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Indo-Pacific Ocean Initiative - an opportunity to create new institutions for maritime governance

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ABSTRACT
The idea of an Indo-Pacific region as a ‘supra region’ encompassing two ocean bodies is nascent. The region comprises multiple diverse and disparate sub-regions and thus lacks geopolitical coherence and a common framework. However, maritime connectivity is a common thread that binds the region and the proposal for an Indo-Pacific Ocean Initiative by India seeks to improve regional maritime governance by focusing on the common regional challenges. This article examines how this could be done by leveraging extant institutions.

Introduction
On 4 November 2019, speaking at the East Asia Summit at Bangkok, the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, outlined a vision for an Indo-Pacific Ocean Initiative to create a ‘safe, secure and stable maritime domain,’ in line with the UN Sustainable Development Goal 14 (UN SDG 14), which calls on the world to “conserve and sustainably use the maritime domain.”

Broadly, Prime Minister Modi called upon interested states to collaborate in promoting maritime safety, security and reducing risks of disasters (MEA 2019). Subsequently, elaborating on the idea of the Indo-Pacific Ocean Initiative, the Indian Foreign Minister Jaishankar stated that it would be built on the seven pillars of maritime security; maritime ecology; maritime resources, capacity building and resource sharing; disaster risk reduction and management; science, technology and academic cooperation; and trade, connectivity and maritime transport (Hindustan Times 2020). Clearly, these also represent key strategic regional challenges of the twenty-first century that can only be addressed multilaterally, and thus the Indo-Pacific Ocean Initiative seems to be an idea whose time has come.

This paper discusses how maritime governance in the Indo-Pacific region could be improved as envisioned under the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative. The first part of the paper discusses the genesis of the term ‘Indo-Pacific region’ as a ‘supra region’ that includes both the Indian and Pacific Oceans. The paper posits that since more than two thirds of the global maritime trade transits the Indo-Pacific region, it is maritime trade connectivity more than geopolitical or geostrategic linkages that binds the region as a...
composite maritime space. Based on this logic, the paper recommends that in order to develop a regional framework for the Indo-Pacific region and also improve maritime governance as envisaged under the Indo-Pacific Ocean Initiative, it could be useful to merge or expand key regional institutions dealing with maritime governance. The paper highlights the challenges of maritime governance within the Indo-Pacific region and identifies the relevant regional organizations in both the Indian and Pacific oceans, explaining how these institutions could be merged into a single entity to provide improved maritime governance for the entire region.

The Indo-Pacific region

The Indo-Pacific region is essentially a biogeographic continuum extending from the East coast of Africa to the West coast of the Americas. Indeed, the first institution to have recognized this fact was the Indo-Pacific Fisheries Council established in 1948 (FAO 1952), later renamed Indo-Pacific Fishery Commission in 1976 and now known as the Asia Pacific Fishery Commission since 1993. According to an Australian commentator, Rory Medcalf, ‘accelerating economic and security connections between the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean region’ of the twenty-first century, have created a single strategic system that led to the coining of the term ‘Indo-Pacific.’ Medcalf posits that this is a new strategic frame of reference replacing the previous widely accepted ‘Asia-Pacific’ construct (Medcalf 2014). However, as he suggests, the term ‘Indo-Pacific’ must not be seen as a ‘redefined regional concept that downplays the centrality of Asia,’ as this is a region with Asia at its core, and thus the region could also be accurately termed Indo-Pacific Asia or Indo-Asia Pacific (Medcalf 2014).

The term ‘Indo-Pacific’ first emerged in the US strategic discourse around 2010 as a regional framework under the Obama administration (Scott 2018), evidently, to define the expanding geostrategic interests and reach of China and India, and also the continued strategic role and presence of the USA in both the Pacific and Indian Oceans (Medcalf 2014). By 2017, under the Trump administration, the term was adopted for official US discourse and in May 2018, the United States Pacific Command (USPACOM) was renamed as the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command. This appears to have created some confusion, particularly in India, where the Indo-Pacific region has always been regarded as extending from East Africa to West America, while the American definition of Indo-Pacific region was a region extending from the West of India to the West coast of the Americas, coterminous with the area of responsibility (AOR) of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command. However, the US Deputy National Security Advisor Matt Pottinger clarified during the Jan 2020 ‘Raisina Dialogue’ at New Delhi, that the United States no longer looked at the Indo-Pacific as a ‘Hollywood-to-Bollywood’ geography but had aligned their Indo-Pacific strategy with India, which he described from ‘California to Kilimanjaro (Times of India 2020).’

In its entirety the Indo-Pacific region stretches across over half the Earth’s surface, encompassing several disparate cultural, social, economic and geopolitical sub-regions, that include the most populous nation in the world, the largest democracy, the smallest republic the largest Muslim-majority nation. It is for these reasons that it is difficult to regard the Indo-Pacific region as a ‘close knit’ or coherent geopolitical entity. For instance, the geopolitics of East Asia have little impact on the Middle East region. But, to be sure, this could change in the near-future, and the rise of China and the impact of its rapidly
expanding economic, political and maritime influences on the Indo-Pacific region could be the single most important geopolitical factor affecting the security dynamics of the entire region.

Meanwhile, the region has emerged as a vital engine for global economic growth. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Asia alone accounted for more than 60% of global economic growth in 2018 and 2019. Clearly, maritime trade has been a key driver for the region’s economic growth. This is evidenced by the facts that the Indo-Pacific region includes not just the world’s busiest shipping lanes and nine of the ten largest international ports but it also includes the world’s largest ship owning and shipbuilding states (US INDOPACOM 2021). Thus, shipping/maritime trade is the single most important common factor that binds the Indo-Pacific region as a composite region or in other words ‘an integrated and organic maritime space’ as defined by Minister Jaishankar at the recently held virtual 15th East Asia Summit (EAS) (Times of India 2020). In this context, the calls for a ‘free and open Indo-Pacific’ and a ‘rules-based international order’ in the Indo-Pacific region is essentially to promote maritime governance and secure shipping and maritime trade. And this also provides the underlying logic for the Indo-Pacific Initiative.

**Maritime governance**

Maritime governance is a vital state function broadly encompassing safety and security of shipping and conservation of the marine environment. It could also be seen as a subset of international ocean governance which is about ensuring sustainable exploitation and management of the world’s oceans and their resources in ways that keep our oceans healthy, productive and resilient; the primary objective of the UN Sustainable Development Goal 14. The Constitution of the Seas or the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, lays down a plethora of jurisdictional rights and duties, institutions, and specific frameworks for effective international ocean governance regulated by various intergovernmental organizations such as the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) and the International Seabed Authority (ISA).

The division of the world oceans into areas of state jurisdiction and the High Seas which account for about 40 percent of the area outside the borders of national jurisdiction, implies a shared international responsibility for maritime governance. Thus, in addition to the extant international regime for ocean governance that includes various international conventions such as the International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships (MARPOL) of 1973 and the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) of 1974, several regional institutions/arrangements have evolved alongside to help coastal states coordinate their efforts in maritime governance.

Within the Indo-Pacific region notable regional institutions focussed on promoting maritime governance include the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) initiated in 2008 by the Indian Ocean navies and the Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS), a similar organization formed by the navies of the Western Pacific region. Both fora serve as a platform for regional navies to exchange views and collaborate on tackling common non-traditional maritime threats and challenges such as piracy, transnational crimes and disaster relief operations – key objectives of the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative enunciated by Minister Jaishankar. Another organization for promoting regional maritime
governance is the Heads of Asian Coast Guards Agencies Meeting, or HACGAM established in 2004 to foster a partnership among the Asian Coast Guards in tackling common challenges such as illegal fishing, disaster management and protection and conservation of the marine environment.

These organizations, and other institutions such as the various Regional Fisheries Management Organisations, the Indian Ocean MoU for Port State Control that are discussed later in the paper, have helped to promote maritime governance mostly within respective regions i.e. the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific. However, the presence of duplicate/multiple regional agencies with similar and sometimes overlapping functions - but different stakeholders - within a ‘supra-region,’ the Indo-Pacific, could pose challenges in compliance and coordination. The Indo-Pacific Ocean Initiative provides an opportunity for the creation of new institutions through a merger of regional organizations – in both the Indian and Pacific Oceans. This could help to harmonize legal mechanisms and achieve synergy of effort for effective maritime governance, as explained in the following section.

Regional organisations for maritime governance

This section includes a discussion on the common maritime challenges in the Indian and Pacific Oceans and the extant regional fora for maritime governance. It also examines the scope for a merger of various organizations with similar functions.

**Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS) and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS)** The idea for a naval forum comprising the Pacific navies to discuss matters of common interest emerged at an International Seapower Symposium in 1987, leading to the formation of the WPNS, which held its first meeting in 1988. Broadly, the WPNS aims to increase cooperation and interoperability among the regional navies, and build trust and confidence between member states. The WPNS provides a regional platform for discussions on maritime issues of mutual interest such as exchange of information, practice and demonstration of capabilities, and the exchange of personnel (WPNS 2010). Over the years the WPNS has hosted numerous symposiums and combined exercises for regional navies, and its membership has expanded to include not just all the Western Pacific navies including the PLA Navy but also extra regional navies such as the Indian Navy and the Russian Navy. A notable achievement of the WPNS has been the formulation of the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES), a common mechanism developed in 2014 for communication between all regional naval ships and aircraft at sea to maximize safety at sea and limit mutual interference (WPNS 2020). The CUES has since been adopted and implemented successfully. Despite the regional geopolitical tensions involving Australia, China, Japan and the United States, the fact that CUES was endorsed by the PLA Navy, gives confidence that China could be a part of other such projects aimed at improving maritime governance, under the Indo-Pacific Ocean Initiative.

Following the success of the WPNS and with a view to promote multilateralism in tackling the emerging maritime security threats and challenges of the twenty-first century such as piracy and terrorism, and disaster relief efforts, the Indian Ocean regional navies were inspired to form a similar forum. And in 2008, India, as the largest maritime power in the region, took the lead in forming the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), a
maritime security construct for the Indian Ocean region. The IONS presently includes 24 member states that ‘permanently hold territory that abuts or lies within the Indian Ocean.’

Both the IONS and the WPNS have helped in corralling regional states in the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean regions under overarching regional institutions. Over the years, these institutions have served as a common platform where the regional navies discuss and share ideas and intelligence on issues/challenges of mutual interest. Clearly, these issues are common to all the Indo-Pacific navies and so are the solutions. For instance, the mechanism of CUES, developed by the WPNS has also been adopted by Indian Ocean navies under the IONS (WPNS 2020).

Humanitarian Aid and Disaster Relieved (HADR) operations are another area of common interest where navies from both regions have constantly interacted with each other. Significantly, the location of the trans Indo-Pacific Ring of Fire stretching from Indonesia to Japan and the Americas, an area characterized by active volcanoes and frequent earthquakes, requires all regional navies to prepare for frequent contingencies as witnessed several times in the preceding decades notably during the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and the 2011 Japan earthquake and tsunami that caused the Fukushima nuclear disaster. Furthermore, maritime security threats such as piracy off Somalia have also brought the navies of the Indo-Pacific region together. For all these reasons, the navies of the Indo-Pacific regularly participate in combined exercises such as the exercises Milan hosted by India, Kakadu hosted by Australia and Carat by the USN, to improve mutual cooperation.

Thus, with the development of a supra-region construct, the Indo-Pacific region, it would be useful to merge both the WPNS and the IONS to create a new organization such as an Indo-Pacific Regional Assembly of the navies. This would not only help to synergise naval efforts across the region but also help in load sharing by the larger navies including the US Navy, the Japanese Navy, the PLA Navy and the Indian Navy, thereby augmenting the capacity of the smaller navies in the region.

**Heads of Asian Coast Guard agencies meeting (HACGAM)**

Coast Guard agencies play an important role in maritime governance. The first Heads of Asian Coast Guard Agencies Meeting, or HACGAM, was organized by Japan in 2004 to help the various Asian Coast Guard agencies collaborate in areas of common interest. The forum has since expanded and the scope of discussions now include; Search and Rescue, environmental protection, preparedness for natural disasters, prevention of transnational crimes at Sea, and capacity building (HACGAM 2014). Most Asian coast guard agencies are limited in size and capacity - with the exception of Japan, China and India - and the HACGAM has proved to be a useful mechanism for information sharing and training, particularly for the smaller agencies. Significantly, over the years Japan alone has provided maritime training for over a thousand coast guard officials (HACGAM 2014).

A key challenge for the coast guard agencies is tackling transnational maritime crimes such as piracy, trafficking, smuggling, and even terrorism which are conducted by well-networked criminal/terrorist organizations operating in multiple countries. Therefore, effective collaboration between the regional coast guards is crucial in tackling maritime crimes. To this end the HACGAM has helped to prevent and also solve a few cases including piracy in Southeast Asia. Illegal fishing is another serious transnational crime where
regional coast guards could effectively cooperate in the Indo-Pacific region. Significantly, fishing trawlers from as far as South Korea and Thailand have been involved in illegal fishing off Somalia (Glaser, Roberts, and Hurlbert 2019). Pertinently, it was illegal fishing by foreign fishing trawlers that led to the emergence of piracy off Somalia. The challenges of illegal fishing are discussed in detail below.

In addition to combating maritime crimes, coast guard agencies also function as specialized agencies for tackling marine environmental pollution caused by oil spills due to accidents or even pollution from plastic discharged into the sea. In August 2019, a massive oil spill off Mauritius caused by the grounding of bulk carrier MV Wakashio, a Panamanian-flagged vessel, owned by a Japanese company and captained by an Indian Master, highlighted the challenges of the multinational nature of the shipping industry and the crucial importance of regional collaboration. Pertinently, it also demonstrated how shipping connects the Indo-Pacific regional states together. Within days after the grounding, MV Wakashio broke into two, leaking over a million gallons of heavy engine oil into the ocean and the resultant oil slick spread to ten times its original size within 5 days, covering 14 miles (Degnarain 2020a). The scale of the disaster was clearly beyond the capacity of the Mauritius government and the urgent salvage efforts that followed were led by Japan coast guard helped by Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency which provided satellite imagery, Indian Coast Guard, a French specialist team from the neighboring French island La Reunion and several other agencies. A repeat of such shipping disasters can’t be ruled out and could involve any of the Indo-Pacific states. Thus, close cooperation between regional coast guard agencies is crucial.

Another area for regional collaboration between regional coast guard agencies in tackling marine pollution is related to plastics in the ocean. It is estimated that up to 15 million tonnes of plastic waste globally is discharged into the oceans from coastlines and rivers (Conversation 2020). This amount is expected to double by 2025 as plastic production continues to increase. Floating plastics in the open ocean are transported by ocean surface currents and winds, and plastic debris accumulates on island coastlines along their path and even forms floating garbage patches. Pertinently, the Pacific is home to the world’s largest floating garbage patches (Conversation 2020). For this reason, the Indo-Pacific initiative advocated by Prime Minister Modi, also included the issue of plastic pollution.

It is clear that the coast guard agencies in the Indo-Pacific could potentially play an important role in combating a wide range of common regional challenges such as transnational crimes including illegal fishing and marine pollution, key objectives of the Indo-Pacific Ocean Initiative. However, currently the HACGAM is limited to Asian coast guards, and therefore expanding the forum as an Indo-Pacific Head of Coast Guards Meeting’ to include others countries from the Indo-Pacific region could go a long way in promoting regional cooperation, augmenting the capacity of some of the smaller regional states and thus improving overall maritime governance.

**Regional fishery bodies in the Indo-Pacific region**

Illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing is an issue of global concern and the regulation of sustainable fishing and ending IUU is a key objective of the UN Sustainable Development Goal 14. Illegal fishing is widely prevalent in both the Indian and Pacific...
Oceans, adversely impacting the sustainability of fish stocks and thus food security. According to a study by the Food and Agriculture Organization’s (FAO), about 30 percent of the Indian Ocean’s assessed stocks are not fished within biologically sustainable levels (WWF 2020). Furthermore, in the South China Sea, fish stocks, over the past 30 years, have declined by one-third and are expected to decrease about 60 percent by 2045 if current practices persist (Perry 2020).

Illegal fishing is a relatively recent phenomenon perpetuated by overfishing in the EEZs of developed countries, and it is now common for large fishing vessels from developed countries to operate in deeper waters of the high seas and poach elsewhere in the EEZs of developing countries. According to a study by the Global Ocean Commission, between 1950–1994, the global catch had increased over five times from 18 million tonnes to nearly 94 million tonnes while the global fishing fleet’s overall engine power grew 10-fold over the period (Mission Ocean 2018). This trend seems to have continued and with the catch now falling due to declining stocks, fishing vessels use twice as much energy to catch a tonne of fish as 60 years ago (Mission Ocean 2018).

Too many vessels are competing for increasingly exploited stocks, increasing the imperative to fish illegally. Illegal fishing has several implications; it puts the local fishermen at a disadvantage, depletes fish stocks, destroys marine habitats and weakens the fishing communities economically. This could potentially impact maritime security as seen in Somalia where illegal fishing in the Somali EEZ led to depleted fish stocks, driving the local fishermen to desperation and eventually to piracy in the early twenty-first century. In India, illegal fishing has been reported around the Andaman islands where exotic marine species such as Sea Cucumbers are known to be highly valued in Chinese markets (MEF 2011), and in the Bay of Bengal where the formation of ‘dead zones’ extending about 60,000 square kilometers indicates that the region’s ecosystems have been adversely disrupted due to various factors including IUU (MEF 2011). Evidently, illegal fishing has not been accorded due importance in the Indian Ocean, probably because other security threats that require an urgent response seem to dominate the maritime security agenda over environmental issues. Clearly, a comprehensive approach to maritime security in the Indian Ocean demands far greater focus on IUU fishing than is currently accorded. Here, the Regional Fishery Bodies have an important role to play.

Regional Fishery Bodies are intergovernmental organizations formed by countries with fishing interests in an area. While some of them manage all the fish stocks found in a specific area, others focus on particular highly-migratory species, notably tuna, in large geographical areas including ‘areas beyond national jurisdiction (EUROPA 2020).’ The RFBs work in close collaboration with the FAO. While some RFBs have a purely advisory role, a few of them – known as regional fishing management organisations (RFMOs) - have been accorded management powers to set catch and fishing effort limits, and implement technical measures and control obligations that are binding on their members. The Indo-Pacific region has about 21 RFBs/RFMOs – with some overlapping jurisdiction - including the Asia Pacific Fisheries Commission, the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission, the South West Indian Ocean Fisheries Commission, the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission and the South Pacific Regional Fisheries Management Organisation.

These organizations are mandated to play an important role in facilitating international cooperation for the conservation and management of fish stocks and present the only
realistic means of governing fish stocks between zones of national jurisdiction and the high seas. Yet, the rise of IUU globally, particularly the Indo-Pacific region, clearly suggests that these organizations are limited in their capacity. For instance, the unchecked rise in illegal fishing in the Indian Ocean over the past several years that has led to several key fish stocks such as the Yellow-fin Tuna, declining below minimum sustainable levels, indicates that the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission has failed to perform as envisaged.

Manifestly, the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission and several other RFBs/RFMOs in the region are constrained by capacity to monitor the entire Indian Ocean region and keep track of fishing activities, a formidable task even for the regional coast guards and navies trying to curtail IUU in their respective national waters. However, certain RFBs/RFMOs such as the South Pacific Regional Fisheries Management Organisation (SPRFMO), set up in 2006 by Australia, Chile and New Zealand, and the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) established in 2004, have achieved significant success in curbing illegal fishing in the Pacific Ocean. The WCPFC has successfully implemented effective a vessel monitoring system (VMS) for keeping track of fishing activities in the region, including maintaining an updated database of annual catch for various species. Under the VMS, all fishing vessels are required to install a position transmitter that enables officials to ensure compliance with area closures and other restrictions. The WCPFC also works in close collaboration with the regional navies and coast guards, which conduct boarding and inspections of fishing vessels and help to reinforce the VMS.

In contrast the RFBs/RFMOs in the Indian Ocean including the Tuna Commission and others has not been able to implement a VMS for the region. Nor have these organizations been able to institutionalize any mechanism for operational level interaction with the regional coast guards and navies which have an overall responsibility for regional maritime security including IUU.

Perhaps the creation of a pan Indo-Pacific regional fishery body to coordinate the functions of the various RFBs and RFMOs and also serve as single point link with regional navies and coast guards under a newly created Indo-Pacific Assembly of Navies and an expanded HACGAM could help in regulating movements of fishing vessels in the Indo-Pacific region and contain IUU, and improve overall maritime governance.

**Indian ocean memorandum of understanding on port state control**

Port State Control is a mechanism by which states inspect ships calling at their ports to ensure that sub-standard ships (ships that do not comply with required IMO environmental regulations, and international standards of safety and seamanship) do no operate in the region. Sub-standard ships are not only vulnerable to piracy/armed attacks but also pose a threat to safety of crew and the environment and are more likely to participate in crimes (Bateman 2012). Considering the multinational nature of the global shipping industry with the fact that over 70 percent of the international fleet comprises Flags of Convenience vessels, port state control inspections are an important responsibility by coastal states accorded by the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Port state control inspections have gained salience in recent times due to the introduction of new IMO conventions such as the Ballast Water Management Convention of 2020 and the latest regulations to reduce sulphur oxides (SOX) emissions by ships.
under Annex VI of the MARPOL Convention. All these developments call for not just greater scrutiny of ships visiting regional ports but also greater coordination between all the ports of the region.

The Indian Ocean MoU on PSC which came into force in April 1999 was an attempt by Indian Ocean rim states to promote regional co-operation in controlling the plying of sub-standard ships in the region. Currently, about 17 Indian Ocean states are parties to the IOMoU including; Australia, Bangladesh, Comoros, Eritrea, France (La Reunion), India, Iran, Kenya, Maldives, Mauritius, Mozambique, Oman, Sri Lanka, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania and Yemen. The mission of the IOMoU is ‘to promote the effective implementation of an improved and harmonized system of port State control by uniform application, of relevant IMO/ ILO instruments on ships operating in the region (IO MoU 2020).’

Currently there are 10 such port state control MoUs in force including the Paris and Tokyo MOUs and the US Coast Guard which are regarded as the most efficient and effective regimes (Bateman 2012). The effectiveness of a regional MoU for port state control is dependent upon how thoroughly port state control inspections are carried out by its members, to that end the Indian Ocean MoU has been found lacking with certain important shipping countries in the region such as Pakistan, Madagascar, Myanmar and the Seychelles remaining outside the MoU, while many member states are not taking their role seriously (Bateman 2012). The effectiveness of the western port state control MoUs has led to many of the sub-standard ships being pushed away from Europe and America towards the Indian Ocean ports which are generally considered lax, with a few exceptions such as Australia, India and Singapore. For instance, according to the EQUASIS – a ship database set up by the European Union and French Maritime Association in 1997 - the MV Wakashio, which caused the 2019 Mauritius oil spill as discussed above, had nearly 100 pending deficiencies from various port state control inspections (Degnarain 2020b). Yet the vessel was at sea, highly unusual for a large ocean-bound vessel, and also a poor account of maritime governance in the region.

Given the maritime connectivity within the Indo-Pacific region, it is imperative that a pan Indo-Pacific MoU for PSC be established including all regional ports. This could be achieved by expanding and renaming the extant Indian Ocean MoU to include various regional ports in the Indo-Pacific region. Furthermore, the Indian Ocean Computerised Information System (IOCIS), a dynamic database maintained by the Indian Ocean MoU containing comprehensive information about the global merchant fleet including reports on ships inspections, detentions and arrests, could be expanded to include all Indo-Pacific regional ports and shared with regional navies, coast guards, ports and custom authorities for profiling ships based on their track record of inspections and detentions. This could serve as a valuable input for improving regional maritime safety and security.

**Building consensus**

The creation of pan Indo-Pacific institutions is clearly a difficult task, given the underlying regional security concerns and geopolitical tensions involving various ASEAN states, China, India, Japan and the United States. However, as advocated by the India’s Foreign Minister, the overarching maritime connectivity and common challenges of maritime governance make it viable for regional states to come together in a ‘lowest common
denominator approach to shared problems’ that ‘require urgent and coordinated solutions (MEA 2020).’ The success of several regional groupings in tackling common maritime challenges, as discussed above, gives hope that a merger of extant organizations is a workable idea.

The Indo-Pacific Ocean Initiative provides an opportunity for the creation of new institutions to address the common challenges of maritime governance in the Indo-Pacific region by a merger of extant organizations. In order to make it work, the idea for a merger of the various organizations would need to be mooted at the relevant forum and key regional states could need to be involved in consensus building. Since the announcement of the initiative by Prime Minister Modi in November 2019, Australia, Japan and several ASEAN member states have shown willingness to work with India (MEA 2020). Evidently, Australia and Japan have agreed to lead on maritime ecology and connectivity respectively, and India has expressed willingness to take the lead in Disaster Risk Reduction and Maritime Security.

**Conclusion**

The idea of the Indo-Pacific as an expanded ‘supra-region’ including two oceans, is nascent and lacks a common framework. Given the fact that maritime trade is the ‘common thread’ that binds the Indo-Pacific as a composite region, the Indo-Pacific Ocean initiative which seeks to improve maritime governance, provides an opportunity to build-up a pan regional framework from the bottom up. Without the creation of pan Indo-Pacific regional institutions that address common challenges, the very idea of an Indo-Pacific region could be difficult to sustain in the long term. But the merger of the extant organizations aimed at improving maritime governance in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, to create new and expanded institutions to deal with common regional issues could help to develop a cohesive framework upon which a comprehensive security regime could be built in time to come.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

**Notes on contributor**

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