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The Indian Ocean Region Island Forum

Report/Executive Summary

May 2023

In partnership with the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, the National Maritime Foundation, and the Australian National University

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

From 10–12 May, the Near East South Asia (NESA) Center for Strategic Studies conducted a forum with its partners focusing on environmental security challenges throughout the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). With a particular focus on the specific challenges facing Indian Ocean island states, the forum brought together over 40 participants hailing from 21 countries for conversations on how to collaboratively further environmental security. The event took place in Bangkok, Thailand. This was the second NESA Indian Ocean Island Forum and is a part of NESA's larger Indian Ocean and Indo-Pacific-focused engagements.

Topics covered during the forum included how states can maximize their efforts at addressing environmental threats, what role private sector entities have in drawing attention and leading action to mitigate environmental threats, and how to use technology and information to further responsiveness for environmental challenges, among others. NESA was joined in this effort by the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, the National Maritime Foundation, and the Australian National University. Collectively, these partnering institutions brought together scientists, naval and coast guard officers, diplomats, technologists, and social scientists. The success of this program and the ongoing network that has resulted will continue in the third Indian Ocean Island Forum in 2024.

THEMES/QUESTIONS:

The following themes and/or questions were discussed by participants during the event, or were ideas offered during breakouts. They reflect but a small portion of the overarching conversations that occurred during the event but reveal the issues and challenges that the participants are considering as it relates to the larger issue of environmental security. These themes are organized around concepts.

- POLITICAL:
 - The separation that remains between the Pacific and the IOR within the Indo Pacific concept remains. Despite common challenges existing in both (environmental degradation, illicit actors, etc.) and numerous efforts to link the two oceans, there remains a lack of familiarity.
 - The erasure or loss of distinction between traditional and non-traditional operations in the maritime domain is strikingly clear in the case of protecting the environment. As the environmental challenges present themselves, there emerges a greater gap between what state institutions, specifically security-related institutions, can do based upon existing operational patterns.
 - Cascading dangers associated with environmental challenges reveals environmental security as likely the single largest challenge for the Indo Pacific and the IOR. The question becomes one of how cooperation, interoperability, and information sharing can progress through efforts like Humanitarian Assistance/Disaster Relief, Search and Rescue, Fusion Centers, Counter-Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated Fishing, monitoring systems (buoys/sensors), and more.
 - Questions continue about how reliable state actors are in discussions about global climate and environmental protection. The same can be said for some international organizations. Do states have the ability to develop policies that account for their own citizens' well-being while also serving a larger aim of regional or even global sustainability? If states are not best equipped, then where can one turn for effective environmental policy? Some argue that the private sector and NGOs offer the best approach, as their actions are interest driven and not necessarily territorial defined. The larger implication being that the national interests which drive modern nation-states may not be able to act on long enough timelines within their polities to operate beyond short-term interests.
 - As climate change progresses, exemplified by sea level rise, will established pillars of the international system, such as UNCLOS, be undermined? Sea level rise will inevitably change coastlines of IOR littoral states, and such change could be used by various state and non-state actors to exploit EEZs and territorial waters. How does the IOR address such a potential problem set?
 - To what degree does an IOR identity exist? Does such an identity assist in efforts to counter or mitigate environmental challenges? Discussions of the lack of trust among IOR states have long lingered, with some questioning if a lack of a strong regional identity or some regional institutional basis contributes to the presence of many security challenges.
 - Global conversations about climate change, environmental protection, and sustainability have a geopolitical element tied to current competition among major powers. Does such international competition destine international environmental

efforts to being less effective? The question of how non-major powers can lead environmental efforts that not only keep major powers committed to environmental protection, but ensure they contribute substantial resources to such efforts is an open question that states throughout the IOR continually discuss.

- A theme that continued throughout the event was how to weave together the various issues that were mentioned into a coherent political conversation for the region, the Indo-Pacific, and the larger world. How can countering IUU-F connect with disaster relief efforts or common pool resource challenges? While no sole answer was agreed upon, the consensus was clear that any answer that emerges will not occur through a hierarchical system and will be arrived at through a messy process. An answer will include the voices of states, NGOs, research institutions, international organizations, private enterprises, and various communal institutions. It will need to include the voices of the secure and the vulnerable.
- ECONOMIC:
 - The promise of the blue economy remains elusive for many IOR coastal and island states and the potential gains from development in that sector become even harder to reach with the compounding problems of climate change, environmental degradation, and threats to biodiversity.
 - How watchful are states and the international community at large regarding seabed mining? Trends point to seabed mining becoming an increasingly profitable economic sector, but one where the long-term environmental impacts are largely unknown. How can such an industry be regulated? What is the scale of potential costs from such economic activity? Questions are numerous regarding both the scale of seabed mining, as well as the secondary impacts of it, particularly upon developing economies. Related to the issue of seabed mining are other subsurface economic activities that are emerging, such as marine pharmaceutical research and development.
 - How can developing states acquire the necessary economic development their population needs for greater prosperity while simultaneously protecting the environment? Is it an either-or choice as some existing frameworks imply? For much of the Global South, economic development remains among the highest goals, but building international pressure to ease off a reliance on fossil fuels and pursuing development in a more sustainable way place pressure on such states. A case in point of how this debate is occurring is found in the Mekong River region. The institutions, both public and private, engaged in environmental protection should build plans of action that are scalable, environmentally sound, and supportive of economic growth.
 - Conversations took place in sessions regarding the responsibility that more developed states and major powers had to improve the capacity of less developed states to better protect their environmental resources. As was seen in previous COP

meetings, there are open questions as what financial, technical, infrastructural, and political assistance should be provided by developed states, given that they enjoy the benefit of having reached a higher stage of development prior to world realizing the scale of climate change and human impact on the environment.

- TECHNICAL/OPERATIONAL

- How do states escape their silos when seeking to address transnational environmental crimes, such as IUU-F and illegal dumping? The IOR is seeking to find an answer to this question and an apparent solution has yet to be uncovered. Yet, the persistence of such crime points to the ongoing gaps in state capacity.
- Can the IOR region adequately conceive of, let alone prepare, for the potential scale of migration brought about by climate change? From wet bulb heat to sea level rise to food insecurity, many of the IOR littorals will find situations where human migration is likely inevitable. Questions abound as to whether government institutions will be able to bear the strain caused by such migration. Yet, the framing of inquiries was not tied to political resilience, but rather the technical acumen of regional states to adapt to such challenges. How can existing institutions, like security services or home offices, alter their operational standards to better account for the challenges that will intensify from climate change?
- The issue of environmental security as a concept was brought up regularly throughout the event. Is environmental security an accurate term for framing the environmental challenges that the IOR and the world will face? Is it merely a way for security institutions to wrap their operational patterns around the threat of climate change? Should environmental challenges be framed in a security mindset? There was no consensus on the validity of environmental security as a concept, save for two ideas. One, that security institutions will be actors in addressing environmental challenges to some degree. Two, that the cascading impact of environmental strain/decline is likely to overwhelm any established institutions that do not adapt.
- Relatedly, environmental security must include some measure of mitigation, or an ability to act proactively to limit the scale of problems that will likely emerge. The dual challenge of food and water security is already present in parts of the IOR due to conflict, market scarcity, and inflation. Climate or environment-related food/water scarcity is expected to emerge in the IOR in the coming decades. Thus, the question was asked of the entire plenary – how do we act to limit such a threat?
- Is technology a possible multiplier for greater effectiveness in protecting the environment, or just another variable that will have a mixed impact? The development of technological applications that have an environmental focus are emerging and more data is available for researchers and policymakers regarding the state of our natural environment than ever before. This is a positive development.

Yet, the expansion of data and the emergence of new technology is also associated with data manipulation and misinformation. New opportunities are emerging because of technology and information sharing, but new threats are also, and there are no technological ‘silver bullets’ to address environmental threats.

- Protection of EEZs, efforts to counter IUU-F, and greater capacity to secure one’s maritime and land boundaries relate to and impact environmental protection. Such issues are tied to traditional security operations and often have a geopolitical element to them, but given the transnational nature of environmental challenges, must be considered in the context of environmental protection.
- What is the long-term trend for disaster preparedness, especially in relation to common pool resources (like fresh water), urban settings, and coastlines? The focus of conversations related to disaster preparedness was in how to prioritize efforts – specifically with a need to understand what human populations are most likely to be harmed in the case of a disaster.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Ideas and recommendations were generated by many participants. What follows are recommendations that were captured in detail for consideration by all interested parties. Recommendations are organized around the set of institutions/level of governance that are most relevant for action.

- **NATION STATES/POLITIES**
 - Information fusion, either from NGOs, fusion centers, or state efforts can be a game changer for protecting our oceans, but we must escape silos that our institutions still create. States, as they remain the primary vector point for data, must redefine how they compile, secure, and, most importantly, share information.
 - Liaison officers must be more commonly forward deployed to fusion centers and other information sharing institutions.
 - Flexibility in security operations, within coast guards for instance, must become common. Shiprider agreements, for instance, can be a great asset and should be more common in the IOR.
 - Despite the risk of misinformation, private sector sources of data and research institution data regarding environmental challenges must become a pillar of state operations. Trust can be built through engagement, but it can also be built by using and sharing the same data. Integrate the private sector in MDA, HA/DR, and environmental protection more commonly.
 - Environmental protection inevitably becomes a politically charged issue. To minimize geopolitical tensions, such as major power competition or developed-developing economic disputes, frame environmental security and environmental

protection in the frame of public good provision. States already have a model for this with HA/DR.

- Regional states and regional forums need to overtly discuss the securitization of environmental response, as a common understanding of how security services will be involved is necessary. Examples from the region already reveal this issue. The region must work towards a definition of the responsibilities of its security services in environmental protection.
- INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS
 - Data regarding the various environmental challenges being faced need to be linked together and more widely shared. The challenges facing the Mekong region are not well known in the Western IOR. Environmental protection and blue economy programs among the IOR island states are not known widely throughout the Pacific. Given the number of international gatherings on environmental topics, some attention must be given to chronicling the efforts of various actors across separate regions. That effort would shine a brighter light on what is being pursued and provide lessons beyond our immediate neighbor that can serve as a model.
 - IOR institutions, like IORA, should work with potential partner nations to stand up an IOR Environmental Forum, similar to ones such as the Pacific Island Forum (PIF) and South Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) that exist in the Pacific.
 - Legal conversations regarding potential future challenges to UNCLOS must occur in the IOR. They can be added on to existing architecture/gatherings or be stood up independently, but such potential legal challenges and the technical elements involved should be routinely discussed.
 - In regional conversations, NGOs with a proven track record for effective approaches to addressing environmental challenges should be included as routine members. Not only would such NGOs provide new voices to such forums, but they can often reveal a different approach to regional actors that may not have yet been considered.
 - Environmental challenges overlap with geopolitical tensions and the region must not back away from openly discussing what defines a bad actor. Transparency is key in such conversations. Some actors, including private and state actors, will claim offense to these conversations. Yet, the longer open conversations about bad actors are delayed, the greater the cost on the environment.

- PRIVATE SECTOR

- Technologically developed states should help facilitate technological tools, applications, or programs that can assist environmental efforts throughout the IOR. Such technological public good provision is being experimented with and is a source of discussion, but the stream of opportunities should be expedited and expanded.
- Accept that the increase in energy for addressing the environment will correspond with a messier political situation. Efforts will be duplicated, silos will exist, and some necessary connections will not immediately form. The more conversations occur and the larger the community of interest expands; the more cohesion will form. It is the private commercial sector that seems most at ease with this dynamic and a possible model from which to gain greater political and institutional comfort.

- NGO/ACADEMIA

- International discussions regarding the seabed need to become topics of greater importance. Institutions like the International Seabed Authority are not well known and given the scale of what is about to occur regarding seabed mining and other mineral extraction, NGOs, states, and international organizations must discuss the seabed more routinely and openly. Raise awareness about the topic.
- State to state relationships exist in the IOR regarding the environment, as do multilateral forums, but what is less common are smaller political entity relationships throughout the region. City to city forums could be a possible option, or even a coastal community forum. As state structures do not localize political decision making, the NGO community would be a logical launchpad for such efforts.
- Prioritization is an unfortunate reality of environmental protection and security. Despite mistrust in the region and different forms of determining policy approaches, all actors should be transparent in how they prioritize challenges. Not only does such openness facilitate possible niche capabilities, but it also will highlight certain challenges that are possibly overlooked that private sector actors can work to address. IUU-F is an example of this – a global effort that was initially prioritized by island states and less developed littoral states that in turn facilitated NGO attention before becoming a global political conversation. Academic/research institutions can be a starting point for work on prioritization that can then expand into other sectors.
- Communities are the front line for environmental threats and serve as a largely underutilized resource for coordinated responses. Regional dialogues must feature locality/community voices. State policy development must integrate local community perspectives. From sea level rise to environment-driven migration to

plastic waste, it is local communities that will be most visibly impacted and can offer effective responses.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS/NEXT STEPS FOR PARTICIPANTS:

The following are activities/policy actions that various states, international organizations, NGOs, and research institutions can pursue in the near term offered by participants in this forum.

- **RESEARCH INSTITUTIONS:**
 - Link existing research forums or networks to an effort devoted to connecting the IOR and the Pacific to build a base for Track II programming to build upon
 - Develop region-specific (IOR, Indo-Pacific, Pacific, etc.) environmental protection priority lists to assist government agencies and international organizations in narrowing their own conversations.
 - Given the interest in climate change and environmental challenges among national security institutions, academics should adapt research findings to speak to those audiences. Directly communicate with the security sector.
- **NGOS/PRIVATE SECTOR:**
 - Add an IOR-focused element/approach to existing public-use datasets, research, and technological applications that address environmental challenges in our waters. Namely fisheries protection research, counter IUU-F mapping/data, marine debris/plastics mitigation, and coastal community sustainability as a start.
 - Stand-up environmental protection workforce development programs that can bring together the government interagency from the region, private sector actors, and other relevant industries/sectors.
 - Technological firms involved in mapping, communications, community building, and domain awareness should reach out to IOR regional states as both potential new markets and as new zones for technology testing to refine products for real-world applicability.
- **STATES:**
 - Developed regional states and/or major powers can publicly lead the way on information sharing as a public good by further lowering barriers for outside actors to access information regarding marine health and safety (Maritime Domain Awareness data). Such data should also be formatted to be more user friendly. Furthermore, developed states should lend more of their technical and

legal assistance to regional states to better codify and regulate marine environmental protection.

- IOR regional states should ask to observe, if not join, existing environmental forums outside the region, such as the Pacific Island Forum.
- IOR regional states should either further refine or develop precise technical, developmental, and logistics lists that assist national interests to better develop cooperative efforts.
- Institutions like NESAs and DKIs/APCSSs should hold regular environmental security-related programming throughout the Indo-Pacific. These should be joint efforts and dive deeper into the challenge set. Recommended near-term actions include environmental protection and technology, regional infrastructure resilience, and undersea maritime protection.
- **INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS:**
 - Initiate efforts and engagements that hold up a mirror to member states regarding environmental security, environmental protection, and weak governance.
 - Request senior leader presence at international forums/conferences beyond organizational areas of responsibility. Further build the network beyond the immediate neighborhood to gain potential solutions learned from elsewhere.
 - The UN High Seas Treaty which came into effect this year (2023) after several years of negotiation will be an opportunity to address key challenges. Therefore, environmental security forums held in the future need to take the implementation of the UN High Seas Treaty into the agenda and policy level discourse in the future forums in order to purport/campaign for its' successful implementation (also relevant for nation state engagements).

WORKSHOP RECORD:

NESA MARITIME SERIES

The Indian Ocean Region Island Forum

In cooperation with the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, the National Maritime Foundation, and the Australian National University

10–12 May 2023

The Lebu at State Tower
1055 Si Lom, Silom, Bang Rak
Bangkok 10500, Thailand

DESCRIPTION:

The challenges facing littoral states throughout the Indo-Pacific are numerous, but few reach the scale of those that are environmental in nature. For the states of the Indo-Pacific, environmental security is essential for future stability and prosperity. From threats to biodiversity, the looming dangers of sea-level rise, the spread of land-based dangers to the maritime domain, and the ability to steward our exclusive economic zones, protecting our oceans is directly tied to protecting modern life. To better prepare all nation states for action, it is essential for us to gather to discuss the health of our seas, the stability of our coasts, and the resources of our respective homelands.

This forum brings together environmental experts, naval and coast guard officers, diplomats, and academics together to provide a detailed accounting of the challenges present and to discuss ideas as to how the Indo-Pacific community can respond to these challenges. To ensure this effort’s success, the NESACenter is working with partners and other elements of the U.S. government interagency. This forum brings immense expertise together – not for scientific advancement, national policymaking, or academic insight – other forums already serve such aims. We gather to propose plans for how to connect and combine efforts, and from such recommendations work with regional governments, institutions, and organizations to invigorate policy.

Tuesday, 9 May 2023

All Day **Participants Arrive; Transport to Hotel; Hotel Check-In** (all participants will receive course booklet upon check-in)

Further arrival protocols will be undertaken based on local requirements; Participants should arrive prior to 5 PM on the 9th of May if possible.

Wednesday, 10 May 2023

0700–0845 Breakfast at Leisure; Café Mozu (Floor M of Lebu at State Tower)

0900–0915 **Introduction of Workshop**
Speaker: *Mr. Jeff Payne, NESACenter*

0915–1045 **1st Session: The State of Our Seas**
Moderator: *Mr. Jeff Payne, NESACenter*
Speaker 1: *Dr. Ethan Allen, DKI APCSS*
Speaker 2: *Commodore Debesh Lahiri, National Maritime Foundation*

1045–1115 Coffee/Tea Break

1115–1245 **2nd Session: Environmental Security: Methods and Objectives**

Moderator: *Mr. Fahad Malaikah, NESA*
Speaker 1: *Mr. Raj Mohabeer, Indian Ocean Commission*
Speaker 2: *Dr. David Brewster, Australian National University*

- 1245–1345 Lunch
- 1345–1515 **3rd Session: New Ideas, New Methods, and Unconventional Perspectives**
Moderator: *Dr. David Brewster, ANU*
Speaker 1: *Ms. Anum Khan, National Maritime Foundation*
Speaker 2: *Dr. Timothy Edmunds, University of Bristol*
Speaker 3: *Mrs. Hala El Hefnawy, Future for Advanced Research and Studies*
- 1515–1545 Coffee/Tea Break
- 1545–1645 **Breakout Session 1: Mapping Environmental Security - Courses of Action**
Team 1
Team 2
Team 3
- 1645 Conclusion of Day 1

Thursday, 11 May 2023

- 0700–0845 Breakfast at Leisure
- 0900–0910 **Introduction to Day 2**
Speaker: *Mr. Jeff Payne, NESA*
- 0910–1040 **4th Session: Efforts at Work – Technological Tools/Commercial Sector**
Moderator: *Mr. Fahad Malaikah, NESA*
Speaker 1: *Mr. Ben Works and Mr. Holden Gibbons, SeaWatch Labs (Digital)*
Speaker 2: *Mr. Joe Ferdinando, Skylight (Digital)*
Speaker 3: *Mr. Bryce Goodman, Defense Innovation Unit (Digital)*
- 1040–1100 Coffee/Tea Break
- 1100–1230 **5th Session: Efforts at Work – International Organizations/Non-Governmental Organizations**
Moderator: *Commodore Debesh Lahiri, National Maritime Foundation*
Speaker 1: *Dr. Karl Kim, University of Hawaii, Manoa*
Speaker 2: *Ms. Gina Fiore, The Pew Charitable Trusts (Digital)*
- 1230–1330 Lunch
- 1330–1500 **6th Session: Efforts at Work – State Responses**
Moderator: *Mr. Jeff Payne, NESA*

Speaker 1: *Dr. Ian Ralby, I.R. Consilium*

Speaker 2: *CPT (ret.) Martin A. Sebastian, former Senior Fellow/Centre Head Centre for Maritime Security and Diplomacy of the Maritime Institute of Malaysia*

1500–1515 Coffee/Tea Break

1515–1630 **Breakout Session 2: Moving Past Gaps and Seams in the Policy World**
Team 1
Team 2
Team 3

1630 Conclusion of Day 2

Friday, 12 May 2023

0700–0845 Breakfast at Leisure

0900–0905 **Introduction to Day 3**
Speaker: *Mr. Jeff Payne, NESA*

0905–1035 **7th Session: Environmental Impacts and Political Stability**
Moderator: *Mr. Jeff Payne, NESA*
Speaker 1: *Dr. Ming Li Yong, East-West Center*
Speaker 2: *Mr. Muhammad Shafqat Munir, Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS)*

1035–1050 Coffee/Tea Break

1050–1215 **8th Session: Policy Connectivity, Cooperative Research, and Breaking Silos**
Moderator: *Dr. Ethan Allen, DKI APCSS*
Speaker 1: *CAPT Sam Gontier, Regional Coordination Operations Centre*
Speaker 2: *Dr. Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, Observer Research Foundation*

1215–1330 Lunch

1330–1430 **Breakout Session 3: Linking, Banding, and Tying Efforts Together**
Team 1
Team 2
Team 3

1430–1600 **8th Session: Making the Case to the Public and Senior Leaders**
Moderator: *Mr. Fahad Malaikah, NESA*
Speaker 1: *Mrs. Sreoshi Sinha, National Maritime Foundation*
Speaker 2: *Dr. Tabitha Grace Mallory, China Ocean Institute*
Speaker 3: *Dr. Tammy Tabe, East-West Center*

- 1600–1630 **Breakout Team Presentations**
Moderator: *Mr. Jeff Payne, NESA*
- 1630–1645 **Final Session: Views from Plenary, Plan of Action, and Farewells**
Moderator: *Mr. Jeff Payne, NESA*
- 1645 Event Concludes



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