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The Security Conundrum in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR)



Colonel Ajinkya Jadhav is a Senior Fellow at CLAWS. An alumnus of Sainik School, Satara & NDA, he was commissioned and commanded 7 PARA. He has rich experience of combat in Op Vijay & Op Rakshak. He has attended the technical staff course and the Higher Command course. He has also been an instructor in the NCO Academy and the Army War College. He has contributed immensely in modernising the Parachute Regiment with latest military technologies.

"Whoever controls the Indian Ocean dominates Asia. This ocean is the key to the seven seas in the twenty-first century, the destiny of the world will be decided in these waters".

—**Alfred Thayer Mahan**

Introduction

The Indian Ocean possesses considerable and often underrated geopolitical significance due to its operation as a highway. Given its geostrategic location and the fact that it provides a relatively short and effective link between the Pacific and the Atlantic Oceans, the Ocean accounts for the transportation of the highest tonnage of commodities in the world, however, more than three-quarters of this is extra-regional trade. The indirect maintenance of ocean routes and associated

choke points—notably the Straits of Hormuz, Malacca, and the Bab el- Mandeb— are significant for the movement of commodities, especially oil and trade to Northeast Asia, Western Europe and North America. India occupies a central and strategic location in the

Key Points

- The Indian Ocean is surrounded by countries from the three continents of Africa, Asia and Australia and some island nations of the Asia-Pacific. These countries have different historical, cultural & political systems and security concerns.
- The intense competition between countries such as the United States, China, India, Russia and Japan, and competitive territorial claims between China and the South East Asian countries in the South China Sea, dominates the security calculus in the Indo-Pacific.
- Development of a pan-IOR maritime domain awareness system to counter the nexus of terrorism-piracy. The identification of core interests of the international community of states can be the basis for joint anti-piracy and anti-terrorism measures.
- China's emergence as a threat in the IOR and significance of QUAD.
- India needs to become a Net Security Provider in IOR.



Indian Ocean area. Its national and economic interests are inseparably linked with the Indian Ocean. Hence, to keep the Indian Ocean as a zone of peace—free from superpower rivalry— the protection of India’s economic interests, security of its diaspora and cooperation among the littoral countries in the region, should be the prime focus of India’s Foreign Policy.

The main aim of this paper is to highlight the security challenges such as piracy and terrorism in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and also analyse the emerging security concerns with the emergence of China as a competitor in the region and suggest policy recommendations for enhancing the security in the region especially from India’s point of view.

Geographical Construct of IOR

The Indian Ocean is the third largest ocean on Earth, covering 68.56 million square km and spanning over 10,000 km from the southern tip of South Africa to Australia. The political map of the Indian Ocean comprises 36 littoral and 20 hinterland states.¹ The combined coastline of all the Indian Ocean littoral states accounts for nearly 40 per cent of the world’s coastline; the IOR is inhabited by about 2.6 billion people, representing 35.7 per cent of the world’s population as of 2010, and generating about ten per cent of the global gross domestic product (GDP). By 2030 this population will likely have added another 689 million people. The geographical position of the Indian Ocean and its strategic waterways provide the shortest and most economical lines of communication to the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans. A unique feature of the Indian Ocean regional trade is the fact that, trade between Indian Ocean littoral states constitutes only 20 per cent of the total volume, while the remaining 80 per cent is transported outside the region. This explains the strategic interests of extra-regional states in the region and the need for the their naval presence in the Indian Ocean.²

Map 1: The Indian Ocean Region (IOR)

Source: <http://southasiajournal.net/the-global-pivot-significance-and-contestation-over-the-indian-ocean-region/>

Geo-strategic Importance: IOR

Historically, the Indian Ocean has served as a benchmark of global politics, economics and culture. In modern times, after World War II, it has emerged as a focal point for great power competition and subsequently, of global commerce, as the pivot of economic growth shifted from Europe to the Asia Pacific— a feature which has since remained constant. The Indian Ocean is surrounded by countries from the three continents of Africa, Asia and Australia and some island nations of the Asia-Pacific. These countries have different historical, cultural & political systems and security concerns. What they share in common is the vast Indian Ocean, which has been a facilitator of contacts between them since the dawn of civilisation.³ The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) holds primacy as an important economic corridor. Of late, 'Indo-Pacific' has gained currency as a broader term, and is often used interchangeably with IOR to denote its strategic and economic significance. The IOR is unique with some of the fastest growing economies and richest countries co-existing with the least developed and poorest countries. Economic and social inequality along with flourishing globalisation, which relies on international sea trade, have prepared fertile ground for criminal activities in this fragile region.⁴ Approximately two-thirds of global oil shipments, half its container traffic, and one-third of bulk cargo, transit through the region. Its seabed holds some of the most valuable mineral resources and fossil fuels, which are economically critical. At present, navies of more than 40 countries are operating in the IOR and the Indo-Pacific region, including navies of the United States, Russia, France and the United Kingdom. Yet, it lacks a security architecture, based on regional cooperation.⁵

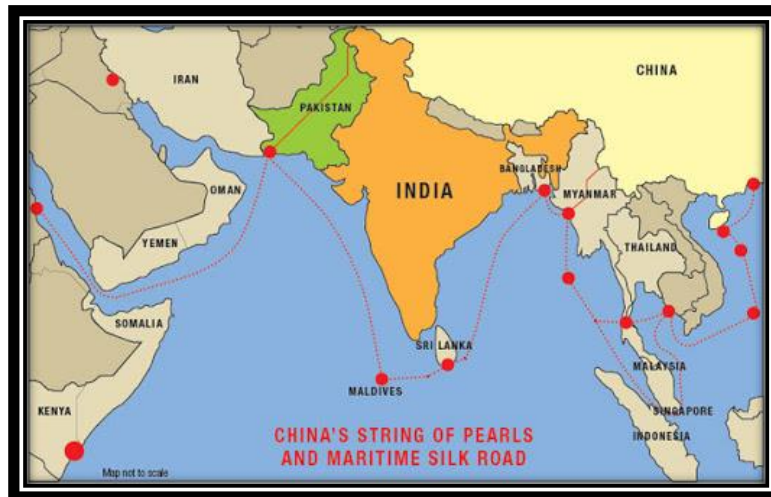


Security Imbroglio: IOR

The Indian Ocean, in the recent past, has seen many challenges with respect to activities of non-state actors, security of the region and many more.

Conventional Security Imbroglio in IOR. The conventional security scenario has developed new challenges in the recent years. The major competition to exploit the economic zone, has led to a race for military dominance in the IOR. The intense competition between countries such as the United States, China, India, Russia and Japan, and competitive territorial claims between China and the South East Asian countries in the South China Sea, dominates the security calculus in the Indo-Pacific. External powers have also used the littoral islands in the Indian Ocean for staging military operations— the development of Diego Garcia as a military base by the United States and the Chinese investments in various port facilities in the IOR like Gwadar in Pakistan and Hambantota in Sri Lanka — have fuelled concerns of they being ‘potentially’ used as naval base like Djibouti, where China formally opened its first overseas base last year⁶. China’s expansionist strategy has led to a global outreach through its belt & road initiative, wherein, it has displayed the intent of use of force to protect its global interest⁷. China is applying the same strategy on the roof of the world (Northern Indian borders) that drove its expansion in the South China Sea i.e. gradual territorial encroachment followed by military construction. So far, this salami slicing approach has proven to be just as effective on land as it is at sea.

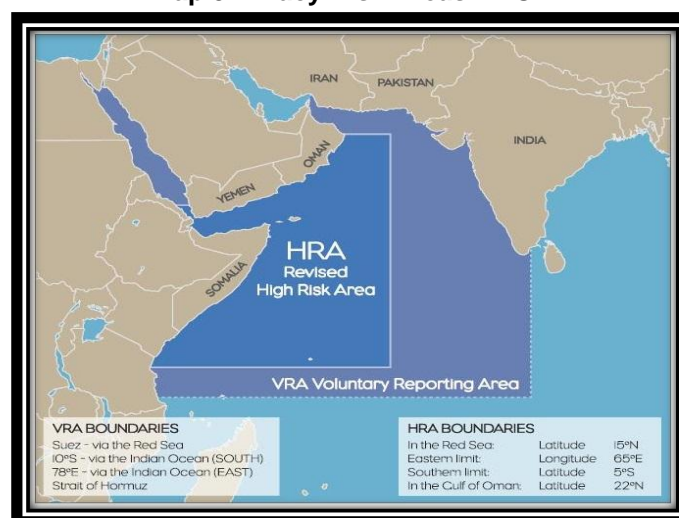
In the present scenario, China has only one goal i.e. to become the world's largest economic power ahead of the USA. Following the motto, “*if you are not a friend, you are an enemy*”, so far, China’s strategy is proving effective both on land and sea⁸. Although, India has been vocal in its approach of defining its territorial defence on its own terms to protect its sovereignty, however in the global scenario, India is yet to set its own terms and turn to the UN Security Council.⁹ The Indian Defence Secretary, remarked that, “*after the South China Sea, the IOR has become an important theatre for activity and national security plans need to cater for this. Maybe it will require naval resources or some air capabilities need to be created to deal with the Indian Ocean. The fact is that security of the IOR has to be addressed*”¹⁰. In the ever-changing geo-political scenario, India needs to be more assertive in its approach and realign its strategy to deal with the growing dynamic situation in IOR.¹¹

Map 2: China's Influence in IOR through its 'string of pearls' policy

Source: Sansara, Nepal Journal, 07 March 2018

Piracy

Piracy is an organised crime that is driven by reasoned action of the perpetrators. Piracy is sea terrorism and is usually characterised by violence and threats to safety of goods and occupants of ships, boats and everything in transit through the seas. It is the manifestation of crime and associated thievery on the high seas with the perpetrators wielding weapons against unsuspecting commuters who are targeted for dispossession of their belongings. Often referred to as 'buccaneering', it made the maritime sector a 'corrosive enclave'.¹² Piracy works through an established and secretive criminal network with close nexus and communication with gangs of weapons and human traffickers, who can also smuggle drugs at the same time.¹³ Historically, it has been seen that piracy has erupted in the Indian Ocean in areas close to choke points and regions characterised by political instability as in the case of Somalia. The straits of Malacca and the Gulf of Aden are an important sea passage that connects the Indian Ocean with the Mediterranean Sea through the strategic choke points of Bab al-Mandab and the Suez Canal—these are vulnerable areas and are traditionally targeted by Pirates, particularly off the coast of Somalia and Yemen due to lack of governance in these countries.¹⁴

Map 3: Piracy Risk Areas in IOR

Source: www.ukho.gov.uk/ProductsandServices/PaperCharts/Documents/Q6099_144.pdf

Counter Piracy. Counter-piracy measures have been put in place by policymakers to manage the problems created by pirates. Methods like planning, security rethinking and restructuring or reforms, mapping out grand and military strategies, identifying the hotbeds of piracy on the high sea, funding, provision of logistics, investigation of reported cases of pirate attack, formation of tactical units, training of naval officers/naval police, monitoring and evaluation as well as policy implementation to equip the security sector in establishing safer and secure waterways for vessels, humans and investments in the maritime sector, has been employed to tackle the problem.¹⁵ Counter-piracy is a 'military oriented' endeavour which requires adequate training on manoeuvring tactics and weapons use. In this regard, militarism requires more insight into counter-piracy by the security forces, involving both internal and external stakeholders within and outside the Indian Ocean Region. Arguably, piracy cannot be 'nipped in the bud' without adequate use of military option that is by engaging the military especially the Navy to counter the sea robbers.¹⁶ Our intelligence network and technologies should also be equally strengthened and vigilant, so as to detect even slightest suspicious activities. Once, detected, mechanisms should be put to place to scramble the required defence equipment at a moment's notice.

Cooperation Towards Anti- Piracy. The idea of counter-piracy is to strengthen a Nation's control over her territorial waters in order to block attacks from militants or armed gangs who transit through the sea without much resistance. Mitigating the problem of piracy requires timely intercepting of networks that encourage illicit drug smuggling, human trafficking for sexual exploitation and labour, as well as those that engages in the proliferation of weapons.



Therefore, countering piracy financing, recruitment and training within the Indian Ocean, must be contained by the stakeholders through multilateral intervention mechanisms namely, promoting state building agenda in fragile states within Africa and Asia to discourage the formation of non-state armed groups. This further justifies the governments' militarism endeavours that has been responsible for the prevailing competition for weaponry in the security markets by both state and non-state actors.

There is a need for regional co-operation in promoting multinational operations to contain piracy, disarming the criminal gangs and bringing them to normal life. Hence, adequate structures and organisations need to be created to institutionalise measures to counter the threat.

The Rules of Engagement of the naval units charged with protecting the trade routes need to be coordinated and agreed on. Furthermore, a close look needs to be taken at the kind of naval vessels, which might be required to combat piracy more cost effectively.

- The use of private security companies should be regulated and agreed upon. Shipping companies need to conform to the basic security requirements when operating in danger areas and should, also look into the security of its crew and cargo. They will need to invest in superior passive defence measures and adopt active measures, if required.
- Long term plans to bring the beginning of stability to Somalia, and the establishment of an effective Coast Guard, need to be drawn up and funding made available. This could be a public- private partnership involving suitably qualified private security companies.
- A consolidated civil-military approach which has a larger agreement by nations in IOR needs to be in place to effectively counter the piracy threat.
- Moreover, a joint Task Force comprising the navies of all the stakeholders in the region could be created with the specific aim of studying the behavioural and activity patterns of the pirates, in order to safeguard the strategic assets of the region.

Maritime Terrorism

Maritime terrorism can be defined as “the undertaking of terrorist acts and activities within the maritime environment, using or against vessels or fixed platforms at sea, or in port; or against any one of their passengers or personnel, against coastal facilities or settlements, including tourist resorts, port areas and port towns or cities”.¹⁷ The onset of 21st century saw a strategic shift in the security scenario in IOR, wherein, maritime terrorism emerged as a major security threat. The attacks on USS Cole and the French Tanker Limburg in the Gulf of Aden in 2000 and 2002¹⁸, respectively are indicative of the seriousness of the situation. However, maritime terrorism is not limited to attacks on water only; it also comprises



waterways and mode of transport which is used by non-state actors for easy entry and exit to the targeted territory. The most horrific terrorist attacks conducted in the region was on 26 November 2008, when ten armed terrorists belonging to Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), an Islamic militant organisation¹⁹, infiltrated through the maritime route of the west coast of India to execute multiple terrorist attacks in Mumbai, killing over 160 people. Subsequent terrorist attacks in the region includes a failed attack on the Japanese VLCC M Star which, on 28 June 2010, suffered hull damage caused due to an external explosion in the Strait of Hormuz and also many other such attacks like a brazen attack by a terrorist outfit — Al-Qaeda— who successfully penetrated into a Pakistani naval dockyard in an attempt to seize the frigate— PNS Zulfiqar—in September 2014.²⁰ Therefore, it is opined that maritime security in the IOR continues to remain fragile and requires unhindered and sustained regional naval cooperation to maintain peace and stability at sea.²¹

Terrorism-Piracy Nexus. An investigation by the United Nations (UN) in 2017 found evidence of collusivity between pirates and the Al-Shabaab terrorist group²² and also discovered the facts that, pirates were helping the latter smuggle weapons and ammunition into Somalia.²³ In Southeast Asia, the terrorist group led by Abu Sayyaf earned millions via ransom payments for piracy.. Its cadres have used the revenue earned from pirate activity to expand the radical organisation's presence in Southeast Asia. Therefore, the terror-piracy linkage is important because it highlights the causal mechanism behind rising violence at sea.²⁴ The task of maritime security agencies becomes harder, when the lines between terrorism and piracy begins to blur.²⁵ Today's pirates are trained fighters onboard speedboats, armed not only with automatic weapons, hand-held missiles and grenades but also with global positioning systems; professional mercenaries that loop effortlessly between rent-seeking and violent acts. Their objectives are both materialistic and ideological.²⁶

Countering Maritime Terrorism. Post 9/11(WTC attack) incident in the United States, the International Maritime Organization (IMO) has established the International Ship and Port Facility Security (ISPS) Code—a set of maritime regulations designed to help detect and deter threats to international shipping.

- India, too, has focused on the improvement of its maritime domain awareness and information sharing, emphasising on rapid response in dealing with criminal and terrorist threats. A new information fusion centre has been set up as an “adjunct” to the Indian Navy's Information Management and Analysis Centre (IMAC) at Gurugram. The centre has been collating, assembling, analysing and sharing data, related to maritime security



with the neighbouring states in the Indian Ocean. Meanwhile, transponder systems are being installed on fishing boats, and biometric cards are being issued to fishermen—many of whom have become the ‘eyes and ears’ of maritime security agencies.

- There is a need to enhance the counter terrorism framework in IOR. Combating maritime terrorism revolves around four tenets of intelligence, threat levels/conditions, vulnerability assessments, and force/facility protection measures. Unfortunately, many regional states do not have the requisite capacities to combat terrorism. Not only is intelligence and data lacking; there is also absence of technical expertise and knowhow. Many of the newly developed sensor technologies— including identification & authentication technology, screening & surveillance assets, and tracking & inspection systems are too costly for smaller states. What Asia needs is a maritime security framework that enables capacity building, at affordable budget, that can be integrated into the facilities and ships accordingly. The solution may lie in partnerships that would help regional states leverage partner strengths to create baseline capabilities to fight terrorism. This includes measures to protect commercial shipping, marine installations and critical infrastructure.
- Adequate measures need to be in place to develop an effective intelligence network and identify linkages in the terrorist network. Efforts need to be made to identify and check the terrorist funding across the states.
- What regional states need is a structured and efficient way of investigating threats, identifying vulnerabilities, and getting stakeholders involved in anti-terrorism operations. Strong legislation that empowers security agencies to act with alacrity and defend commercial & coastal military assets is a pre-requisite.
- ***Emergence of QUAD.*** The circumstances of the 21st century have called for a shift in the security architecture from the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific, triggered by the rise of China²⁷. Australia, India, Japan and the United States — a group of democratic nations dedicated to delivering results through practical cooperation — coordinated rapid humanitarian assistance and disaster relief to people in need. This cooperation, known as “the QUAD”, was born in crisis. It became a diplomatic dialogue in 2007 and was reborn in 2017.²⁸ In the recent QUAD meeting of the four heads of states, a vision for an Indo-Pacific region that is free, open, resilient and inclusive was shared. They showed commitment to ensure that the Indo-Pacific is accessible and dynamic, governed by international law and bedrock principles such as freedom of navigation and peaceful resolution of disputes, and that all countries are able to make their own political choices— free from coercion.²⁹ There is a resolve to strengthen partnerships in Southeast Asia, starting with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN);



working with the Pacific Islands; and engaging the IOR to meet this moment. The QUAD is a flexible group of like-minded partners dedicated to advancing a common vision and ensuring peace and prosperity. QUAD may not be a full-scale alliance yet, but a new “minilateral” is taking shape.³⁰ There is a new beginning with COVID Vaccine diplomacy where India is a key player. The ‘elephant’ in the room is however China. If QUAD is to not go down that path, it should be willing to take the ‘bull by its horns’.

The Indo-Pacific region is heating up. A new Cold War has already started. Xi Jinping, the supreme leader of China, believes that time and momentum are on his side. He is flexing his military muscle aggressively. The SIPRI report of Jan 2021³¹, describes the Chinese expansion of islands in the South China Sea as a militarised activity. Military hangars, anti-aircraft missiles, runways and military grade radar systems, among other things, have been installed by China. The islands are off limits to foreigners and are controlled by the PLA. The militarisation of the South China Sea may suggest that all or some of the costs of construction of these islands, if not already part of the official defence budget, would soon be included in estimates of China’s military spending.³² This build up is a major security concern in the region. In order to tackle a belligerent China, other countries are also actively upping their strategic activity in the region.³³ USA, Japan, Australia— all have bases in the IOR and the South China Sea, so does India— therefore, interoperability and cooperation to enhance maritime security can be envisaged in the immediate near future. Ex-MALABAR 2020, was certainly a demonstration towards increasing interoperability in the IOR. Militarism is, thus, very much in the air in the Indo-Pacific. China in a recent statement has hit out against the QUAD, describing it as “*forming enclosed small cliques*”, as “*the sure way to destroy the international order*”.³⁴ International pressures are definitely building in the IOR and India will play a pivotal role in the regional security. In the meeting recently held in Alaska on 19 March 2021, the Biden administration clearly highlighted the strategic importance of Indo-US ties and its significance to deal with China in the IOR. China, however, was quick to show its ‘unfavourability’ towards the same.³⁵ The next few years are extremely critical for India in the region.

Recommendations

The current scenario demands effective policy formations and modification of the existing policies as per the requirement. Some recommendations to maintain peace and stability in the IOR are as follows:



- Development of a pan-IOR maritime domain awareness system to counter the nexus of terrorism-piracy. The linking of all information resources in the region could thus be the first step at the practical and operational level— step towards achieving a comprehensive framework.
- Maritime security cooperation in the IOR has evolved and improved over the years; the multilateral associations such as Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Indian Ocean Navy Symposium (IONS) are although not traditional alliances, but they need further consolidation and better understanding and framework for building capabilities, for enhanced maritime security.
- The identification of core interests of the international community of states can be the basis for joint anti-piracy and anti-terrorism measures. The threat situation caused by piracy off the coast of Somalia and in the Indian Ocean will remain particularly tense in the foreseeable future; in the field of maritime terrorism, in general, we still have to be prepared for worldwide terror attacks. The fight against piracy and maritime terrorism will continue to be successful only if we adopt the strategy of a 'comprehensive approach'.
- The Indian Prime Minister's vision of SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) is an iconic step towards achieving cohesion in the IOR. Through SAGAR, India seeks to deepen economic and security cooperation with its maritime neighbours and assist in building their maritime security capabilities. India therefore, would have to cooperate with the nations in the exchange of information, coastal surveillance, building of infrastructure and strengthening their capabilities. The consolidation of this initiative will further provide prospects of enhanced security in the region.
- The policy of 'Guns & Butter' has largely been the driver of India's foreign policies till date. However, in the existing security scenario, India needs to re-define its policies with a determination to act as a 'Net Security provider' in the IOR. Therefore, the policy of 'Guns & Butter' is the need of the hour. India is a rising



and responsible power with an ability to project and apply power for the common good.

- In the existing geo-political scenario, coalition operations are important to achieve political objectives; the conduct of multi-domain operations are imminent and capacities will have to be built to achieve them. The changing character of warfare has led to blurring lines in the grey zone, however, the only question that remains is “as to ‘where’, ‘how’ and ‘when’ to use force and in what form”.
- The evolution of the QUAD as a platform of like-minded countries will have to be leveraged to ensure the security of the sea lines of communication (SLOCs); open for free trade and growth of the economy of these countries. The emerging threat scenario and the geo-political situation in the IOR has led to a new alignment which has the potential to develop and contain China’s hegemonic expansionist plans. India needs to be cautious yet assertive towards its approach if it has to emerge as a net security provider in the region.
- To achieve credible deterrence and defence against a rising military power, the QUAD nations will need to fortify the Indo-Pacific Arc— collectively structuring their forces, furthering capability growth, and establishing new basing options outside the missile threat rings.
- India cannot stand apart at this juncture and ignore the situation especially in South Asia. The internal security situation in IOR and south Asia has a bearing on India’s security paradigm. While the government needs to have a political legitimacy in its outreach in the region, the military needs to build capacities towards application of force to create a favourable situation on ground in a quick time frame. The interests of India’s diaspora, protection of its economic interests abroad and building credible deterrence are our prime concerns and moral responsibility. Developing expeditionary capabilities in sync with QUAD is hence a reality and needs to be nurtured.
- Additionally, India along with the other stakeholders in the region could undertake more joint naval exercises, with an aim to strengthen its naval might in the region.



- In order to check China's rise, India and other stakeholders could adopt the concept of civil-military fusion, wherein, people from the civil domain who have extensively studied China, can be a part of the core planning group of the military. This would help in better understanding of the region and thereafter more effective planning.

Conclusion

IOR has emerged as an important focal point for economy and trade in the world. To ensure growth and prosperity in the region it is pertinent that adequate security measures are in place against piracy and terrorism. India, owing to its geographical location, is ideally suited to take the lead and is therefore coined as the 'net security provider' in the region. Comprehensive steps to build capacities to develop capabilities and enhanced cooperation between the countries in IOR, will lay the foundation for a secure and prosperous IOR. India will have to play a major role in the emergence of QUAD to ensure a secure conventional security environment in the region.

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CENTRE FOR LAND WARFARE STUDIES (CLAWS)

RPSO Complex, Parade Road, Delhi Cantt, New Delhi 110010

Tel.: +91-11-25691308, Fax: +91-11-25692347, CLAWS Army No. 33098; Email: landwarfare@gmail.com

Website: www.claws.in