



Multilateral Maritime Cooperation in the Indian Ocean: Legal Frameworks and Challenges

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Abstract

India, with its extensive coastline at the heart of some of the world's major trade and energy routes, ports, and security interests, is a region that has become one of the most significant maritime regions in the world. Regional cooperation exists through international law and regional institutions, yet there remains a real governance issue in the region. Overlapping maritime claims, inadequate enforcement, disparate laws, lack of institutional coordination, piracy, trafficking, illegal fishing, and marine environmental harms are all problems associated with these. The article takes a closer look at the legal and institutional framework for multilateral Indian Ocean cooperation, focusing on the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), the Djibouti Code of Conduct and its amendment (Jeddah), and maritime governance instruments. It employs a qualitative doctrinal research method, using primary and secondary legal documents, institutional materials, policy reports, and academic literature. Legal trend analysis, comparative analysis, doctrinal analysis, and thematic analysis are applied to assess the adequacy of existing laws, the effectiveness of the institutions, and the practical challenges. As the analysis demonstrates, UNCLOS offers a solid legal basis for cooperation in the maritime domain, although its application and effectiveness can vary depending on the interpretation of the law, the capacity for implementation, and the political stance of the States. Regional institutions assist in developing dialogue and fostering trust, but most have not yet achieved the strength of law and have yet to secure a consultative role, and some remain weak with limited capacity. The study recommends greater legal harmonisation, information sharing, joint enforcement, capacity building, and institutional coordination to achieve better governance of the Indian Ocean.

Keywords: Indian Ocean, Maritime Cooperation, UNCLOS, Maritime Governance, Maritime Security, Regional Cooperation, IORA, IONS, International Maritime Law, Ocean Governance



Introduction

The Indian Ocean is no longer merely a vast expanse between continents. Today, it plays a key role in global politics, trade, energy transport, military strategy, and environmental security. It connects the Middle East, Africa, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Australia. It is also home to critical sea lanes that carry vast quantities of oil, gas, containers, and raw materials daily. The Indian Ocean links to the rest of global commerce through key chokepoints, including the Strait of Hormuz, Bab el-Mandeb, the Mozambique Channel, and the Strait of Malacca. Therefore, disruption to the Indian Ocean can affect not only coastal states but also remote states that maintain trade connections via open sea routes and are influenced by the Indian Ocean's weather conditions (Bueger & Edmunds, 2017; Rumley, 2013).

Indian Ocean security has become more vital than ever, and there is a need for close cooperation in the maritime domain amongst the countries in the region. The maritime domain cannot be controlled or protected by a single State. Maritime hazards can cross borders, spread rapidly, and exploit legal voids. Solutions to the issues of piracy, armed robbery at sea, trafficking in drugs and persons, IUU fishing, marine pollution, and climate-related damage and risks will go beyond the reach of a single navy, coast guard, or legal system. These issues call for shared rules among coastal and user states, joint enforcement efforts, information exchange between states, and trust among them (Kraska & Pedrozo, 2013; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2024).

International law offers a valuable foundation for this kind of mutual collaboration. Internationally, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) is sometimes referred to as the constitution for the oceans, as it defines the rights and duties of states within maritime boundaries, including the continental shelf, the high seas, the exclusive economic zone, contiguous zones, the territorial sea, and its internal waters (United Nations, 1982). Other rules of UNCLOS cover navigation, marine scientific research, the protection of the marine environment, piracy, and dispute settlement. In theory, it provides states with a universal legal framework for operating at sea.

But having a law does not necessarily mean there is effective governance. Several issues affect the implementation of the law in the Indian Ocean. Coastal States lack maritime enforcement capacity. There are overlapping claims to maritime territory and indeterminate boundaries in some places. Certain aspects of UNCLOS (such as those relating to innocent passage, EEZs and MRRs) are interpreted differently by different States. Also, regional mechanisms are not always well entrenched, with limited permanent structures or legal enforcement powers. Consequently, the region has a legal structure, but not always an effective governance regime (Bateman, 2016; Beckman, 2013).

Regional institutions have tried to fill this void. Maritime safety and security are among the priority areas of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) in its mission to foster cooperation between states in the Indian Ocean region (Indian Ocean Rim Association [IORA], 2022). The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) is a forum for navies to exchange views on maritime security, interoperability and confidence-building. Cooperation against armed robbery and piracy in the western Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Aden is promoted through the adoption of the Djibouti Code of Conduct under the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) flagship, and wider cooperation on maritime crimes is advanced through the Jeddah Amendment (International Maritime Organisation [IMO], 2017). These mechanisms are helpful but also expose the disjointedness of regional

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maritime governance. There's diplomacy, naval diplomacy and extensive crime control. They have similar mandates and, in many instances, weak coordination.

The research problem that this paper addresses is then evident. Numerous legal and institutional instruments are available in the Indian Ocean, yet weaknesses in maritime security and governance persist. There is a disconnect between law and practice. Moreover, there is a gap in regional dialogue and concrete institutional action. Current scholarship on Indian Ocean strategy, piracy, maritime security and ocean governance has focused on the relationship or disjunction between legal orders and multilateral institutions, but an in-depth analysis of how both work together in practice is lacking (Brewster, 2018; Cordner, 2014; Kraska, 2011).

The study is important because maritime cooperation has implications for the Indian Ocean, including regional peace, economic stability, food security, environmental preservation, and the lawful use of its waters. Inadequate governance in coastal areas may foster the growth of criminal organisations. It could significantly impact fish populations, negatively affect coastal communities, and further erode the already low level of trust between states. More collaboration, on the other hand, can safeguard shipping operations, manage resources more effectively, help achieve sustainable development, and reduce the likelihood of conflict.

This paper is designed to critically assess the effectiveness of multilateral maritime cooperation in the Indian Ocean, particularly the gaps and the implementation of legal tools and institutions. The central question is whether UNCLOS, IORA, and IONS, along with other cooperative initiatives, can address the threats to maritime security and governance in the region. While UNCLOS is a powerful instrument for legal support, the article argues that legal harmony, enforcement capability, institutional cooperation, and political support are important for ensuring effective cooperation.

Research Objectives

The focus of this study is threefold: an examination of the effectiveness of international and regional legal frameworks in advancing multilateral maritime cooperation and regional maritime governance in the Indian Ocean; a critical examination of the effectiveness of regional maritime governance; and a critical examination of how international and regional legal frameworks can contribute to regional maritime governance. It highlights the contributions of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) in establishing maritime cooperation mechanisms among the states of the Indian Ocean. In addition, it discusses the critical legal, regulatory, political, and institutional issues that pose challenges to effective maritime cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region and offers practical legal and policy solutions to enhance maritime governance and cooperation.

Research Questions

The two main research questions for this study are: First, to what extent do existing multilateral legal frameworks – both international and regional – contribute to effective multilateral maritime cooperation and governance in the Indian Ocean region? Second, it focuses on the key legal, political and institutional challenges that limit maritime cooperation and assesses the need to strengthen regional legal and policy instruments to enhance cooperative maritime governance and regional stability.

Literature Review



Legal Foundations of Maritime Cooperation

The primary legal basis for cooperation at sea is UNCLOS. It confers jurisdiction on states over the maritime zones and sets duties for states as well. For instance, coastal states have rights over natural resources in their EEZs, as well as the right to protect the marine environment and to respect others' right to navigation (United Nations, 1982). UNCLOS also obligates all States to cooperate against piracy on the high seas. UNCLOS has been referred to as a 'balancing instrument' because it weighs state control over the oceans against the freedom of navigation and the common interest in the oceans (Beckman, 2013; Rothwell & Stephens, 2016).

But UNCLOS has its limitations. It is a framework convention, so it provides general rules and broad policy guidelines, with implementation left to States. This poses issues when the law must account for differing capacities and political interests among States. Illegal fishing, trafficking, and environmental crimes are examples of criminal activities that pass through multiple maritime zones. UNCLOS principles may not be a lived reality at sea if national legislation is ineffective and enforcement measures are lacking. That is why maritime governance relies, aside from treaty law, on domestic implementation, the capacity to patrol and gather evidence, and cooperation between courts, navies, coast guards, and port authorities (Kraska & Pedrozo, 2013).

Recent developments in the field of law regarding the oceans demonstrate the expanding scope of this area. Since 2023, the Agreement on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ Agreement) has highlighted biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction (United Nations, 2023). In 2024, the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) also rendered an advisory opinion on the extent to which greenhouse gas emissions fall within states' obligations to protect the marine environment under UNCLOS (International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea [ITLOS] 2008, 2024). All these developments are significant for the Indian Ocean, given climate change, ocean pollution, biodiversity loss, and the absence of environmental legislation and monitoring.

Regional Institutions and Cooperative Mechanisms

There are several regional/subregional bodies in the Indian Ocean, but they are not part of a single governance system. IORA is a wide-ranging diplomatic organisation that fosters cooperation in sectors such as Fisheries, Disaster Risk Management, Maritime Safety and Security, Academic Exchange, and the Blue Economy & Trade (IORA, 2022). One of its strengths is that it distils a multitude of states of the Indian Ocean. The downside to it is that it's primarily consultative and consensus-based. It can facilitate co-operation, but rarely exerts pressure or pressure-like influence on states to do something.

IONS is distinctive as a forum for naval leaders. It facilitates communication between maritime and naval security experts and chiefs. This is useful on several fronts, including search and rescue, anti-piracy, maritime domain awareness and humanitarian assistance. However, IONS is not a legal treaty body and therefore has its own limitations. It relies on the political will, naval capability and openness to information sharing among states. Trust-building may take a long time and be narrow in scope in areas characterised by high levels of strategic competition (Brewster, 2018; Cordner, 2014).

The model of cooperation contained in the Djibouti Code of Conduct and the Jeddah Amendment thereto is more focused and specific. The initial code was designed to facilitate cooperation to counter piracy and armed robbery in the western Indian Ocean



and the Gulf of Aden. Later, the scope of the Jeddah Amendment was expanded to cover additional maritime crimes, such as trafficking in persons and illegal activities at sea (IMO, 2017). This is significant in terms of the interdependencies between legal cooperation, information sharing, training and capacity building. Its impact remains greatest in pockets of the western Indian Ocean, however. The overall area remains too extensive and too politically fragmented to have a single mechanism to address all issues.

Maritime Security Threats in the Indian Ocean

Piracy is one of the most researched issues at sea in the Indian Ocean. Poor governance on the ground, as Somali piracy demonstrates, is mirrored by weak governance at sea. After reaching its peak, piracy was eliminated by international naval patrols, industry good practices and regional cooperation, and the spotlight shifted to more unstable areas. However, warnings have emerged about a resurgence in piracy (ICC International Maritime Bureau [ICC-IMB], 2025; UNODC, 2024). This indicates that the fight against piracy cannot be a one-off effort but must be an ongoing process.

Other dangers are less apparent but equally serious. Maritime routes and weak enforcement are used for trafficking in drugs, weapons and people. Because criminal networks are fast-moving and adaptable, use small boats, and operate in gaps between the territorial jurisdictions of states, they are difficult to monitor and control. Illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing is also threatening the region's stocks, coastal livelihoods, and sparking squabbles between local fishermen and foreign ships. The adverse impact of illegal fishing on food security and lawful resource management constitutes both an economic and a governance issue, as the losses incurred by the interviewed FIs result from weak governance. In contrast, the environmental impact is linked to economic damage on legal fishing vessels (Food and Agriculture Organisation [FAO], 2022).

Co-operation in the maritime field is also crucial for addressing environmental risks. Indian Ocean states are experiencing many impacts, including oil spills, plastic pollution, coral reef damage, climate change, and the loss of marine biodiversity. These issues do not always respect maritime boundaries. Pollution events and/or ecological degradation in one location can affect fisheries, tourism, ports and coastal communities at another location. The ITLOS advisory opinion 2024 confirms States' grave responsibilities to prevent, reduce and control marine pollution, including climate change-induced damage. These places added pressure on States to help others cooperate more closely and firmly on matters of environmental security.

Gaps, Debates, and Trends in the Literature

In scholarship, a large-scale debate has been underway over whether to use a strategic competition or a cooperative governance perspective to describe the Indian Ocean. Great power rivalry, naval competition, and sea lanes were important themes in the research of some scholars (Brewster, 2018; Rumley, 2013). Others centre on common dangers and maintain that maritime cooperation can build trust, despite the overall climate of tension. Others argue that cooperation at the maritime level can create trust even in more fraught circumstances (Bueger & Edmunds, 2017; Cordner, 2014). It's great to have both perspectives. Competition is evident throughout the area, but there are also real challenges that require us to work together.

Another area of the law-institutional gap concerns the relationship with legal practice. Numerous studies are limited to describing UNCLOS as the principle or legal foundation,



or to antipiracy cooperation, IONS or the IORA. There is relatively little research examining the interaction between these layers of law and institutions. For instance, a State might be a member of UNCLOS but lack the means to enforce fisheries law. A Navy might participate in IONS without sharing sensitive security information. IORA can issue policy statements on maritime security, but lacks enforcement mechanisms. This article fills this void and focuses on law, institutions and implementation as aspects of a single governance problem.

The prevailing trend is towards maritime security as a way of going beyond traditional naval security. Previously, piracy and the protection of sea lanes were emphasised. Recent work captures the governance of the blue economy, climate change, illegal fisheries, marine pollution, cyber risks in ports and at sea, and human security (Bueger & Edmunds, 2017; FAO, 2022; ITLOS, 2024). These include expansive considerations of the Indian Ocean as a space not only for navigation but also for ocean communities and economic activity. Hence, it is indisputable that there is a need for a more holistic legal and policy framework for cooperation in the maritime domain, as envisaged in the literature.

Methodology

Research Approach

This study utilises a qualitative 'doctrinal' research approach that examines the legal and institutional aspects of multilateral maritime cooperation in the Indian Ocean. A doctrinal approach is appropriate given the research's interpretative, evaluative and analytical focus on international legal instruments, regional doctrine and policy documents, and maritime governance arrangements. This study is based on secondary research, drawing on the results of other interviews and surveys. Rather, it explores legal and policy resources to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the governance system.

Research Design

An exploratory and analytical research design is used in this study. It is exploratory, aiming to examine the legal and institutional infrastructure in the Indian Ocean. It is analytical in that it assesses the effectiveness and feasibility of these arrangements in meeting students' needs, as well as their coherence. There is a stronger connection between legal doctrines and issues on the ground, ranging from piracy and ship trafficking to illegal fishing, pollution, and enforcement failures within the maritime realm.

Sources of Data

Secondary data from legal, institutional and policy sources, as well as academic sources, have been used in the research. These include UNCLOS, the Djibouti Code of Conduct and the Jeddah Amendment, documents from IORA and IONS, reports from IMO and UNODC, FAO documents on illegal fishing, scholarly publications and peer-reviewed journal articles, and explanatory documents on anti-piracy and maritime security programmes in the IOR.

Use an appropriate method for analysing data

Doctrinal, comparative and thematic analyses are used to analyse the material gathered in this study. The Dr A.-Y.-Khan Shared Vision focuses on doctrinal analysis of the strength, flexibility and coverage of the legal documents. Comparative analysis is used to explore differences across regional mechanisms and their implementation across countries. Key issues that keep emerging from the thematic analysis include multi-sectoral governance,

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overlaps, a low level of the rule of law, divergent legal interpretation, capacity constraints and institutional constraints.

Scope and Limitations

It examines the Indian Ocean region and reviews maritime cooperation in the areas of legal governance, security, environmental protection, and institutional coordination. It focuses particularly on piracy, trafficking, illegal fishing, and security-related environmental issues. This study adopts a qualitative approach using secondary data and doctrinal analysis. It does not include interviews, surveys or field trips. Hence, the results will rely on existing legal records, literature, policy reports, and academic research.

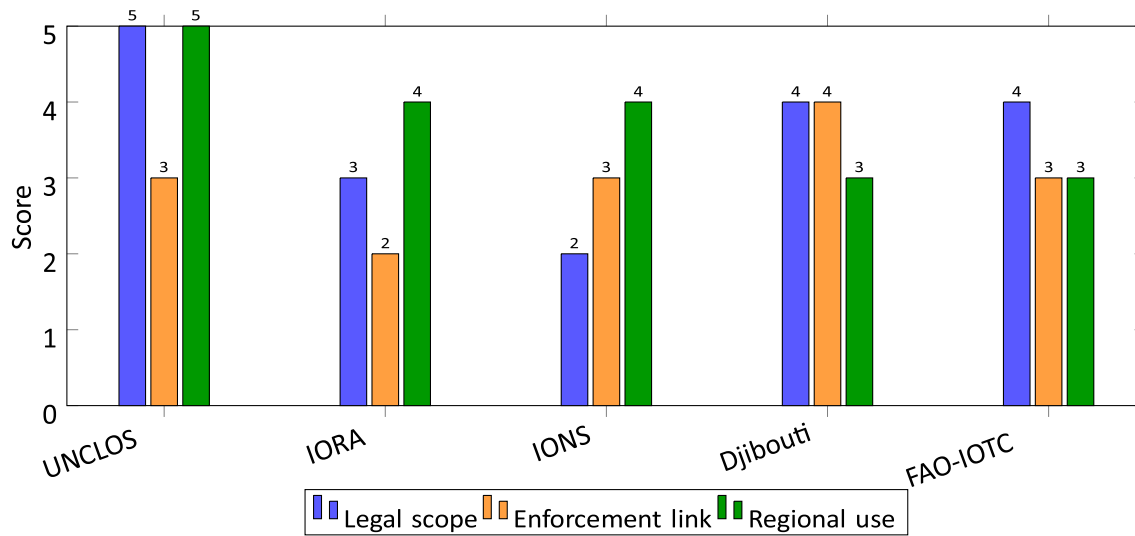
Data Analysis

Data analysis is based on a qualitative analysis of legal instruments, regional institutional materials, policy documents and literature. The tables and other graphs below do not contain statistical survey data. They offer doctrinal, comparative and thematic analysis scores that expound on the law and the institutions involved, as an interpretation. A score of 1 will be considered for slight presence, and a score of 5 for very strong presence.

Table 1: *Legal and institutional framework matrix*

Framework	Legal scope	Enforcement link	Regional use	Main relevance
UNCLOS	5	3	5	General legal basis for maritime zones, navigation, resources, environment, piracy, and dispute settlement
IORA	3	2	4	Diplomatic platform for regional cooperation, maritime safety, blue economy, and policy dialogue
IONS	2	3	4	Naval dialogue, confidence-building, search and rescue, and maritime security communication
Djibouti Code/Jeddah Amendment	4	4	3	Cooperation against piracy, armed robbery, and wider maritime crime in the western Indian Ocean
FAO/IOTC fisheries rules	4	3	3	Fisheries governance, stock management, and action against illegal fishing

As presented in Table 1, the scope of law encompassed by, and the regional importance of, UNCLOS are the widest. Its implementation, however, has a weaker link, and states largely bear the responsibility for implementation. IORA and IONS can be useful in Dialogue and trust-building processes, but have limited legal competence. The Djibouti Code and the Jeddah Amendment have greater operational value in the fight against crime, but are not equally active throughout the Indian Ocean region.



Graph 1: Comparative strength of selected legal and institutional frameworks.
 The overall pattern is confirmed with the graph of 1. The best institutions do not necessarily lead to good implementation. UNCLOS is more general in scope, whereas region-specific instruments are more effective in specific regions but less comprehensive than the general floor of governance provided by UNCLOS.

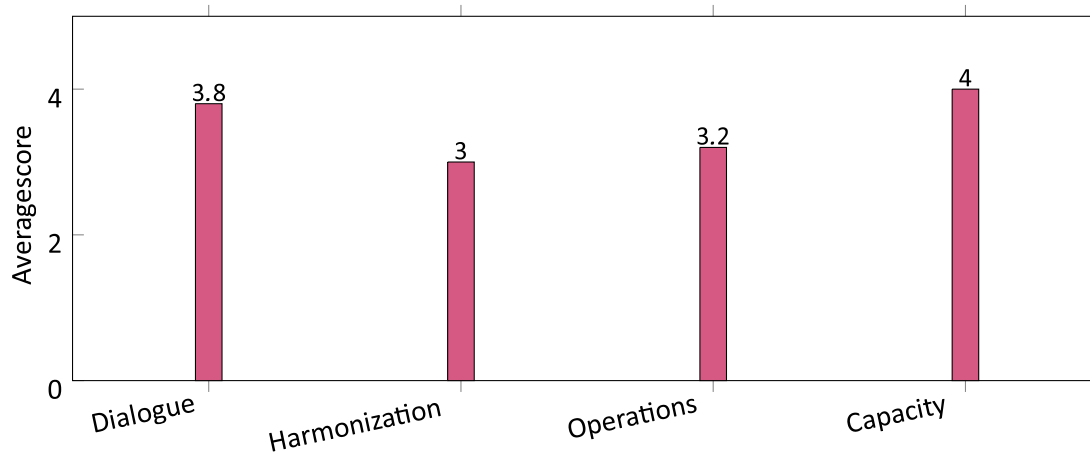
Table 2: Effectiveness of regional mechanisms by governance function

Mechanism	Dialogue	Legal harmonization	Operational response	Capacity-building
IORA	5	3	2	3
IONS	4	2	3	3
Djibouti Code/Jeddah Amendment	4	3	4	4
IMO technical cooperation	3	4	3	5
UNODC Maritime Crime Programme	3	3	4	5

A summary of the different mechanisms in Table 2 indicates that each has different functions to perform, and does not perform all the same functions equally. IORA has good dialogue capabilities, but limited response. IONS helps to facilitate naval communication, but does not have much law-making power. Capacity building, particularly in training and technical support, is a key area of IMO and UNODC's contributions.

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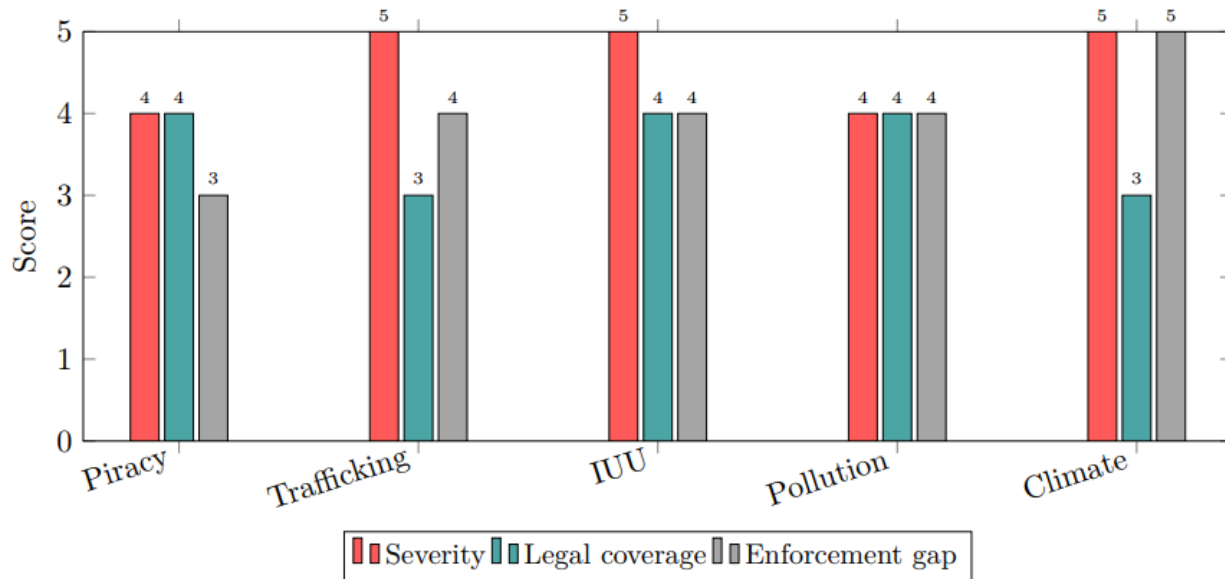
Graph 2: Average effectiveness by governance function.

Graph 2 demonstrates that capacity building and dialogue are more effective than the technical processes of legal harmonisation and operational response. This implies that the process of talking, training, and knowledge sharing for cooperation is advanced at the regional level compared to establishing binding cooperation rules or working together to enforce them.

Table 3: Emerging maritime threats and legal governance gaps

Threat	Severity	Legal coverage	Enforcement gap	Main governance concern
Piracy/armed robbery	4	4	3	Requires sustained naval cooperation and prosecution capacity
Trafficking by sea	5	3	4	Criminal networks exploit weak surveillance and jurisdictional gaps
Illegal fishing	5	4	4	Weak monitoring and different national rules harm fish stocks
Marine pollution	4	4	4	Environmental harm crosses borders and needs a rapid joint response
Climate-related harm	5	3	5	Legal duties are developing, but regional implementation remains weak

Table 3 suggests some of the biggest governance weaknesses relate to illegal fishing, trafficking and harm caused by climate-related effects. These threats are hard because they are transboundary, hidden, and, at times, associated with low state capacity. There's greater legal awareness of piracy, but it's self-evident that if there is no interest in the region, then it can make a comeback.



Graph 3: Threat severity, legal coverage, and enforcement gaps.

As shown in graph 3, there is a substantial gap between the severity of threats and enforcement. The enforcement gaps are extremely high for climate-related harm and trafficking. This goes on to mean that there is more than just the legal acknowledgement.

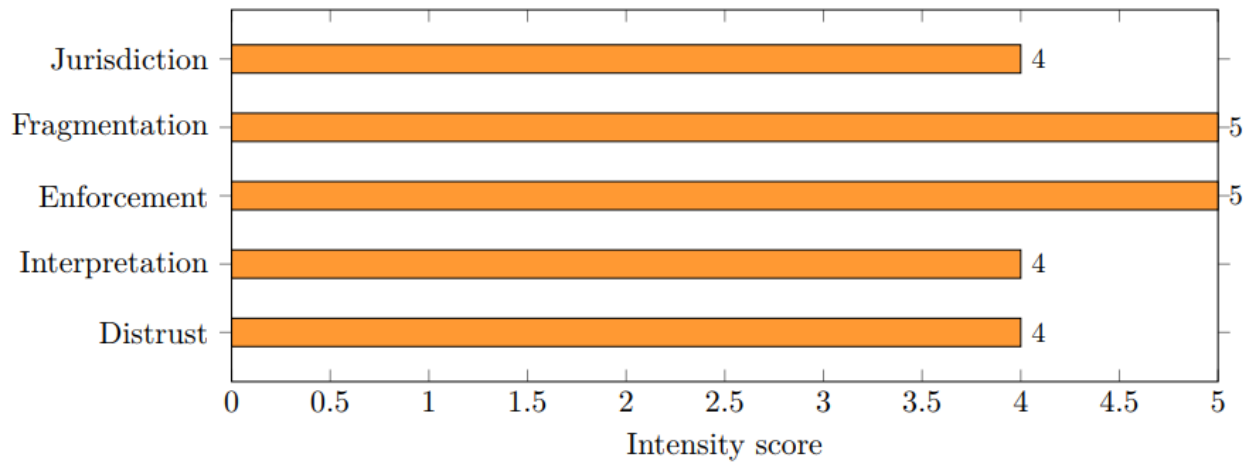
Table 4: Major barriers to maritime cooperation

Barrier	Intensity	Explanation
Overlapping jurisdictions	4	Unsettled maritime boundaries and mixed claims complicate enforcement and resource control.
Fragmented institutions	5	Several bodies operate independently, with limited coordination and distinct mandates.
Weak enforcement capacity	5	Many states lack patrol assets, surveillance systems, trained personnel, and prosecution capacity
Inconsistent legal interpretation	4	States differ on rights and duties in maritime zones, navigation, and enforcement powers
Strategic distrust	4	Rivalries reduce information-sharing and limit joint operations

The most severe overall constraints are weak enforcement capacity and fragmented institutions, according to the results reported in Table 4. The question of overlapping jurisdiction and conflicting interpretations of laws remains highly relevant, as it introduces uncertainty about who can act, where they can act, and on what legal basis they do so.

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Graph 4: Intensity of major barriers to maritime cooperation.

The problems at the institutional level and with enforcement capacity are clearly central issues, as evidenced by graph 4. The results address the second research question, "Why is cooperation less effective than suggested by the legal framework?" by identifying why cooperation remains insufficient.

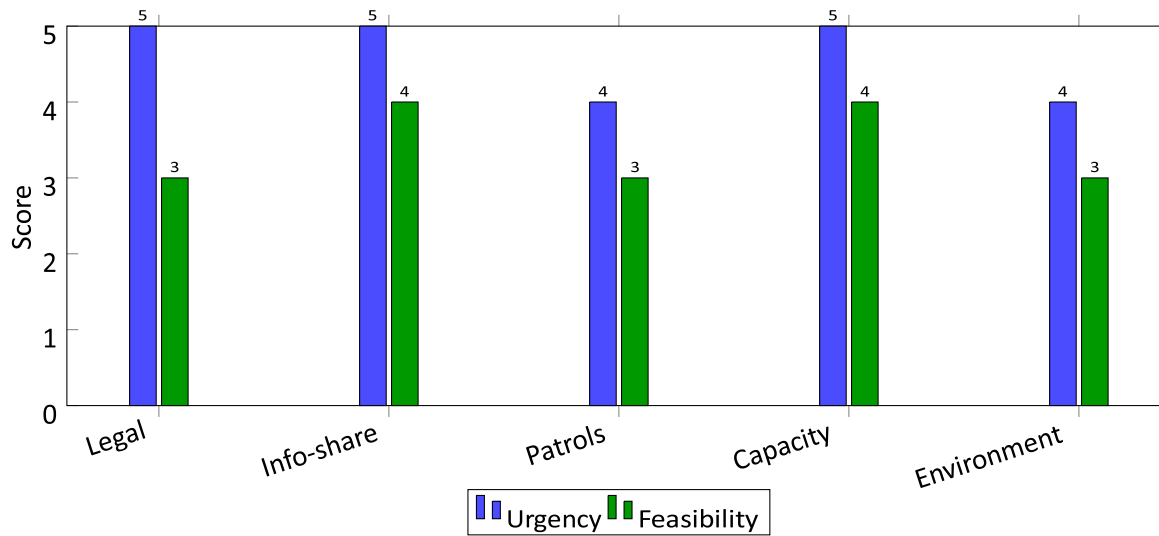
Table 5: Priority measures for strengthening maritime cooperation

Measure	Urgency	Feasibility	Expected contribution
Legal harmonization	5	3	Reduces differences in national maritime laws and improves prosecution
Regional information-sharing	5	4	Improves maritime domain awareness and early warning
Joint patrols and exercises	4	3	Builds operational trust and supports response to threats
Capacity-building for small states	5	4	Strengthens enforcement, surveillance, and legal institutions
Environmental cooperation mechanism	4	3	Supports shared response to pollution, climate harm, and biodiversity loss

Table 5 indicates that the measures with the highest need are legal harmonisation, information-sharing and capacity-building. However, feasibility differs. Politically realisable and feasible in the short term would be information sharing and capacity building rather than binding and legal reform.

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Graph 5: Urgency and feasibility of recommended measures.

It would appear that the best order of reform is given by Graph 5. States should begin implementing urgent and attainable measures, particularly in information sharing and capacity development. Harmonisation of the law is also crucial and will likely take longer, as it will need to be adopted through national legislation and decided politically.

In conclusion, the data analysis aims to understand the legal framework and implementation of the Indian Ocean, which indicates that the Indian Ocean has a solid legal framework but limited implementation. The rules in UNCLOS are general, though there is a considerable reliance on state capacity and institutional coordination. There are broad regional institutions which are useful but yet fragmented. But the existing cooperation is limited by the emerging threats. A policy blueprint that resonates with justice, capacity development, and on-the-ground, cooperative working is best.

Discussion Section

The results revealed that the multilateral cooperation in the maritime aspects of the Indian Ocean is grounded in substantial legal strength but suffers from significant governance weaknesses in practice. The universal language of the law in UNCLOS is useful because international cooperation at sea is impossible without a shared understanding of the rules governing zones of jurisdiction, rights and duties, navigation, access to resources, environmental protection, etc. The discovery corroborates the legal thinking that UNCLOS provides the foundation for order in the ocean (Beckman, 2013; Rothwell & Stephens, 2016). But the analysis further uncovers that UNCLOS is not self-enforcing. Its effectiveness relies on national legislation, patrol capabilities, judicial systems, political will to support it, and local trust.

The study also shows that the role of the regional institutions is useful but not equally so. IORA plays an essential role in diplomatic dialogue and agenda-setting, particularly about maritime safety, security and the blue economy. IONS promotes dialogue and confidence-building in the Navy. A model of cooperation in combat against maritime crime is more visible in the Djibouti Code and the Jeddah Amendment. However, they are diffused. They are not always disclosing, coordinating agendas, or even establishing binding relations. This only reinforces Bueger and Edmunds' (2017) view of maritime security as an interdisciplinary domain requiring cooperation among numerous actors beyond the navy.



An important discovery is the disparity between the level of legislation and enforcement capability. One of the important discoveries is the legal coverage and how well it is enforced. The clear extent to which UNCLOS and related instruments cover piracy, however, is offset by a deficiency in comparable prosecution/police/, and patrol capacity. The fisheries law and regional fisheries bodies (RFBS) address illegal fishing; however, monitoring is difficult. The duty under UNCLOS in the context of climate-related harm is now better understood in light of the ITLOS advisory opinion. However, the implementation process can be improved at the regional level (ITLOS, 2024). Including the legal system, this has led to growth, with the enforcement being the point of weakness.

The results also reveal that non-traditional threats have become central to the governance of the Indian Ocean. Maritime security is too complex to be defined just as 'naval defence' or 'counter-piracy'. Must cover aspects of trafficking, foreign fishing and environmental degradation, and aver environmental damage due to climate trends. Its threats bring negative impacts on food security, port security, coastal livelihoods, regional security in the long term, and human security. This overall frame of reference aligns with a recent body of maritime security literature that sees maritime governance as a combination of different aspects of policy and law enforcement, efforts for environmental conditions and protection, and efforts to ensure economic order and safety for humans (Bueger & Edmunds, 2017; FAO, 2022; UNODC, 2024).

The theoretical importance of the study is based on the doctrinal rather than institutional link. Rules might only become apparent from a legal analysis. The forums may only be identified in the context of institutional analysis. However, given this study, rules and forums will not work without coordination. The importance of an injury is also obvious. A single State in the Indian Ocean should not unduly handle the governance of maritime affairs. There is a need for capacity support to small states. In large states, it is important to foster trust rather than harness cooperation solely for strategic influence. Clear division of labour and tighter linkages between legal, naval, environmental, and criminal justice actors are needed on the regional level.

There are some limitations in the study. It makes no mention of interviews with officials, naval officers, port authorities or fishers and is based on secondary sources and doctrinal legal analysis. It also employs interpretive scores, rather than statistical scores, to analyse the data and report patterns.

There is a need for an empirical study in the field, interviews with regional decision makers, and case studies of specific maritime events for future investigation. Capacity issues also require greater attention for smaller island and coastal States, as they typically experience the most severe shortages and may be the least discussed in strategic discussions.

Recommendations

The results indicate that both legal improvements and practical institutional reforms are necessary in the Indian Ocean to facilitate cooperation. Law is not entirely lacking in the region. Rather, it has been plagued by ineffective implementation, a disunited institutional setting, and a lack of capacities. Thus, advice should be directed towards making current legal obligations more conducive to ongoing cooperation.

There is a need for greater legal harmonisation between Indian Ocean states. National laws concerning piracy, illegal fishing, maritime evidence and pollution should be harmonised with UNCLOS and other relevant instruments. Necessarily, this would not

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mean to say that all states would have the same laws. It requires their laws to be sufficiently compatible to enable mutual investigations, prosecutions, extraditions, and evidence sharing. Smaller States could benefit from regional legal workshops and model maritime laws, as they are key to updating domestic laws.

Secondly, coordination needs to be strengthened within the regions. Programmes of IORA, IONS, IORA-supported mechanisms, UNODC programmes and fisheries bodies must not operate in their silos. There is potential for significant duplication, which can be minimised through frequent joint meetings, joint working groups, and a common maritime risk assessment. IORA can be expanded to include diplomatic dialogue, and IONS can lead naval/operational dialogue. The Djibouti Code/Jeddah Amendment model could be scaled up or better connected to other regional maritime crime programmes.

Thirdly, enhancing the maritime domain knowledge should be promoted. Enhanced systems should be in place in the states to facilitate more effective vessel tracking and data exchange, and to enable awareness of unusual activity. This is particularly the case with respect to preventing trafficking, illegal fishing, and piracy. Navies, coast guards, fisheries agencies, customs, port authorities, and environmental organisations should be included in information sharing. To ensure timely action while respecting sensitive information, the rules of trust-building must be followed.

Fourth, capacity-building should be regarded as a "long-duration" issue in the region. There is a need for patrol boats, surveillance technology, training, legal expertise, prosecutors, and port inspections among many Indian Ocean states. Capacity building may not be limited to short training. It should involve continuous TQ and technical assistance, common drills, legal counselling, and equipment maintenance. It is recommended to rely on capacity development by strong states and development partners, but not to depend on them or put political pressure on them.

The fifth aspect concerns the need to enhance cooperation towards the environment. There is a need for robust regional planning in the Indian Ocean to address oil spills, marine pollution, climate change impacts, and the protection of corals and biodiversity. States have new legal incentives to cooperate on environmental protection (ITLOS, 2024; United Nations, 2023) arising from the BBNJ Agreement and Italy's ITLOS climate advisory opinion. Regional organisations need to identify these responsibilities and put them into practice by developing regional emergency response plans, conducting regional environmental monitoring, and sharing information on environmental monitoring.

Last but not least, future studies should go further in their analysis than the broad regional analysis we have and focus on specific case studies. Recommendations in various areas are useful, including prosecution proceedings for piracy suspects, port state control, fisheries enforcement, search-and-rescue cooperation, and duties related to climate change in maritime areas. The voices of smaller and more coastal states, of island states and of the fishermen and enforcement officials must also be heard.

Conclusion

This article will discuss the prism of useful Maritime cooperation models in the Indian Ocean, focusing on legal aspects, as well as regional and practical aspects of governance, law, and society. Moreover, the study revealed that even though UNCLOS provides a solid legal basis for cooperation among states, its implementation remains limited and inconsistent. The roles of regional institutions like IORA and IONS in facilitating dialogue



and building trust, as well as the Djibouti Code of Conduct and the Jeddah Amendment on maritime crime cooperation, are useful examples. However, the above mechanisms are severely constrained by limited enforcement capacity, a lack of coordination amongst them, overlapping jurisdictions, differing interpretations of the law, and scepticism about political strategy.

Another finding of the study was that new threats reveal contemporary governance regimes' intolerance of complexity in maritime areas. The study also showed that new threats unveil the limits of current maritime governance. Piracy is still an issue, but it is not the only one – in the region, trafficking issues and illegal fishing, marine pollution, and even climate change-related damage are also issues. Such risks are transboundary and may not be addressed by a single state. They need common data and harmonised legislation, plus trained organisations to monitor and enforce the laws, and greater regional institutions. Analysis reveals that the major challenge is not the absence of rules of law, but the gap between rules and actions.

The contribution of this study is that it brings together doctrinal legal analysis with institutional and thematic analyses. It demonstrates that the governance of the Indian Ocean waters needs to be viewed as a system comprising law, institutions, political trust and the capacity to enforce it. In theory, the article advocates a comprehensive concept of maritime security that encompasses environmental, economic, and human security. In terms of policy priorities, it implies that legal harmonisation, capacity-building and institutional co-ordination should be accorded high policy priority in practice.

The study has limitations, as all data come from secondary sources and no interviews or observations were conducted. Future studies should hence involve empirical research on maritime officials, regional institutions, and coastal communities' fishers. Despite this constraint, the article demonstrates that enhanced collaboration between the multiple actors in the region is required to obtain a stable, lawful and sustainable Indian Ocean. The Region's Accompaniment towards coordinated action will consolidate better protection of trade routes, marine resources, and coastal communities, and support long-term peace.

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