil spillage, which even threatened the Indian Gujrat coast. Similarly, the 2004 tsunami impacted all coastal and Island states (Khan, 2003).

No single nation or state can address the maritime challenges of the 21st century in the shared spaces of the Indian Ocean.

IUU fishing is also impacting fish catch in South Asian EEZs. Reportedly, Pakistan has lost fish stocks by more than 80% over the decades, primarily due to IUU fishing. It is estimated that the fishery sector alone can generate trillions of dollars in South Asia if collective wisdom prevails and a concerted effort against IUU fishing to join hands is made. We are also witnessing an increase in the frequency of cyclones in the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea. Similarly, plastic and oil pollution in the Indian Ocean is creating serious challenges for marine life and threatening the global food security chain. Hence, answering the earlier question is very simple: nations must cooperate at sea as they do not have physical barriers to restrict the impact of climate change, rising temperatures, pollution, overfishing, and oil spills. This cooperation amongst South Asia can stabilize the fisheries sector and effectively manage HADR requirements. Ultimately, it will result in cleaner seas, a healthy atmosphere, and ensure food security for our future generations.

At the global level, we have several success stories of maritime cooperation regarding the impact of development on the health of our oceans. ASEAN countries did not wait for the normalization of relations between ASEAN states. They identified common maritime threats in 2019 and adopted the “*Declaration on the Blue Economy*” in 2021, highlighting principles of sustainability, resilience, inclusivity, and cross-sectoral integration. This declaration not only covers the oceans and coasts but also covers the freshwater systems (BR Web Desk, 2025). In 2023, the scope of this framework was further expanded. The details are as follows:

- a. Integrating upstream-downstream sectors.
- b. Developing and implementing harvest strategies (100+ types of fish) for sustainable fisheries.
- c. Developing, coordinating, and promoting marine tourism with a focus to earn US\$100 billion+ regionally.
- d. Reviving cooperation in research on exploiting renewable energy sources (like offshore wind and tidal projects in the South China Sea)
- e. Blue Carbon (replantation of mangrove and seagrass, which helps in reducing CO₂). Estimates suggest that 50% of global mangrove forest areas

have declined in the last few decades (IUCN Species Survival Commission (SSC) Mangrove Specialist Group, 2024). Mangroves help in storing CO₂ in soil, sediments, and biomass. It is worthwhile to mention that mangrove forest covers only 0.7% of the tropical forest area but reduces CO₂ by 10%.

f. Launching of “Aquatic waste management” (Collaborative efforts successfully reduced 20% of marine litter in pilot areas). This waste management defined the roles of Governments, Banking Institutions, Donor Agencies, the Private Sector, and Communities involved.

g. Promoting research on Biotechnology for harnessing marine microbes for the pharmaceutical industry.

h. Developed regional marine litter guidelines. The key elements of the guidelines were:

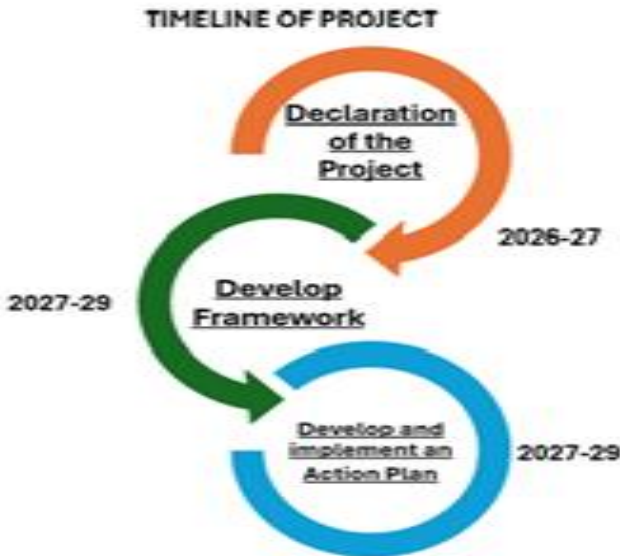
- i. Assisting member states in developing and adopting relevant laws in conformity with global standards.
- ii. Allocating at least 15% of coastal waters as a “Marine Protected Area”.
- iii. Cooperating with international donor agencies for cooperative projects to control plastic pollution flowing from the hinterland to seas and oceans.

Pakistan has always been contributing to developing consensus amongst neighbors to meet the challenges of the 21st century. Pakistan has always advocated for “Oceans must be zones of peace, not conflict” and supported Sri Lanka’s call for the Indian Ocean as a Zone for Peace in 1971 and later, the UN General Assembly also adopted the resolution UNGA 2832 (XXVI) (United Nations General Assembly, 2026).

“Oceans must be zones of peace, not conflict.”

Pakistan believes in collaboration and cooperation amongst states. Pakistan has always supported movements, arguments, and efforts to develop infrastructures based on the principle of equality, progress, and a win-win situation for all partners. In the maritime field, Pakistan has ratified more than 25 multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) and 17 IMO conventions to date. Pakistan is in the process of launching a revised National Maritime Policy (NMP) to meet the national needs of the maritime sector, while adhering to global and regional needs. The draft NMP emphasize on development of the Blue Economy and calls for regional cooperation. Pakistan also believes that non-traditional maritime challenges are common to all states of the IOR; hence, trust can be developed despite political differences.

Figure 2: *Timeline of the Project*



Proposal for Maritime Collaboration in South Asia

It is high time for South Asia to join hands to manage the challenges of the Indian Ocean. The cardinals of the proposal for jointers in maritime collaboration are appended below:

- a. **Initial Phase (2006-27) – Declaration of the Project.** A ministerial-level meeting of South Asian Nations to be held to agree on the need for a joint project to ensure and preserve ocean health. Sub-committees are to be formed to identify the sectors and develop a detailed proposal for cooperation to work under a joint project. This proposal may focus on the identification of maritime challenges at hand, including Blue Economy, IUU Fishing, Climate impact, and maritime pollution.
- b. **Mid Term Phase (2027 - 29) – Develop Framework.** Sub-committees can work together to develop a Framework of Cooperation for adoption at state-level meetings.
- c. **Long Term Phase (2029 Onward) - Develop & Implement Action Plan.** The Action Plan may focus on the following areas of cooperation:
 - i. Giving priority to the Blue Economy in national policies.
 - ii. Developing and sharing data/ Domain awareness.

- iii. Developing and adopting common maritime standards for South Asia, as per global practices.
- iv. Scaling up of the PLEASE Project to reduce Pollution/ Plastic pollution in the Indian Ocean.
- v. Taking adequate steps for sustainable fisheries in respective areas of responsibility, including curbing IUU fishing practices.
- vi. Developing a robust HADR organization to support each other.
- vii. Developing and Adopting Climate Resilience Policies.

Implementation Strategy. It is also an accepted fact that South Asian nations have divergent views, and their political leadership is hostage to past relationships and land disputes; hence, bringing them under one roof and agreeing to cooperate in maritime fields is a gigantic task. Here comes the key role of Academia, the media, press, and maritime professionals, including environmentalists, who understand the complexities of the issue and the cost of “*Do Nothing*”. They can collectively create an environment of cooperation and collaboration amongst South Asian nations. Their writings and interactions will bring the necessary change in the approach of their respective governments. The following strategic options can be exercised to form positive public opinions for collaboration:

- a. In the initial phase, Track II Dialogue should be promoted to create a positive environment for collaboration amongst the South Asian states.
- b. All states to develop Pilot Data Centers for producing accurate and factual data for better decision-making. Subsequently, these data centers can share relevant information on need basis.
- c. Providing relief to the victims of human or natural disasters is the prime responsibility of all humanity. Bilateral or multilateral HADR drills will be organized, and lessons can be shared with others.
- d. The new setup will require substantial funding to attain its objectives. Participating nations can contribute for initial setup in accordance with their areas of responsibility. Moreover, funding can be acquired from the World Bank, Asian Development Bank (ADB), and United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) on a line of PLEASE-style grants.
- e. The new setup can also align its desired output with the United Nations’ SDGs (especially SDG 14 – Life underwater) and other goals. Similarly, the program will also assist with the challenges of preserving Biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction (BBNJ). The envisaged role of South Asian countries is to develop the program, facilitate linkages between maritime professionals and environmentalists, and subsequently implement the program in the true spirit.

Conclusion

The concluding argument is that the Indian Ocean connects the Atlantic, Pacific, and Southern Oceans. Global trade is dependent on the neutrality and the healthy Indian Ocean. Unfortunately, we, the South Asians, have yet to realize the true potential of Allah's blessing in the shape of the Indian Ocean. It is high time that we move on and join hands with each other, bypassing bilateral political differences, to keep a healthy Indian Ocean for our future generations. We critically need to connect regionally in ocean affairs. Mind it, the cost of inaction will be colossal and unmanageable. It will initiate loss to the maritime environment, polluted seas, and ultimately impact on the livelihoods of the entire region. Cooperation and collaboration to protect the environment and health of the ocean will result in cleaner waters and bring prosperity for the entire region.

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