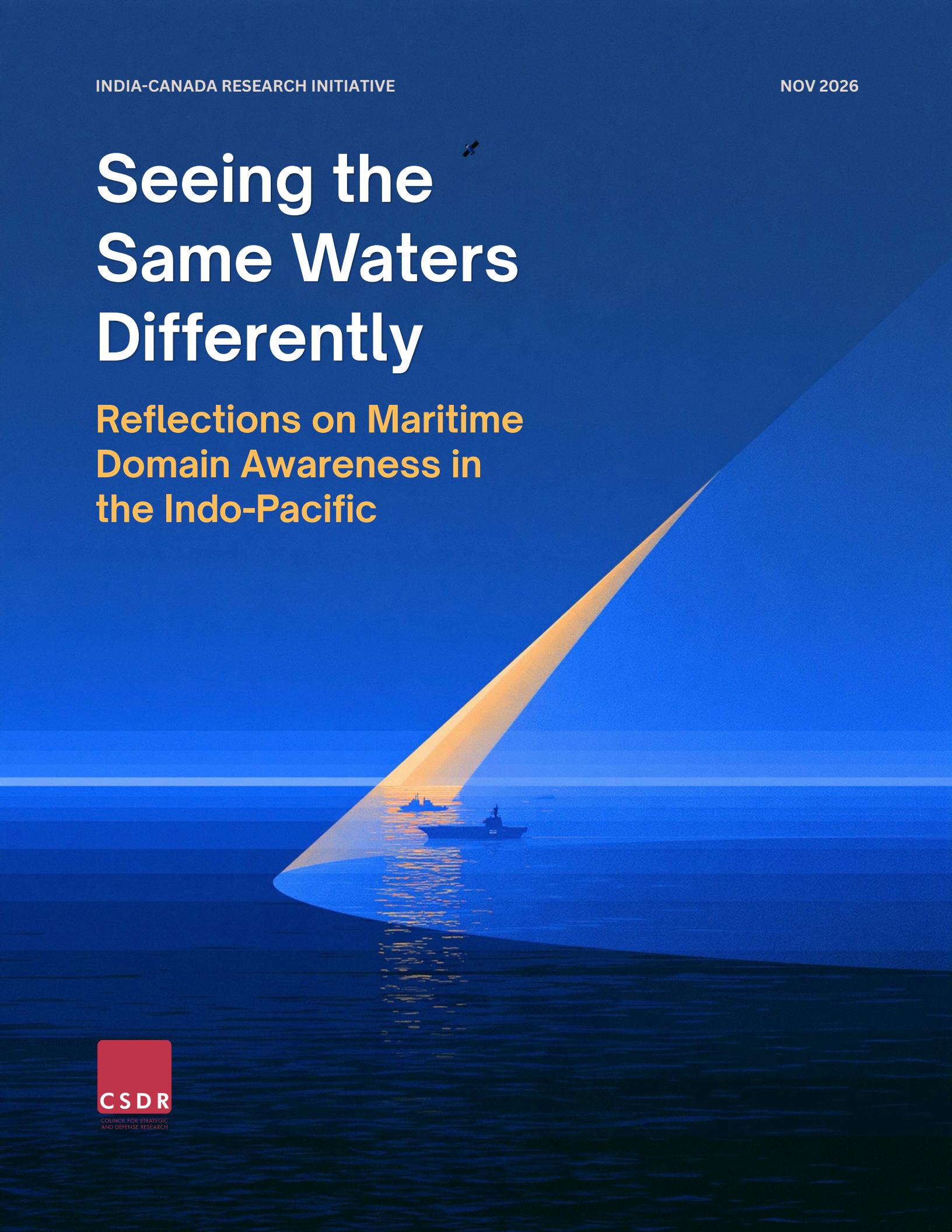
INDIA-CANADA RESEARCH INITIATIVE

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Seeing the Same Waters Differently

Reflections on Maritime Domain Awareness in the Indo-Pacific



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ABOUT THIS REPORT

At the end of September 2026, CSDR and the National Institute of Advanced Studies brought experts to Bengaluru, with support from the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, to compare twelve national perspectives on how the Indo-Pacific watches its waters. This report captures reflections from two days of discussion.

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AUTHOR

Dr. Gaurav Saini, Co-founder, CSDR

INTRODUCTION

Maritime domain awareness (MDA) has long been a technical matter, focused on detection, identification, tracking, and monitoring. However, over the past few years, it has also gained strategic and political relevance. Three shifts could help explain this change.

The first is what to watch in the maritime domain, i.e., what one needs to be aware of. While the old agenda of piracy and illegal fishing has not gone away (ReCAAP recorded 132 incidents in Asia in 2025, up from 107 a year earlier; IFC-IOR reported 227 incidents of piracy and armed robbery in 2025, the same as 2024, and 673 IUU fishing incidents, a reduction of 17% from 809 in 2024),[1] awareness requirements have shifted to the seabed and into the gray zone. Several instances, such as damaged cables in the Red Sea in early 2024 and again in September 2025, cutting of cables in the South China Sea connecting Taiwan,[2,3,4] the rapid rise of Taiwan's air defense identification zone breaches by Chinese military aircraft (972 in 2021 to 3,615 in 2024),[5] have encouraged states like the Philippines to shift to a strategy of exposing such violations since February 2023.[6] At sea, the pressure has grown as well. In 2025, the Philippine Navy reported 286 Chinese military vessels in the West Philippine Sea, the China Coast Guard more than doubled its presence around Scarborough Shoal, and a record 1,380 China Coast Guard and other Chinese state vessels were reported in the contiguous zone around the Senkaku Islands.[104] Therefore, seeing is no longer enough and showing has become part of the contest.

> **Seeing is no longer enough and showing has become part of the contest.**

The second shift is in the tools available for creating awareness. Space has been commercialized, and with it the picture of the sea. One company alone, ICEYE, has launched 70 radar satellites since 2018.[7] Free platforms such as Skylight now serve more than 300 organizations in about 70 countries.[8] As a result of these changes, coast guards that could never own a satellite can now get access to ISR capabilities at a small price. The Quad built its maritime partnership on precisely this premise.[9]

The third shift is institutional: states are creating internal bureaucratic structures, legislation, and infrastructure to collect, process, and relay awareness information into actionable intelligence to safeguard their interests. Hence, states are writing awareness into law and organization. The Philippines set up a National Maritime Council in 2024, South Korea gave its coast guard a legal basis to collect maritime information in 2025, and India contracted for a National MDA Project the same year.[10,11,12] At the regional level, the Colombo Security Conclave signed its charter in August 2024, and in May 2026 the Quad moved from sharing data to coordinating surveillance.[13,14]

Yet, all this progress has brought its own problems; for instance, regional cooperation mechanisms may have multiplied faster than the links between them (inter- and intra-agency coordination). Further, while we may be collecting more information than ever before, the choices about sharing intelligence (based on that information) remain political and hard to come by. On top of all this, the uniting factor, i.e., the US, that did most to promote the idea has become harder to plan around. Washington's latest National Security and National Defense Strategy documents put its own hemisphere first.[15,16] So, while the Indo-Pacific is more aware of its waters, it has not yet decided who acts on what it sees, and with whom. This report addresses that question through six themes and ends with recommendations.

Three shifts at a glance

WHAT TO WATCH

132
incidents reported to ReCAAP in Asia in 2025, up from 107 a year earlier

673
IUU fishing incidents reported by IFC-IOR in 2025, down from 809 in 2024

TOOLS TO WATCH WITH

70
radar satellites launched by ICEYE since 2018

300+
organizations in about 70 countries served by Skylight

LAW AND ORGANIZATION

2024
the Philippines sets up a National Maritime Council

2025
South Korea gives its coast guard a legal basis to collect maritime information; India contracts for a National MDA Project

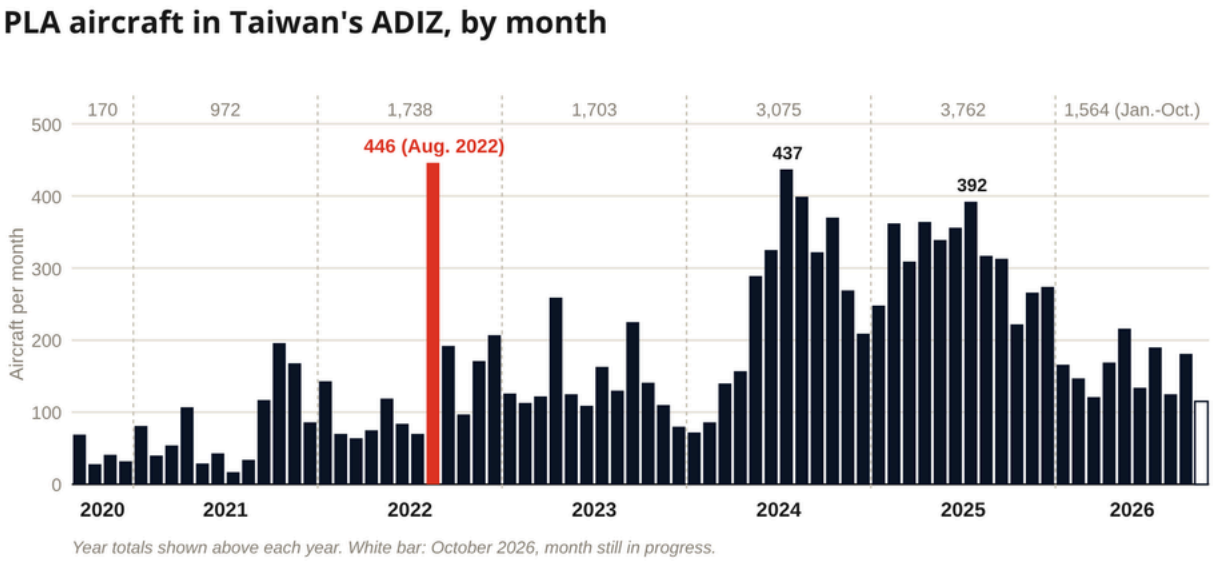
A SHARED DEFINITION, FRAGMENTED PRACTICE

While Indo-Pacific countries (both resident and non-resident stakeholders) generally agree on what constitutes MDA, other components, such as capabilities, intent, and enforcement, remain fragmented. This is only natural since every state views the same body of water through the prism of its own threats, budget, and politics.

Currently, Taiwan and the Philippines are better positioned within the U.S.-led MDA framework, most clearly expressed in the Quad's 2022 IPMDA partnership and at the forefront of MDA requirements and reform.[9] Manila has reorganized itself around this idea as early as March 2024, when the Philippine president signed an executive order designed to enhance maritime security and maritime domain awareness.[10] The order established the National Maritime Council, and a Maritime Zones Act was signed into law in November of the same year.[17] Manila has also drawn on external partners. Since October 2023, it has been connected to Canada's Dark Vessel Detection System.[18] Since 2021, the United States has given Philippine agencies free access to its SeaVision platform.[19] In February 2026, the Philippine Navy received coastal radar systems worth 600 million Japanese yen through Japan's Official Security Assistance.[20] And since February 2023, Manila has made a policy of publicizing Chinese coercion at sea, its so-called transparency initiative, which turns awareness into a political instrument.[6]

> **While Indo-Pacific countries generally agree on what constitutes MDA, other components, such as capabilities, intent, and enforcement, remain fragmented.**

Like the Philippines, Taiwan faces a similar geographical predicament, but it is not a member of bodies such as the International Maritime Organization, and it conducts maritime cooperation mainly through bilateral channels.[21,22] Even so, MDA is critical for its security. In 2021, Janes counted 972 Chinese military aircraft entering Taiwan's air defense identification zone (ADIZ). By 2024, that figure had more than tripled, to 3,615.[5] In June 2025, a Taiwanese court sentenced the captain of a Togo-registered vessel to three years in prison for severing the Taiwan-Penghu No. 3 communications cable.[4] Several unreported but regularly detected incidents of this kind have now become common in the South China Sea (SCS).



Source: Global Military, "Taiwan ADIZ Violations," globalmilitary.net, accessed 23 Oct. 2026. October 2026 is a partial month.

Other ASEAN states, such as Indonesia and Malaysia, are at the other end of the MDA spectrum. For them, MDA priorities include domestic housekeeping (deciding which agency is responsible for what, how agencies share information, and how they are funded) before it becomes regional or global politics. In Indonesia, six institutions share maritime enforcement responsibilities, a maritime security bill awaits consideration, and Bakamla saw its 2025 budget cut from Rp 1,084 billion to Rp 729 billion.[23,24] All of this needs to be fixed at home; therefore, they need knowledge (from others) on how to better organize an MDA framework, and the political will to implement these reforms.

In Malaysia, its SWASLA radar network is being extended to Sarawak and the peninsula's east coast, but it keeps its differences with China out of public and regional discussion.[25] When a Chinese diplomatic note protesting Malaysian exploration near the Luconia Shoals leaked in 2024, Kuala Lumpur opened an inquiry into the leak, and the prime minister described China as "a great friend" and said the exploration would continue.[26]

For states between these two ends, i.e., between Taiwan and Malaysia/Indonesia, concerns are rising. For instance, Vietnam's perception of maritime threats is rising sharply. In September 2024, Vietnamese fishermen were beaten by Chinese maritime officers during an interdiction near the Paracels.[27] Due to its changing predicament, Hanoi has taken delivery of a third former U.S. Coast Guard cutter and is pursuing an active reclamation program in the Spratlys.[28,29]

Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK), which already have substantial capabilities, are reassessing the threat from major powers and what it means for their maritime strategies. In 2023, Japan adopted its Fourth Basic Plan on Ocean Policy, which includes strengthening its MDA capacity.[30] South Korea amended its Maritime Guard Act, effective October 2025, to give the Korea Coast Guard a legal basis for collecting maritime security information.[11] The coast guard plans a "K-MDA" center for 2027,[31] yet the

wider frame in ROK is less settled, as there are signs of Seoul shifting away from the 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy.[32]

> **Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK), which already have substantial capabilities, are reassessing the threat from major powers and what it means for their maritime strategies.**

Today, technologically advanced partners outside the region provide much of the capabilities, each in a different way. The United States provides a platform: SeaVision reports over 4,400 users in 120 partner nations.[33] Canada provides similar capabilities, but as a service. Canada launched its Dark Vessel Detection program in 2021 with C$7 million to detect suspected illegal fishing. It now reaches 15 Pacific Island nations, the Philippines, and Ecuador.[34,35] France provides a network, namely the EU's IORIS, which Expertise France implements. By May 2025, it was being used by 218 agencies in 56 nations.[36] So smaller players in the region have a choice to make between three models, i.e., using a platform, a service, or a network, and a littoral state can use all three without any regional coordination.

Three models of outside support

A PLATFORM

SeaVision, United States

4,400+

users in 120 partner nations

A SERVICE

Dark Vessel Detection, Canada

C$7m

at launch in 2021; now reaches 15 Pacific Island nations, the Philippines, and Ecuador

A NETWORK

IORIS, EU, implemented by Expertise France

218

agencies in 56 nations using it by May 2025

In some cases, MDA has meant only specific threats, and the approach has therefore taken a different route. Sri Lanka, a crucial point on the Indian Ocean's sea lines of communication, shows the economic imperative most clearly. One published estimate is that about 70 percent of the cargo transshipped through Colombo is India-linked.[37] Colombo assesses everything else through this number, including the year-long moratorium it imposed in 2024 on all foreign research vessels, and the operating procedure

that was still not formalized in 2025, by which time Colombo had canceled a UN research ship visit at a reported loss of more than a million U.S. dollars.[38] Similarly, Thailand is primarily concerned with MDA along the Myanmar border, and is working to give MDA a larger place in its strategic thinking. The Thai Maritime Enforcement Command Center was established only with the 2019 Act.[39] The pressure comes from its western seaboard. In November 2024, a Thai fisherman was killed when Myanmar's navy fired on Thai fishing boats in the Andaman Sea,[40] and the UN refugee agency estimates that 6,500 Rohingya attempted sea crossings in 2025, of whom nearly 900 died or went missing.[41]

> **Awareness of MDA has increased, and its meaning is widely shared. States differ in how they pursue it: alone, bilaterally, or multilaterally.**

India is a case of its own. There is a bit of everything, but mostly at the threshold. The Information Management and Analysis Center has been in place since 2014,[42] but it was only in 2025 that the contract was awarded to turn it into a multi-agency national MDA center.[12] Separately, more than 49,000 fishing vessels have been fitted with transponders against a target of 100,000.[43] The Information Fusion Center for the Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) hosts liaison officers from 17 partner nations, the latest from Indonesia and Germany.[44] The aim is to have about 50 liaison officers by 2028.[45]

Clearly, awareness of MDA has increased, and its meaning is widely shared. States differ in how they pursue it: alone, bilaterally, or multilaterally.



WHAT MECHANISMS DO WE ALREADY HAVE?

There are several mechanisms to increase regional MDA cooperation: the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), the Colombo Security Conclave, the Quad's Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA), and now its Indo-Pacific Maritime Surveillance Collaboration (IPMSC). There are fusion centers in Gurugram and Singapore, ReCAAP, the Regional Maritime Information Fusion Center (RMIFC) in Madagascar, the Regional Coordination Operations Center (RCOC) in Seychelles, the Pacific Fusion Center in Vanuatu, the Forum Fisheries Agency's surveillance center in Honiara, Solomon Islands, and the various platforms that support them. However, the relevant question is what purpose each serves.

IORA is a foreign-ministries level platform. It has 23 members and 12 dialogue partners, including China, Russia, and the U.S. Its Council of Ministers meets once a year.[47,48,49] Among its six priority areas is maritime safety and security. IORA offers the widest tent and political cover, yet its role is limited to political trust-building, and it has no real mechanisms for data sharing.

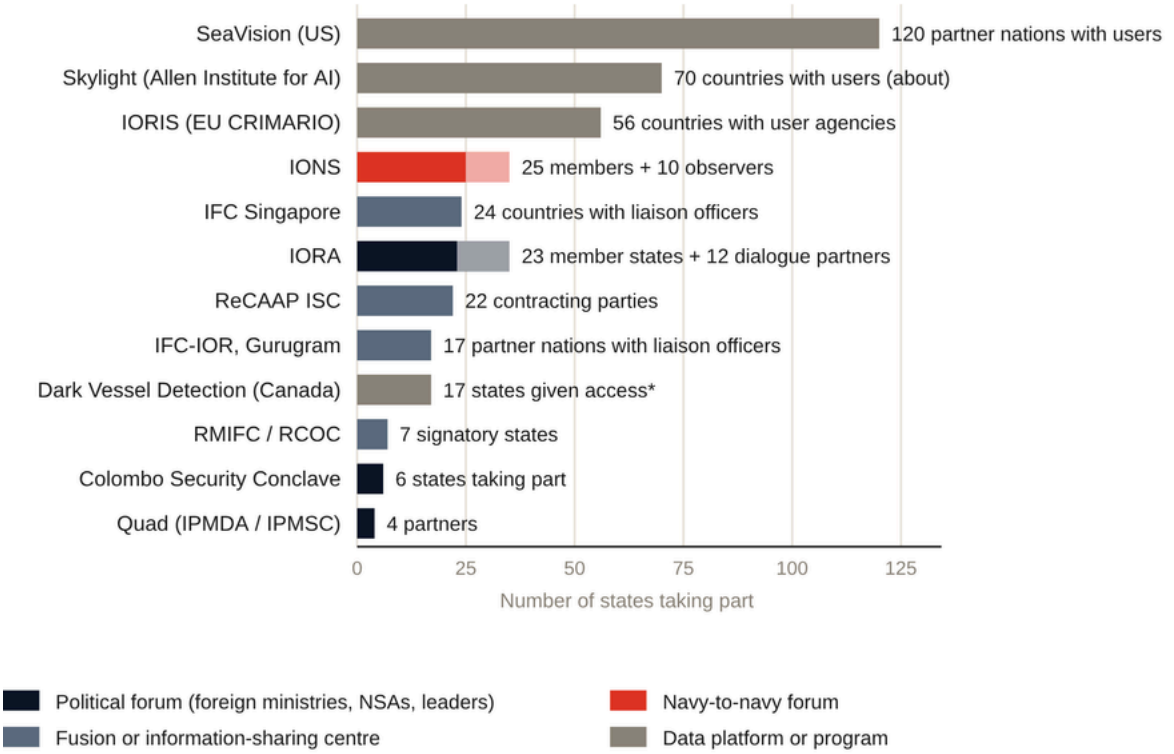
IONS, first held in New Delhi in 2008, is a voluntary forum of navies, with 25 members and 10 observers.[50,51] This year at Visakhapatnam, the chiefs adopted revised governance documents and guidelines on maritime security and disaster relief.[52] What IONS attempts to build are habits of cooperation and familiarity between services; however, it does not have a mandated operations role or ambit.

The Colombo Security Conclave is a forum for national security advisers. It rests on five pillars: maritime safety and security, counterterrorism, trafficking and organized crime, cybersecurity, and disaster relief.[53,54] Among the mechanisms compared here, it is the only one where maritime awareness, counterterrorism, and cybersecurity are discussed by the same officials at the same table, but it is still taking shape. The charter was signed only in August 2024, and the secretariat was interim as late as April 2026.[13,55] By the end of September 2026, a Secretary General had taken charge in Colombo, and Seychelles was taking part alongside the five earlier members.[56]

The Quad differs from these in that it aims to be a provider. IPMDA takes commercially available data and routes it to centers that already exist, reaching well over two dozen countries by 2024.[9,57] IPMSC now adds coordination of maritime surveillance, initially in the Indian Ocean Region, and the four partners have committed to develop a common operational picture across the Indo-Pacific.[14]

Further, we have the fusion centers; for instance, the IFC-IOR in Gurugram, India, has liaison officers from 17 countries, and IFC Singapore from 24.[44,58] ReCAAP has 22 contracting parties and a narrow brief: piracy and armed robbery against ships. It recorded 132 incidents in 2025, against 107 the year before.[59,1] In the western Indian Ocean, seven states have divided the work in two, with a fusion center in Madagascar and a coordination center in Seychelles.[60] The division in the Pacific is different. The Pacific Fusion Center does strategic analysis and training, and the fisheries agency's center in Honiara, introduced above, handles watchkeeping for its 17 members.[61,62,63]

Who takes part in each mechanism



*Counts are not like-for-like: a member state, a liaison officer and a platform user are different commitments, and the dates differ. The Colombo Security Conclave figure is my count of the states named as taking part in September 2026. *The Dark Vessel Detection figure is my addition of 15 Pacific Island states, the Philippines and Ecuador; the source does not publish a total.*

Taken together, they meet six different needs: permission, habit, decision, data, picture, and action. Here, permission means political cover to cooperate; habit, routine familiarity between services; decision, a forum where officials can agree on joint steps; data, raw feeds such as satellite and vessel-tracking data; picture, a fused and analyzed view of what is happening at sea; and action, coordinated operations on the water. IORA meets the need for permission, IONS for habit, the Conclave for decision, the Quad for data, and fusion centers for picture. Only a few, namely the Seychelles center, the fisheries agency, and ReCAAP within its limited scope, reach as far as action.

The overlap, then, is mostly one of membership and much less one of purpose. India is present in IORA, IONS, the Conclave, and the Quad, and hosts a fusion center. France is an IORA member, is a signatory to the western Indian Ocean centers, and is the implementer of the EU's IORIS.[64,60,36] Hence the same capitals keep meeting each other in different uniforms.

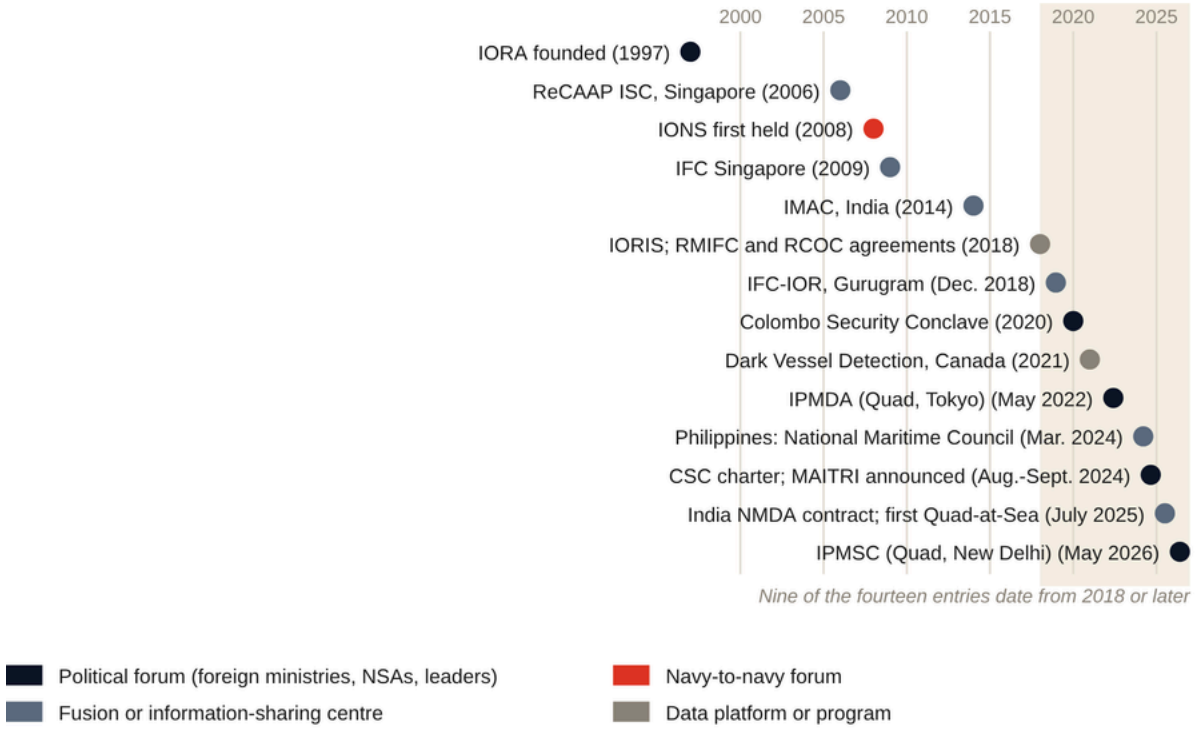
The problem, as some have argued, is not of duplication of objectives or mandates. A region this large requires overlaps and may even need repetition at several levels. The problem is the lack of integration: six overlapping layers of maritime information architecture in the Indian Ocean are connected, but not systematically integrated,[65] to an extent where a 2026 study in International Affairs found that the EU's platform and India's fusion center have come into competition.[66] Apart from the Quad and commercial platforms, not much links the Indian Ocean and the Pacific.

What each mechanism is for

Mechanism	Permission	Habit	Decision	Data	Picture	Action
IORA	●					
IONS		●				
Colombo Security Conclave			●			
Quad (IPMDA, IPMSC)				●		
Platforms (SeaVision, IORIS, Dark Vessel Detection)				●		
IFC-IOR, Gurugram					●	
IFC Singapore					●	
ReCAAP ISC					●	○
RMIFC and RCOC					●	●
Pacific Fusion Centre		○			○	
FFA surveillance centre					●	●

Filled circle: primary purpose. Hollow circle: partial or narrow role.

How the architecture grew, 1997-2026



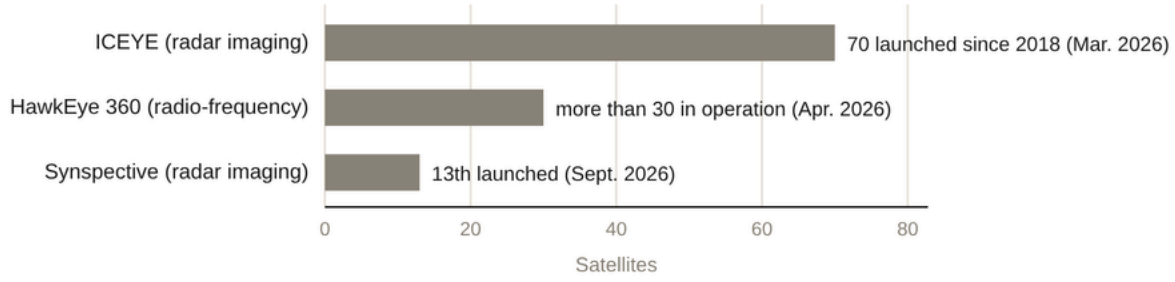
Nine of the fourteen entries date from 2018 or later

INDUSTRY IS IMPORTANT BUT IS NOT THE SOLUTION

In much of the policy debate on regional MDA cooperation, industry and new technologies are presented as an easy solution. Yet the obstacles to regional MDA cooperation, as discussed in the first two points, are trust, data sharing, sovereignty, existing interstate disputes, and varying foreign/trade China-management policies. Hence, supply is not the real constraint in regional MDA cooperation. For instance, HawkEye 360 operates more than 30 satellites,[69] ICEYE has launched 70 radar satellites since 2018, and Japan's Synspective launched its thirteenth in September 2026,[7,70] Skylight is a free platform operated by a nonprofit, used by more than 300 organizations in about 70 countries, and SeaVision, as noted, has thousands of users.[8,33] The Quad partnership was also built on commercially available data.[9] If technology were the binding constraint, several issues would be easing by now. The problem remains in politics: sovereignty, fear of leakage, and the worry that shared data will be turned against the state that shared it.[71,72] India is a case in point, showcasing a political choice. It hosts a fusion center, runs its own information-sharing platform, is not reported to use the EU's IORIS, and uses SeaVision only under controlled conditions.[65,66]

However, industry-industry or industry-to-government cooperation, both within and across countries, widens individual states' access to capacity and capability, and that is a natural and welcome outcome. Therefore, the ROK, Japan, Australia, Singapore, Indonesia, the United States, India, and France should keep working on regional frameworks and, in the meantime, encourage and support industry-to-industry literacy and socialization. These tracks need not wait for each other.

Commercial satellite constellations



AN ITEC FOR THE SEA

The Indian Navy already trains personnel and platforms from friendly foreign countries (FFCs). Its 2026 maritime security strategy lists training of international students at naval establishments, operational sea training of FFC platforms, mobile training teams, technical assistance, and engagement through IFC-IOR to strengthen MDA and the collective operational capability of participating nations.[105] What is missing is a more focused approach that links this training to regional MDA arrangements such as the Quad's IPMDA and IPMSC. India should therefore consider a specialized Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) program, run through the Indian Navy as part of its defense diplomacy. It would combine two priorities: maritime domain awareness (MDA) and capacity building. India's defense minister released a defense diplomacy strategy this year that makes such a program timely. The document, RAKSHA, was unveiled on September 3, 2026, as a ten-year roadmap with four pillars: strategic partnerships, capacity building, indigenous exports, and maritime security.[74]

The Indian foreign policy establishment already has the know-how and expertise in running such capacity-building programs. Its ITEC program was instituted in 1964 and covers about 160 countries, with the last reported breakdown for 2019-20 showing 2,342 defense training slots.[75,76] The Coast Guard ran a Maritime Law and Operations course under ITEC in March 2024, with 32 trainees from 11 countries.[77] The Navy took 44 personnel from nine countries to sea on IOS SAGAR in 2025.[78] The Navy's fusion center has also run a Maritime Information Sharing Workshop since 2019; its third edition, in November 2025, drew more than 57 participants from 30 countries.[79,80] That workshop sits outside ITEC, the Navy's 2026 strategy does not connect its FFC training to ITEC, and the civilian ITEC planner for 2025-26 lists no course with a maritime title.[81] What is missing is a standing course on how to build internal frameworks, agencies, and legislation for MDA, and how to establish and operate a fusion center.

Other countries, such as France, Canada, and the Quad partners, could contribute to such an effort. The Quad announced its maritime training initiative, MAITRI, in 2024.[57] Experience shows that sharing

India's existing capacity building

1964
ITEC instituted; it now covers about 160 countries

2,342
defense training slots under ITEC in 2019-20, the last reported breakdown

32 from 11
trainees and countries on the Coast Guard's Maritime Law and Operations course, March 2024

44 from 9
personnel and countries taken to sea on IOS SAGAR, 2025

57+ from 30
participants and countries at the third Maritime Information Sharing Workshop, November 2025

0
courses with a maritime title in the civilian ITEC planner for 2025-26

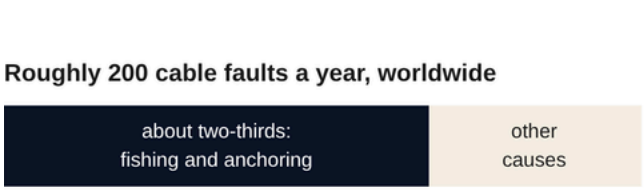
capabilities through official development assistance (ODA) is not enough. There is no shortage of gifted hardware in the region, like Japanese radars in the Philippines and American cutters in Vietnam and Sri Lanka.[82,28,83] India also funded a rescue coordination center in Colombo.[84] What matters is turning that hardware into working national capacity to monitor and control the region's maritime domain. Lessons from states that have already done this, on coordinating policy, legislation, regulation, and the chain of command, would be valuable to the region. It took the Philippines an executive order and Thailand an Act to determine who is in charge,[10,39] and Indonesia is still trying to figure it out.[23] That is what India's capacity building program should focus on.

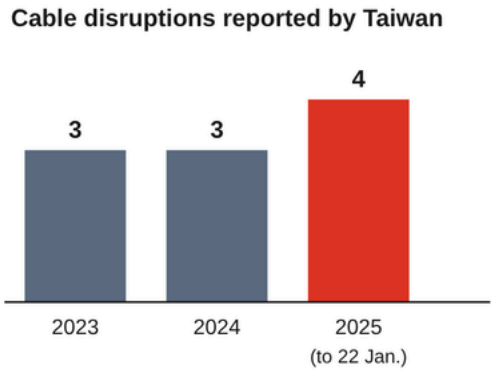
UNDERWATER DOMAIN AWARENESS NEEDS ITS OWN CHANNEL

By the time awareness of the surface domain is refined, the ground beneath it may well have shifted. More than 1.5 million kilometers of submarine cable are in service, and around 200 faults occur every year, roughly two-thirds of them caused by fishing and anchoring.[85] Taiwan reported three disruptions in each of 2023 and 2024 and four in the first three weeks of 2025.[86] In early 2024, three cables in the Red Sea were damaged, most likely by the dragging anchor of a ship that had been hit in a Houthi attack.[2] In September 2025, another incident in the same waters affected four systems that connect three continents, and it too was attributed to a ship.[3] Under water, attribution is slow and usually arguable, which is part of the difficulty.

However, UDA is also a competitive and closely guarded field. Barriers to sharing data on state capacities and capabilities are higher, and states rarely disclose even what seabed sensors or other technologies and capabilities they hold nor are they likely to share full transfer of such technology. So UDA cannot be the opening topic of discussion, but it does need a dedicated lane. Governments have made a start, and in July 2025, Australian and Indian defense science agencies launched a three-year research project on towed array target motion analysis.[87] In June this year, their defense ministers agreed to explore ways to enhance undersea domain awareness.[88] CSDR has begun similar work at the Track 2 level and has made good progress. Since July 2025, our project with the Defense and Security Institute at the University of Western Australia has held three UDA workshops in Perth, Visakhapatnam, and Fremantle, and we are producing 5 co-authored reports on various aspects of UDA cooperation between India and Australia.[89]

Undersea cables in numbers



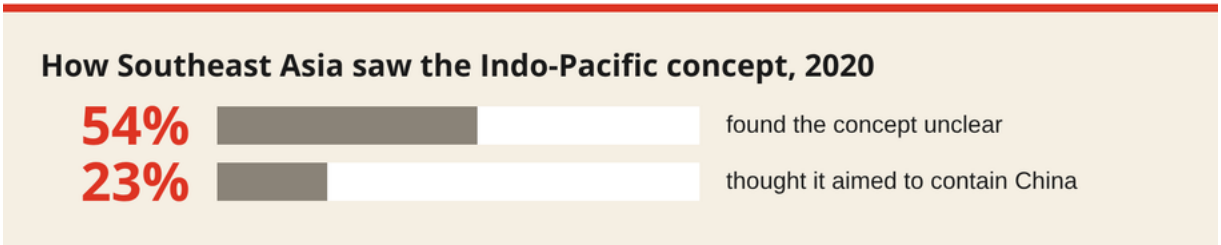


The 2025 figure for Taiwan covers 1 to 22 January only.

NEW APPROACHES TO THE INDO-PACIFIC REGION

A few years ago, the frequent complaint was that the Indo-Pacific concept was a Western-centric way of drawing the region into an unwanted conflict between the U.S. and China. In the 2020 ISEAS survey of Southeast Asian opinion, 23 percent of respondents thought the concept aimed to contain China and 54 percent found it unclear.[92] The region made its displeasure known and took its own courses of action. ASEAN's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, adopted in June 2019, was one example.[93] Yet, all this while, regional players operated on the belief that U.S. interests and contributions to the region would remain intact. Now there is a need to account for and navigate the Indo-Pacific region without, or with less of, the U.S.

The US National Security Strategy released in December 2025 lists the Western Hemisphere as a first priority and expects allies to carry more of the load in other regions such as the Indo-Pacific.[16,94] This change in direction is also visible in Washington's hitherto focus on public goods. For instance, it announced the cancellation of 83 percent of USAID's programs in March 2025.[95] Even at the political level, there has not been a Quad leaders' summit since September 2024, and in May 2026 India was reported to be set to pass the chair to Australia without hosting a summit.[15,96] And yet the United States announced 55 million dollars for regional maritime law enforcement in September 2025, and the Quad Foreign Ministers met in New Delhi this May and announced the Indo-Pacific Maritime Surveillance Collaboration.[97,14]



The mixed American record, 2024-2026

Signs of distance	Signs of presence
Sept. 2024: the last Quad leaders' summit to date, in Wilmington[15]	Sept. 2025: USD 55 million announced for regional maritime law enforcement[97]
Mar. 2025: cancellation of 83 percent of USAID programs announced[95]	May 2026: Quad foreign ministers meet in New Delhi and set out the IPMSC[14]
Dec. 2025: National Security Strategy lists the Western Hemisphere first and asks allies to carry more[16, 94]	SeaVision still reports over 4,400 users in 120 partner nations[33]

The key lesson for regional stakeholders is that the US is present, but not to be planned around. As a result, these stakeholders are still making their own choices, but with the realization that the context is no longer binary, i.e., with or against either the U.S. or China. After years of complaining about gray-zone warfare, the region now finds itself in a gray world.

This opens up considerable opportunities, many of them not yet visible, alongside challenges that are already well known. First, everyone needs a new Indo-Pacific policy, one based on the new reality. The Canadian government's 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy (backed by almost 2.3 billion Canadian dollars) has been under revision since October 2025, on the foreign minister's instruction.[90,91] There are signs that others like the ROK and Japan are abandoning their existing ones given the centrality of the US in said policy. Yet others, smaller ASEAN states, which have hitherto presented a regional outlook to the Indo-Pacific, trying to keep out of the US-China competition, now find more meaning in bilateral pragmatic relationships both within and outside of regional frameworks.

Therefore, second, the new reality is also a major test of multilateralism. In the last five to seven years, we have seen a shift from multilateral to bilateral and minilateral cooperation, with most states becoming adept at issue-based, one-on-one cooperation, driven by major-power rivalry and shortcomings in large forums.[98] My view is that this moment will let us carry the lesson of issue-based cooperation back into multilateralism through pragmatic multi-alignment. In January, at Davos, Canada's prime minister, Mark Carney, said something similar, calling for middle powers to work together in different coalitions on different issues.[99] I think we will see more ASEAN cooperation in the future than we have in the last few years. One example is the move in June by the ASEAN Coast Guard Forum toward becoming a formal subsidiary body of the ASEAN senior officials' process.[100]

Other middle powers, like Australia, Canada, Japan, and the ROK, along with European partners such as France and the UK, should be doing more of the same, and India can no longer justify staying on the periphery, as it did with the Quad for so long. India chairs IORA and IONS until 2027 and 2028, respectively.[49,52] It has declared 2026 as the ASEAN-India Year of Maritime Cooperation and is negotiating a trade agreement with Canada, which both sides aim to conclude by the end of 2026; four rounds were completed by September.[101,102,103] India currently holds several levers in the region, and those levers are closely interconnected. Canada already provides the Philippines with Dark Vessel Detection,[18] and India has established a fusion center in Gurugram, where Indonesia recently posted its first liaison officer.[44] In the next two years, the question will be whether India uses these levers to better connect existing systems, thereby revealing a new approach to a changed Indo-Pacific reality.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For India. Take the opportunity that the coincidence of two chairs presents. India leads IORA until 2027 and IONS until 2028.[49,52] Place a shared MDA item on both agendas, so that, for once, foreign ministries and navies have the same objectives. Complete what is half-built at home, the national MDA center and fishing vessel transponders, because credibility abroad rests on what the country has built at home.[12,43] Establish an elaborate MDA course under ITEC run by the Navy, building on the fusion center's existing workshop, as the first visible product of RAKSHA,[74] and settle a clear position on working with IORIS and the centers in the Western Indian Ocean.

For regional states. Each country should first sort out its chain of command before considering additional cooperative arrangements. Thailand and the Philippines are prioritizing their own orders and legislation, and Indonesia is still debating its maritime security bill.[10,39,23] No partner state can share with a country that has not decided the nodal office for coordination. Posting liaison officers to the fusion centers is the lowest-hanging fruit in the architecture and should therefore follow. Request donor states to provide training and enablement alongside infrastructure and technology. It is also time to give the ASEAN Coast Guard Forum (ACGF) some clear objectives, as it is becoming a more formal structure.[100]

For extra-regional states. Adapting quickly to unpredictable U.S. behavior should now be the norm, and middle-power initiatives will help the region do so. Where Washington can, it should offer continuity for the data flows and platforms on which other states have built their routines. Canada should write Dark Vessel Detection into its revised Indo-Pacific strategy and link it with Gurugram IFC-IOR. France and the EU should make IORIS interoperable with the fusion centers it runs alongside, building on SHARE.IT,[106] the CRIMARIO framework for linking existing information-exchange systems, to which IFC-IOR has been invited. Japan, the ROK, and Australia should pair every hardware transfer with doctrine, law, and command, and should also support industry-to-industry contact that facilitates future collaboration. Australia and India should keep the undersea conversation on track.[88]

For the institutions themselves. Agree on a division of labor and publicize it: IORA for norms and political cover, IONS for professional culture, the CSC for neighborhood decisions, fusion centers for situational awareness. Linking these in a closed loop would benefit the region. Inviting the fusion centers to brief IORA and IONS meetings would enhance regional MDA. The case for integrating the centers of the Western Indian Ocean with IFC-IOR and IPMDA and IPMSC should be acted on.[72]

ANNEX: WHERE MDA STANDS

Regional mechanisms compared

Mechanism	Since	Who sits at the table	Size (latest published)	What it does
IORA	1997 (28th year marked in 2025)	Foreign ministries; Council of Ministers meets annually	23 member states, 12 dialogue partners[47]	Broad regional cooperation; maritime safety and security is one of six priority areas. India chairs 2025-27.[49]
IONS	2008[50]	Navies and maritime agencies	25 members, 10 observers[51]	Voluntary naval forum. Indian Navy chairs 2026-28; Philippines admitted as observer in Feb. 2026.[52]
Colombo Security Conclave	2020[53]	National security advisers and deputies	6 states taking part (Sept. 2026); charter signed Aug. 2024[56, 13]	Security coordination among Indian Ocean neighbors. Secretariat interim in Apr. 2026; a Secretary General had taken charge in Colombo by Sept. 2026.[55, 56]
Quad: IPMDA and IPMSC	2022; 2026	Leaders and foreign ministers of four states	4 partners; data reaching well over two dozen countries (2024)[57]	Commercial data routed through regional fusion centers; IPMSC to coordinate surveillance, initially in the Indian Ocean.[9, 14]
IFC-IOR, Gurugram	Dec. 2018[68]	Indian Navy host; foreign liaison officers	Liaison officers from 17 partner nations (July 2026)[44]	Maritime security information sharing for the Indian Ocean Region.
IFC Singapore	2009[67]	Singapore Navy host; foreign liaison officers	Liaison officers from 24 countries (Jan. 2026)[58]	Maritime security information sharing, hosted at Changi.
ReCAAP ISC, Singapore	2006	National focal points of contracting parties	22 contracting parties (Aug. 2026)[59]	Information sharing on piracy and armed robbery against ships in Asia.
RMIFC and RCOC	2018	Liaison officers of signatory states	7 signatories[60]	Western Indian Ocean information fusion (Madagascar) and joint operations (Seychelles), set up under an EU-funded program.
IORIS (EU CRIMARIO)	2018	National and regional agencies as users	218 agencies in 56 countries (May 2025)[36]	Secure web platform for information sharing and incident management; implemented by Expertise France.
Dark Vessel Detection (Canada)	2021[34]	Fisheries and Oceans Canada with partner agencies	15 Pacific Island states, the Philippines and Ecuador[35]	Satellite-based detection of vessels suspected of illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing.
Pacific Fusion Centre, Port Vila	n/a	Pacific Islands Forum members; funded by Australia	n/a	Training and strategic analysis against priorities set by Forum leaders.[61]
FFA Regional Fisheries Surveillance Centre, Honiara	n/a	Fisheries agency staff with seconded defense personnel	17 FFA members[63]	Fisheries surveillance and coordination of regional operations against illegal fishing.[62]
SeaVision (US)	n/a	Individual users in partner agencies	Over 4,400 users in 120 partner nations[33]	Web-based maritime situational awareness tool.

National set-ups in twelve countries

Country	Lead body or legal anchor	A recent published marker
Philippines	National Maritime Council and National Maritime Center, under Executive Order 57 of Mar. 2024[10]	Coastal radar systems worth JPY 600 million handed over under Japan's OSA, Feb. 2026[20]
Indonesia	Bakamla, among six institutions with overlapping enforcement roles[23]	First liaison officer posted to IFC-IOR, July 1, 2026[44]
Malaysia	Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency; SWASLA coastal radar network	SWASLA to be extended to Sarawak and the peninsula's east coast (announced Feb. 2025)[25]
Vietnam	Vietnam Coast Guard	Third former U.S. Coast Guard cutter in service; Spratly reclamation at about 2,771 acres[28, 29]
Republic of Korea	Korea Coast Guard; amended Maritime Guard Act in force Oct. 2025[11]	Integrated maritime information analysis system planned by end-2026; "K-MDA" center planned for 2027[31]
Taiwan	Coast Guard Administration	3,615 PLA aircraft entered the ADIZ in 2024, against 972 in 2021; three-year sentence for cutting a subsea cable, June 2025[5, 4]
United States	SeaVision platform; Quad IPMDA	USD 55 million announced for regional maritime law enforcement, Sept. 2025; IPMSC set out May 2026[97, 14]
Canada	Dark Vessel Detection program; Indo-Pacific Strategy (2022)[90]	Revision of the strategy directed by the foreign minister, Oct. 2025[91]
Thailand	Thai Maritime Enforcement Command Center, under the 2019 Act[39]	Fatal incident with Myanmar's navy in the Andaman Sea, Nov. 2024[40]
India	IMAC (2014), IFC-IOR (2018), and IPMSC via IFC-IOR; national MDA project contract announced July 2025[42, 68, 12]	Over 49,000 of 100,000 fishing-vessel transponders fitted; liaison officers from 17 nations at IFC-IOR[43, 44]
France	Expertise France implements the EU's IORIS platform[36]	IORIS used by 218 agencies in 56 countries (May 2025)[36]
Sri Lanka	Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre at Navy headquarters, commissioned June 2024 under an Indian grant[84]	Fourth former U.S. Coast Guard cutter sailed for Sri Lanka, Feb. 2026; research vessel procedure unfinished as of mid-2025[83, 38]

One marker per country, chosen for recency. It is not a ranking and not a full description of any national system.

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