



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



DPG POLICY BRIEF

Assessing the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness

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Admiral R Harikumar, Chief of Naval Staff, India, with International Liaison Officers at IFC-IOR on June 13, 2022. Source: Indian Navy.

Indian Ocean Activity as seen at IFC-IOR Gurugram. Source: Indian Navy

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Introduction

"We welcome a new maritime domain awareness initiative, the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA), designed to work with regional partners to respond to humanitarian and natural disasters, and combat illegal fishing"¹. So said the Quad leaders at their summit on May 24, 2022, describing the IPMDA as "embodying what the Quad stands for: catalysing our joint efforts towards concrete results that help make the region more stable and prosperous"².

Considerable publicity has marked the launch of the IPMDA, both through official statements and media commentaries. An assessment of how the initiative serves India's purpose, however, needs to be made. On the one hand, the IPMDA is projected as transforming "the ability of partners in the Pacific Islands, Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean region to fully monitor the waters on their shores and, in turn, to uphold a free and open Indo-Pacific"³. On the other, it has been indirectly linked to China's intimidatory behaviour⁴, designed to nullify China's attempts to build 'security perches' in the Pacific Islands⁵, intended to check China's 'grey zone' maritime activities⁶ and to enable tracking of "dark shipping"⁷.

This brief seeks to demystify the IPMDA, as seen from India's perspective.

¹ Quad Leaders' Joint Statement, May 24, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/05/24/quad-joint-leaders-statement/>

² Ibid.

³ Fact SHEET: Quad Leaders' Tokyo Summit, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/05/23/fact-sheet-quad-leaders-tokyo-summit-2022/>

⁴ Quad unveils Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness to monitor the waters, <https://www.firstpost.com/world/quad-unveils-indo-pacific-maritime-domain-awareness-to-monitor-the-waters-10712561.html>

⁵ With an Eye On China, Quad Unveils IPMDA To Bolster Surveillance, Security in the Indo-Pacific, <https://www.news18.com/news/world/with-an-eye-on-china-quad-unveils-ipmda-to-bolster-surveillance-security-in-indo-pacific-5233159.html>

⁶ How the Quad can Take on China in the 'Gray Zone', <https://www.19fortyfive.com/2022/05/how-the-quad-can-take-on-china-in-the-gray-zone/>

⁷ Quad set to launch maritime security initiative to track 'dark shipping' in Indo-Pacific, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/us/quad-set-to-launch-maritime-security-initiative-to-track-dark-shipping-in-indo-pacific/articleshow/91758120.cms>

Geographic Span

The first area to note is the geographic span of the initiative. “The IPMDA will build a faster, wider, and more accurate maritime picture of near-real-time activities in partners’ waters. This common operating picture will integrate three critical regions – the Pacific Islands, Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean region – in the Indo-Pacific”⁸. The omission of East Asia is conspicuous, but we understand that the US and Japan between them already possess a well-developed MDA picture of the East China Sea.



Admiral R Harikumar, Chief of Naval Staff, India, with International Liaison Officers at IFC-IOR on June 13, 2022. Source: Indian Navy.

More important, the IPMDA’s coverage in the Indian Ocean appears limited. According to the Fact Sheet that preceded the Leaders’ announcement, four existing Information Fusion Centres are to be linked: the ones at Gurugram, Singapore, the Solomon Islands and in Vanuatu. Linkage with the Regional Maritime Information Fusion Centre at Madagascar, operated by France and the EU, among others, is conspicuously absent. So is linkage with either the MDA component of US Operation Sentinel or the European Maritime Surveillance Mission in the Straits of Hormuz (and Bab-el-Mandeb). At a time when India has positioned a Liaison Officer at NAVCENT Bahrain and joined the Indian Ocean Commission, the Djibouti Code of Conduct and the Coalition Maritime Force at Bahrain as an observer, this omission becomes obvious.

⁸ FACT Sheet: Quad Leaders’ Tokyo Summit, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/05/23/fact-sheet-quad-leaders-tokyo-summit-2022/>

It must be concluded from this that the IPMDA is presently coterminous with the Area of Responsibility of US INDO-PACOM, which would be the lead US agency charged with its implementation. India has been emphasising to the US that dividing the Indian Ocean arbitrarily into two halves just to accommodate US Command boundaries is not viable. It could be that India will be able to ensure that the Western half of the Indian Ocean is linked up in due course. However, the reality that the IPMDA as it stands only partially covers the geographic span of India's maritime interests in the Indian Ocean is a visible limitation.

Tracking of Dark Shipping

The International Maritime Organisation (IMO) requires all ships displacing over 300 tons and engaged in international voyages (and all cargo ships of over 500 tons displacement even if not engaged in international voyages) to be fitted with an Automatic Identification System (AIS). The system essentially enables identification and tracking of vessels (including by satellites). Designed initially for collision avoidance, AIS also enables monitoring of national merchant and fishing fleets, cargo tracking, infrastructure protection, search and rescue and EEZ security.

The use of AIS for security comes up against two impediments. First, vessels engaged in illegal activity such as sanctions-busting switch off AIS transponders, thus 'going dark'. Second, they indulge in spoofing - switching their response code to assume the identity of another vessel. This change of identity happens at sea: a vessel displaying a wrong response code in harbour is likely to be picked up by port authorities due to correlation between visual/electronic and AIS inputs. Since most monitoring systems are unable to maintain round-the-clock surveillance over the open sea, the 'spoofer' gets away.

Technological developments provide a potential solution to both. Satellites enable receipt and round-the-clock tracking of AIS responses from all vessels. The use of artificial intelligence should enable electronic identification and flagging of the moment when the vessel begins spoofing. Synthetic aperture radar, such as will be used by the NASA-ISRO NISAR satellite due for launch by India in January 2023, provides the ability to see through clouds, enabling better radar tracking of all vessels, including those that have 'gone dark'. The challenge so far has been availability of satellite data at a reasonable price. This can be overcome if the IPMDA initiative picks up the costs, or provides the requisite satellite coverage.

Two questions arise: whose purposes the tracking of dark shipping serves, and who will respond. Among the primary purposes is to check sanctions evasion, involving both UN-imposed sanctions as well as unilateral ones imposed by the US, such as on Iran and Russia. India has an interest in tracking dark shipping emanating from its west and used for terrorist purposes, enabling the ability to respond, but the region to India's west is not covered by the IPMDA. On the other hand, the US has an interest in tracking of all dark shipping, including for countering the evasion of unilateral sanctions.



Indian Ocean Activity as seen at IFC-IOR Gurugram. Source: Indian Navy

Southeast Asian, Southern Pacific and Indian Ocean nations by and large lack the capacity or the interest to respond to China's infringement of their economic zones. This was amply demonstrated in May 2020, when China's Haijing 35111 operated near a Shell-chartered drilling vessel in Malaysia's Luconia Shoal before shifting to operate in Vietnam's Block 06-01. In both cases, China was able to successfully deter response by maritime forces of the countries concerned. It was left to the USN to protect Shell's interest in the former case. It is unlikely that the US will respond in the Indian Ocean, absence of a sustained presence alone will prevent it from doing so. Even within the remaining area of coverage, the implications of a US response to infringements within the territorial zones of smaller island states need to be thought through. As the detailed mechanisms under IPMDA for tracking dark shipping take shape, India will need to exercise care to ensure its own interests are not infringed.

IUU Fishing

China is by far the largest exploiter of the world's oceans for fish. In June 2020, its distant water fishing fleet was estimated⁹ as comprising 16,996 vessels, more than 5-8 times previous estimates. Another report¹⁰ identified the area around Seychelles and Mauritius as the most vulnerable to IUU fishing, but this area is not covered by the IPMDA.

Within the Indian Ocean part of the IPMDA, India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Indonesia and Thailand all maintain reasonable surveillance and response capabilities within their maritime zones. The benefit provided by IPMDA will be welcome but incremental. It is the smaller island nations in the Central and Western Indian Ocean that need the IPMDA most. India will have to work out how to extend its benefits to them.

Other Transnational Crime

It is noteworthy that the IPMDA does not yet intend to cover other transnational crime, such as piracy, terrorism, traffic in narcotics, guns, contraband or humans. Perhaps these areas will be taken up later.

Conclusion

Following the 9/11 terror attacks, the US launched a National Plan to achieve Maritime Domain Awareness. As stated by the then US President George W. Bush, "The heart of the Maritime Domain Awareness programme is accurate information, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance of all vessels, cargo and people extending well beyond our traditional maritime boundaries"¹¹. The US has, since then, pursued MDA with considerable focus. The IPMDA enables networking of the strategic picture in the Indo-Pacific as defined by the US to a considerable extent.

India, on the other hand, began construction of its regional domain awareness infrastructure only after the 26/11 Mumbai terror attacks. The requisite infrastructure is now well-developed, but given the seamlessness of the seas,

⁹ China's distant-water fishing fleet: scale, impact and governance, <https://odi.org/en/publications/chinas-distant-water-fishing-fleet-scale-impact-and-governance/>

¹⁰ Shining a Light: The Need for Transparency across Distant Water Fishing, <http://stimson.org/wp-content/files/file-attachments/Stimson%20Distant%20Water%20Fishing%20Report.pdf>

¹¹ National Plan to Achieve Maritime Domain Awareness for The National Strategy for Maritime Security, https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/HSPD_MDAPlan_0.pdf

would benefit from linking up with similar structures to India's east and the west. The experience gained from IPMDA will certainly help in the establishment of similar links with the Arabian Sea and the Eastern Indian Ocean.

The Quad partners have committed to begin immediate consultations with regional partners and identify future technologies of promise to allow the IPMDA to remain a cutting edge partnership to promote peace and harmony in the region. It is hoped that these consultations will address some of the shortfalls identified above, allowing the IPMDA to truly provide concrete results that will make the region more secure and prosperous.

In any event, a good start has been made to marrying capabilities, with the intention to advance the IPMDA concept across the wider region. This could well become an important foundation for scaling up to an overall, shared maritime strategic picture which will benefit the security interests of the Quad partners in the Indo-Pacific¹².

¹² Hemant Krishan Singh and Arun Sahgal, "American Diary: Reflections on the State of World Order and the Future of the US-India Strategic Relationship", DPG Policy Brief Volume VII, Issue 25, <https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/publication/policy-briefs/american-diary-reflections-on-the-state-of-world-order-and-the-future-of-the-us-india-strategic-relationship.html>



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