

Twin hurdles hinder India's maritime role

Infrastructure constraints, delay in postings causing setback, says official

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NEW DELHI

As the Quad grouping of India, Australia, Japan and the U.S. looks to roll out an Indo-Pacific maritime domain awareness (MDA) initiative for information sharing and maritime surveillance across the region, two issues limit India's ability to further expand its role, say government officials. These are infrastructure constraints and continued delay in posting Indian liaison officers at other facilities and centres in the region.

"There is interest and there are requests from several countries to post international liaison officers (ILO) at the Indian Navy's Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) but it cannot induct any more at the moment due to infrastructure constraints. A proposal for expansion has been pending with the Defence Ministry for two years now," a government official told *The Hindu* on condition of anonymity, which was also acknowledged by diplomatic sources.

Last December, Navy chief Admiral R. Hari Kumar said



Info exchange: Delegates attending a maritime information sharing workshop by the Indian Navy at the IFC-IOR. ■FILE PHOTO

that ILOs from 14 countries have been invited to join the IFC-IOR. South Block officials said there is interest from many more countries in the region and beyond.

The scope of information sharing for MDA has significantly expanded in recent years among Quad countries as well as with littoral states against the backdrop of expanding Chinese naval presence across the region.

Elaborating on the value addition ILOs bring in, the official stated that ILOs bring to the table one's local expertise which we are not aware of and can't be determined from here and also help in building linkages with various agencies in their home countries.

At a different level, coun-

tries in the neighbourhood joining our information sharing framework is a strategic

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statement that these countries are aligning with India for their security needs, the official noted. The initiative will lose steam if not acted upon immediately as countries will lose interest, one South Block official cautioned.

The official cited earlier said it is not just important to have ILOs in India, but also equally important that Indian Navy officers be posted at similar centres in other countries.

The IPMDA initiative was announced at the Quad Leaders' Summit in Tokyo

on May 24 to track "dark shipping" and to build a "faster, wider, and more accurate maritime picture of near-real-time activities in partners' waters" integrating three critical regions in the Indo-Pacific – the Pacific Islands, Southeast Asia, and the IOR.

Pending proposals

Proposals to post Indian naval liaison officers (LO) at the Regional Maritime Information Fusion Centre (RMIFC), Madagascar, and the Regional Coordination Operations Centre, Seychelles, have been pending for more than two years.

Another proposal to post an LO at the European-led mission in the Strait of Hormuz (EMASOH) in Abu Dhabi has also not been approved so far.

In addition, there is a delay in continuing the present LOs as well. India has had an LO at the IFC in Singapore since 2009. Officials had described that this is in the overall realm of improving linkages of the IFC-IOR with the other IFCs and eventually becoming the repository for all maritime data in the IOR.