

South African institute of International Affairs

“Indian Ocean Security and Indian Foreign Policy in a Changing Landscape”

By

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June 9, 2011

OUTLINE ONLY

I give sincere thanks to Elizabeth Sidiropoulos for inviting me to this most interesting conference in your beautiful country.

My topic has three parts: security issues in the Indian Ocean; the changing global landscape; Indian foreign policy with respect to the Indian Ocean region.

Security issues in the Indian Ocean. These are constant and consist primarily of:

- a. Keeping open Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) across an Ocean over which about half the world’s sea borne trade passes, especially the oil and petroleum needs of the littoral states as well as China, Japan and South Korea.
- b. Keeping open the vital passages at either end of an almost ‘closed’ Indian Ocean at the Straits of Hormuz and the Straits of Malacca and including the Gulf of Aden. India defines this area as one of vital national interest.
- c. Threats to the above are perceived as arising from great power conflict as in the Cold War, the spill over of serious instability in littoral states such as Somalia, Sudan, Pakistan, Burma/Myanmar, and activities of non-state actors in drug trafficking, smuggling, piracy and/or terrorism.
- d. Climate change that threatens the very existence of some island sates such as the Maldives.

Changes in the Global Landscape impacting on the Indian Ocean.

- a. The British withdrawal in the 1960s and the transfer of Diego Garcia to the US for construction and maintenance of a huge naval base. Expansion of French and Soviet naval presences in the Indian Ocean. A small but “blue” Indian navy also visible and active.
- b. The end of the Cold War and disintegration of the Soviet Union. This most dramatic change in the global landscape had an almost immediate impact on mutual Indian and American perceptions of each other, producing the Kicklighter (CinCPac) proposals of 1991-92 to introduce joint exercises and cooperation between the US and Indian navies. These are now regular features.
- c. During the 1980s the US Department of Defence created a new Central Command with jurisdiction over the Western half of the Indian Ocean including the Arabian Sea and Persian Gulf. Pacific Command continued to have jurisdiction of the

Eastern half including the Bay of Bengal as well as the Western Pacific. A glance at a map showing India's prominent place at the centre of the Indian Ocean indicates the complications such a bureaucratic division has created in US-India defence cooperation.

- d. The Rise of China is the most obvious and important change in the global landscape. Moreover, China has clearly articulated its aim of becoming a major Indian Ocean power and is augmenting the PLA Navy with more submarines and an aircraft carrier under construction to become a "blue water" Navy. (IISS *Military Balance 2010*) China justifies this naval build up as protection of its considerable commercial and trading interests in the region. Some analysts see it as a direct challenge to US superiority and a threat to India.

Significant steps in Indian foreign policy with respect to the Indian Ocean

- a. India's Commonwealth links were strong at the time of independence and afterwards. The Indian Navy was small but competent and supposed to have been enlarged by the British. But the lack of capital funding for defence, and more importantly, the continental mind-set of New Delhi faced with hostility from Pakistan and China prevented implementation of long term Indian Ocean strategy.
- b. By the 1960s India's policy of Nonalignment and non-engagement in great power conflict had grown into membership of the Nonaligned Movement (NAM) and vocal opposition to the presence of extra-regional naval forces and bases in the Indian Ocean region. Along with Sri Lanka, India sponsored the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace resolutions in the United Nations General Assembly after 1971 and was an active member of the Ad Hoc Committee on the Indian Ocean Zone of Peace. The initial emphasis was against the presence of extra-regional naval forces and the US base at Diego Garcia. The ad hoc committee was sabotaged by the US and Australia and anti-Indian sentiment among some members. India's lease of submarines and purchase of defence equipment from the Soviet Union exacerbated divisions within the ad hoc committee and there was no consensus of the meaning of the term "Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace."
- c. India's engagement with African nations was at various levels. India's vigorous anti-apartheid policies and trade embargo on South Africa since 1948 continued. Common membership of NAM was a strong, but largely rhetorical, bond with many newly-independent African states. Substantive economic cooperation between India and Africa was inhibited by the autarchic or inward looking character of India's political economy in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as by internal problems within African states sometimes expressed in actions against resident Indian communities, as in Uganda. (India's contributions to UN Peacekeeping in Africa are a separate subject.)
- d. India was actively engaged with Sri Lanka. The Maldives, Aden and Somalia on the Indian Ocean littoral in the 1980s. The Persian Gulf states became

increasingly important to India in the 1970s and 1980s (and remain so) because of energy supplies and the large numbers of Indian workers at all levels, including the managerial and menial, employed there. Their number is currently estimated at 4.5 or 5 million. India was diplomatically active in strengthening ties with BOTH the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and warding off the spill-over of their rivalry in India with its very large Muslim population. India also established cordial and cooperative ties with the Gulf Cooperative Council (GCC). The Indian Navy successfully evacuated Indians caught in the conflict in Lebanon in the 1980s, as currently from Libya.

- e. The early 1990s saw the biggest changes in Indian economic and foreign policies. “Liberalisation” of the Indian economy was accompanied by diplomatic activism on the part of the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) and the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI). India’s economic growth rates gradually improved to their present impressive level, trade expanded, and increased revenue from a dynamic economy enabled some much-needed capital investment in defence, including new acquisitions for the Indian Navy.

Indian foreign initiatives since the dramatic changes of the early 1990s

- a. India’s “Look East” policy led to increasing engagement with ASEAN as a dialogue partner, member of the ARF, various other formal and non-official exchanges, and membership of the East Asia Summit on Asian security that India will host in 2012. Cooperation with Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam goes beyond commerce to include joint naval exercises. India also moved to re-establish ties with Burma/Myanmar with which it shares a long land and maritime border and which it does want to see become a Chinese dependency. Look East and economic liberalisation enabled growing ties with Japan and South Korea. India, Japan, Australia and the US conduct joint naval exercises (Australia dropped out in face of China’s demarches.). Improvement in India-China relations and “management” of their deep seated problems has been parallel with other developments between India and East Asia. The prompt and generous response of the Indian Navy to the fearsome tsunami of December 2004 undoubtedly set the stage for increased naval cooperation and the holding of regular joint naval exercises in the eastern half of the Indian Ocean as far as the South China Sea and Okinawa. Indian warships also have provided escort duty to others, including the US, through the Straits of Malacca. India established a Combined Defence Command in the Andaman Islands that lie close to Indonesia and to Burma/Myanmar.
- b. India’s “Look West” policy was matched by increasing European and American interest in “new emerging markets.” A surprising reversal of US-India relations from being seen as “near adversaries” (1971) to “natural allies” (2004) took place. This culminated in the Indo-US Civil Nuclear Cooperation Agreement and a series of other commercial, defence, economic, educational, energy and technology partnership agreements between the governments as well as

private companies. However, actual alliance does not appear to be possible or even desirable to either country.

- c. "Looking Farther" is a term that could be applied to the gradual expansion of India's diplomatic and economic activities in the last few years to Central Asia, Africa and Latin America. India was among 14 founder members of the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC) formed in 1997. It has not been very active but India enjoys close relations with Mauritius, the Maldives and the Seychelles extending to naval cooperation. We know about the India-Africa Summits of 2008 and 2011 so there is no need to expand on them except to make three points.
 - i. First, the Indian Navy has been an active pursuer of the pirates that operate in the Indian Ocean, capturing several "mother ships" and releasing many hostages irrespective of nationality, mainly in the Gulf of Aden or off the coast of Somalia but sometimes further south. In the absence of a framework for a code of conduct it appears that an informal understanding among Navies prevails, that whichever war ship is closest to the scene of piracy will go after it. The Indian Navy organised the first Indian Ocean Naval Symposium in 2008. Very recently, India has offered similar anti-piracy support to Mozambique in coordination with South Africa.
 - ii. Secondly, the 53 soon to be 54 states of the huge Africa Union obviously have varied relationships with India. From India's point of view large, oil producing, Nigeria is very important and South Africa the most natural strategic partner. I was not able to find any information on bilateral naval cooperation between South Africa and India or joint exercises undertaken in the southern half of the Indian Ocean, but understand that these are planned or carried out under the auspices of the trilateral India-Brazil-South Africa (IBSA) grouping. There obviously is room for strengthening such ties.
 - iii. Thirdly, India's stated policy on Indian Ocean security issues projects a cooperative and inclusive vision. High officials explicitly welcome naval cooperation with all major stake-holders including China and the US and privately fear the emergence of any Sino-American duopoly in the Indian Ocean or Asia. 40 per cent of India's total trade is with the Indian Ocean littoral and its origins go back several thousands of years. India promotes a multilateral approach to the management of Indian Ocean security that obviates any single hegemon and rejects Robert Kaplan's idea of the US playing a broker's role between India and China.

General characteristics of current Indian foreign policy

- a. Despite creation of the post of National Security Adviser and a National Security Board in the late 1990s India still lacks the institutional and intellectual infra-structure necessary to coordinate the different aspects of national security that include defence, diplomacy, and internal security. The formulation of long- term strategic goals is only beginning and their realisation will need a lot of coordinated hard work on the part of separate and often competitive services.
- b. India adopts a modest, non-confrontational, profile emphasising peaceful resolution of differences through dialogue.
- c. India simultaneously seeks and welcomes participation as an equal in multilateral gatherings such as BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) and the G-20 looking at global management of the financial system. As is well known, India has sought permanent membership of the UN Security Council since the mid-1990s and is presently an elected non-permanent member of that body.
- d. India is sceptical of the use of military force alone to solve problems. The NSA has publicly described India's traditional and contemporary attitude toward the use of force as only in the last resort, defensively, and proportionately. India is seen as a status quo power upholding international law.
- e. India promotes the idea of mutual development and South-South cooperation toward shared prosperity and shared security. The scope is enormous and just beginning to be tapped, with Africa, for example. A debatable topic is India's imitation of or competition with China.
- f. India's naval capabilities and far sightedness are key elements of India's Indian Ocean policy. The Indian Navy is the largest indigenous force in the Indian Ocean with a balanced and medium sized structure that includes 36 principal vessels and plans for induction two or three aircraft carriers. Its submarine fleet of 20 is too small, especially as compared with China's at 83 (IISS *Military Balance 2008*) and some augmentation is envisaged. India regularly trains foreign naval personnel from many friendly countries. It also has hydrographic capabilities and has carried out surveys for others, such as Oman. India has three naval shipyards and opened a warship- designing centre in 2010. Bureaucratic delays afflict everything.

As I mentioned at the beginning, the topic of Indian Ocean Security and Indian Foreign Policy in a changing global landscape is a very wide one indeed and I have merely scratched its surface. Thank you.