INDIAN OCEAN SECURITY: A FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS

Mak Joon Num

Mak Joon Num is currently Director of Research at the Maritime Institute of Malaysia (MIMA) in Kuala Lumpur and heads the Institute's Centre for Maritime Security and Diplomacy. His research interests centre around regional security issues, with special emphasis on defence and naval strategies of Asian countries. His seminal study on the development of ASEAN armed forces, ASEAN Defence Reorientation 1975 - 1992: The Dynamics of Modernisation and Structural Change, was published by the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University in 1994. He is currently focusing on naval policies and the shift in defence dynamics in Southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific as well as on conceptual approaches to regional confidence-building.

INTRODUCTION

This paper puts forward two main arguments. The first is that India takes centre stage in any analysis of Indian Ocean security. This is because India constitutes the core of the Indian Ocean security complex. Geography and geopolitics has made the Indian subcontinent the focal point of any Indian Ocean security strategy. The size and centrality of the subcontinent means that the power that occupies it needs to command both the ocean, and defend the subcontinent from land threats. This fact was recognised by the British when they occupied India. In its imperial defence of its colonial Indian "barrack", British strategy emphasised securing the subcontinent and "sanitising" two adjacent concentric "rings". India is therefore the geostrategic pivot of the region, with the inner defence ring comprising lands and seas immediately adjacent to India, and the outer ring stretching from the Persian Gulf to Thailand.¹ The heartland must be held, the inner ring secured by having allies in control, and the outer ring sanitised by ensuring that the countries there remain friendly to India.

¹ The Persian Gulf to Thailand, and the outer ring stretching from the Persian Gulf to Thailand.
The second argument is that a purely military solution to secure the Indian Ocean today will be prohibitively expensive for New Delhi today in both the short term and long term. India therefore sees the trend towards regionalism in the post-Cold War world as an opportunity to secure the Indian Ocean through non-military means through a policy of "engagement and enlargement". The analytical framework of this paper is therefore based on the assumption that Indian defence strategy has remained essentially unchanged since at least the days of the British Raj, an assumption which is borne out by past and recent writings on Indian defence. What has changed is the instrument. Instead of relying on gunboat or coercive diplomacy, New Delhi is tentatively exploring the use of economic cooperation and regionalism to make its central role acceptable in the region. This policy of regionalism and socialisation is encapsulated in India’s dominant role in the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IORARC). The IORARC, from the Indian perspective, is an economic as much as security initiative. It is a form of regionalism which would hopefully enable New Delhi to secure its outer fence without having to resort to an economically and politically costly military solution in a changing world order. A more prosperous Indian Ocean rim will hopefully contribute to domestic and regional stability and make New Delhi more acceptable regionally.

Although the Indian Ocean has been often described as an arena of superpower rivalry, that is no longer the case in the post-Cold War world. Non-resident powers such as the United States no longer share India’s overwhelming security concern for the Indian Ocean. The Indian Ocean, whilst important for the US, is still not vital in the final analysis. While other powers might come and go, India is very much part and parcel of the Indian Ocean. The sub-continent’s position just above the main sea lines of communication (SLOCs) between the Pacific and the Middle East gives India a central geostrategic position. For New Delhi, the security of the Indian Ocean is perceived as a matter of national survival since it is inextricably linked with the security of India’s two defence rings or perimeters. India’s strategic priority is to therefore secure the heartland and the two outer defence rings.

Seen in this light, a great deal of India’s defence policies and actions become quite explicable. It explains its preoccupation with Kashmir and its inability to come to terms with Pakistan. Indeed, New Delhi’s perceived arrogance and high-handedness in dealing with Bhutan, Sikkim, Nepal and the Northeast frontier states is understandable if we consider this northeastern region to be part of India’s "inner moat." India's non-aligned policy which it seemingly abandoned when it signed a friendship treaty with the Soviet Union, and its involvement in Afghanistan and in West Asia can all be explained in this larger, historical and geostrategic context of Indian defence strategy.
The post-Cold War World, however, has made Indian defence more complex. The end of strategic bipolarity brought to an end the US-Soviet Union balance in South Asia. The withdrawal of Russia from the region has apparently left India without firm allies in the region. However, the danger which emanates from the Indian Ocean rim today is no longer purely military. There is the revival of a more militant Islam in a westward arc which New Delhi sees as threatening it with encirclement. Islam, combined with ethnic and language issues, is perceived as threatening the heartland itself. Indeed, the danger of the moment is no longer superpower rivalry, but internal ethnic, religious and political dissension which threatens the stability of India, Pakistan and the Gulf states. To complicate matters, the rise of militant Hinduism in India itself makes the Hindu-Muslim cleavage even more stark. India might be the Indian Ocean’s most populous nation, but it is ringed on the western and northwestern quadrant by a string of Muslim countries stretching from Somalia to Uzbekistan. In the east lies Malaysia and Indonesia, both of which are also Muslim states, with Indonesia having the largest Muslim population in the world. India itself has a sizeable Muslim minority of 110 million people, or 12 percent of the population. Military power alone will therefore not solve India’s security problems. Indeed, any military assertiveness could be interpreted as Indian hegemonism and play into the hands of Pakistan, India’s implacable foe since the partition of the subcontinent in 1947.

The first section of this paper outlines the basis of Indian defence strategy, which is to secure the Indian heartland. India’s overriding concerns for the Indian Ocean must be balanced against the security interests of the main regional players. Indian Ocean security today, therefore, hinges on the interaction between India, the US and littoral powers of the Indian Ocean.

The second section discusses this relationship. The tension between India and the US has decreased in the post-Cold War world. Indeed, there appears to be increasing congruence of interests. All related security issues involving the other principal players—Iran, Pakistan, South Africa, Australia and Russia—“hang” from this central relationship. Little discussion is devoted to South Africa and Australia, principally because their impact on Indian Ocean security today is still marginal. That could of course change in the future.

The third section tentatively examines the Indian Ocean Rim Initiative (IORI) and the follow-on Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IORARC) initiative in the context of India’s regional security interests. It puts forward the argument that the current Indian Ocean Rim initiative must be seen against the backdrop of India’s wider strategic concerns. This security slant explains why India has taken an exclusive rather than an all-inclusive approach to Indian Ocean cooperation. The
IORI initiative of March 1995 involved just seven countries, significantly leaving out major Indian Ocean players such as Indonesia and Pakistan. The compromise IORARC expanded to 14 members, again leaving out Pakistan and Iran among others. This exclusive approach, it is argued, is the result of India’s attempt to use regionalism for both economic and security ends. This exclusive approach helps explain Iran’s Indian Ocean Community initiative, which may be seen as the Iranian way to circumvent India’s exclusive approach.

The probable contributions of the IORARC to India’s economic and security interests are also very briefly touched upon. The IORARC may, or may not, help India to remain the dominant regional power. Whether an empowered India will be a benign hegemon, or whether the IORARC will truly make India part of the region, depends on one’s world view. So far, India has not been overly successful at regionalism. Although it has been involved in the economic engagement of the Central Asian republics since the early 1990s, the verdict is still out as to whether these initiatives have been successful. Delhi’s regionalism has been limited to the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Indian Ocean Organisation for Marine Affairs Cooperation (IOMAC), where it has been accused by other members of being somewhat overbearing.

I. INDIA’s SECURITY DILEMMA

India’s security dilemma is the result of history. The period of British colonisation created and defined India as a modern nation state. Independent India also inherited Britain’s strategic dilemma and adopted, consciously or unconsciously, the imperial solution. The Indian Ocean is the smallest of the world’s oceans. To the north is the Eurasian landmass. To the east is the “Malay barrier”, through which maritime traffic has to transit the narrow chokepoints of the Indonesian and Malacca straits. To the west is Africa and the Middle East, a desert and jungle terrain easily traversed only via the Red Sea and Persian Gulf. Both these bodies of water end in narrow chokepoints - the Bab Al Mandab and the Straits of Hormuz - which are easily dominated from land. Towards the southwest, maritime traffic must transit the Cape of Good Hope, which again constitutes another chokepoint. Australia lies southeast of the Indian Ocean. It is only towards the south that the Ocean ends in a relatively open body of water. Thrusting downwards like a tongue into the Indian Ocean from the north is the Indian subcontinent. The Himalayas and the Hindu Kush mountains act as a barrier north of the subcontinent. India’s central position in the Indian Ocean makes it extremely vulnerable. It is open to access from the sea on both the east and the west, and to the north it has a mountainous yet permeable land border. While the mountains and deserts north of India constitute formidable barriers, India, nevertheless, has traditionally
been invaded from overland. Unlike transient maritime powers, the resident power of the subcontinent must control both the ocean and secure the land corridors to the north. Imperial Britain therefore relied on a strategy of naval supremacy and continental defence to secure India.

"...if the strategic passes in the Indian subcontinent’s mountainous northwestern, northern and northeastern frontiers could be sealed against penetration and if the Indian Ocean with its limited gateways of ingress could be exclusively controlled by the Royal Navy and if the political restlessness of its indigenous populations could be moderated, then India would function as a truly secure and puissant 'English barrack in the Oriental Seas,' from whence Japanese and Chinese ambitions in the East, Russian ambitions in the North, and Italian and German designs in the West could be properly checkmated".2

This description of British strategy encapsulates the Indian defence dilemma. India needs to secure the heartland from internal threats. Next, it must address land-based threats along its northern borders. Last of all, it would have to secure the Indian Ocean rim to ensure a safe environment for New Delhi through a strategy of domination and/or alliances. The security of the subcontinent is made more complex by the fact that the present Indian Ocean rim borders were all arbitrarily drawn up by former Western colonial powers which did not take into consideration ethno-religious group interests. The result is that many ethnic groups are divided by political boundaries and thus cannot identify with the state, laying the ground for potential dissension and secession.

During the early years of independence, India had little choice but to prioritise border defence, together with dealing with secessionist movements in the northeast. Problems with Pakistan resulted in three wars, in 1947 during Partition, in 1965 and again in 1971 when East Pakistan became Bangladesh. India also fought border skirmishes with China in 1959 and 1962. This border conflict indirectly stemmed from India’s support of Tibet and the Dalai Lama following the Chinese annexation of Tibet. India, not surprisingly, wanted an autonomous Tibet as a buffer against China, although it accepted Chinese suzerainty over Tibet.3 In a move which paralleled British Himalayan policy, India attempted to take up advanced positions in the ambiguous border areas of the northeast and northwest, a move which ended in Indian troops being somewhat roughly handled by Chinese forces.4

India has demonstrated a steely determination, using both brute force and sophisticated accommodation, to secure its inner "ring," putting down separatist movements in north-east India (Nagaland, Mizoram and Assam) in the 1970s and 1980s. This was one area where the Indian and Chinese frontiers met, and was thus regarded as vital for Indian security. Many
Indian analysts also openly acknowledge that Delhi’s politics and policies are closely intertwined with the actions of its neighbours. Disputes with neighbours are therefore often treated as domestic disputes. This attitude is reflected in its integration of Sikkim into the Indian Union in 1975; its support of Bangladesh during the 1971 war; its despatch of a task force to put down a rebellion in the Maldives in 1988; and peace-keeping operations in Sri Lanka in 1990. In the context of overall Indian defence policy, Pakistan and Kashmir falls within the Indian “inner ring”. It is therefore unsurprising that India will always feel insecure until Pakistan becomes an Indian ally, and the Kashmir issue permanently settled in India’s favour.

The Indian Ocean was, until 1971, dominated by the Royal Navy and the US Navy. These two powers posed no threat to India, thus Delhi could afford to concentrate on securing its inner and outer perimeters on land. The Indian Navy was only given priority after the late 1960s. The Navy did well in the 1971 Indo-Pakistan War, only to see ultimate victory snatched away by a display of superpower gunboat diplomacy when the US nuclear carrier Enterprise sailed into the Bay of Bengal to signal to India that it should not invade West Pakistan. The 1971 war also resulted in the creation of Bangladesh, supplanting what was East Pakistan. This removed the Pakistani threat on India’s eastern border, simplifying its land defence. What comes out clearly during the 1960s and 1970s is that the axes of threats to India have not changed since the days of the British Raj. From the northeast was the China-Pakistan threat (until the 1971 war); from the northwest was the Pakistan threat; and more recently, from the Indian Ocean appeared naval threats from both extra-regional and regional powers.

India therefore embarked on a programme to upgrade and expand its navy after 1971. This phase of Indian naval expansion, was from the early 1970s to the end of the 1980s. The Soviet Union played an important part in the modernisation of the Indian Navy, by supplying missile strike craft and submarines, and extending credit for the building of a dockyard at Visakhapatnam. During this period, the Indian Navy became the regional “bogeyman”, with fears of Indian expansionism being expressed as far away as Australia and Malaysia. There was speculation that the Indian Navy, with two aircraft carrier groups, was attempting to sail to the Malacca Straits and beyond. However, it may be argued, with hindsight, that India was attempting to secure just the Indian Ocean and had no ambitions to expand beyond the Andamans. This period of naval expansion proved to be salutary for India. It revealed that maintaining a regional and reasonably sized navy was a very expensive process. In addition, a purely naval or military approach to secure the Indian Ocean “fence” proved somewhat counter-productive. It aroused fears across the region that India was out to establish some form of hegemonism by using naval
power. In the light of this, and increasing financial difficulties, the Indian Navy has become a victim of budget cuts and has become operationally much less effective than what it used to be during its heyday in the early 1980s. For instance, one aircraft carrier has been laid up with no replacement being likely in the near future.

II. INDIA & THE POST-COLD WAR SECURITY COMPLEX

The “Muslim Factor”

Post-Cold War developments have brought benefits and problems to India. The “Muslim factor” is often cited as one of India’s biggest potential problems. Developments and alignments in the Middle East and Central Asia, most of which are Muslim nations, will have increasing impact on the potential balance in the Indian Ocean. India has been preoccupied by the Muslim factor in three respects: its ongoing tensions with Muslim Pakistan and Kashmir; its reliance on Middle Eastern oil; and its own Muslim minority of 110 million. Pakistan is constantly attempting to exploit the Muslim factor against India, and developments in the post-Cold War world could potentially destabilise the Indian Ocean rim and India itself, either through the formation of a Muslim coalition against India, or through internal subversion and proxy war. Indeed, one analyst has asserted that the 1990s is witnessing a major shift in the South Asian security paradigm as states face the prospect of disintegration. Concerns about major power rivalry and Sino-Indian tensions are therefore outdated as states are faced with the “enemy within” in a “back-to-the-future” scenario. Raju Thomas’ hypothesis is that all South Asian states are weak states, and that India would have to face a variety of internal and external threats. India’s future conflicts would therefore be complicated by the internal uprising in Kashmir, questionable Sikh loyalties in Punjab, and a nuclear threat from Pakistan.\[10\]

The Muslim factor can develop into a serious threat for Delhi. The demise of the Soviet Union led to the creation of five “new” Islamic states to India’s northwest—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. The five new Central Asian republics, plus the victory of the pro-Pakistan Taliban regime in Afghanistan, appears to reinforce the Muslim “crescent” west-northwest of India. Under such conditions, it would appear that India has become isolated in the Indian Ocean region with no “useful friends”. Historically, India has cause for concern over the Muslim factor. Iran provided logistical support for Pakistan in the 1971 war, while Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates were believed to have provided funds for Pakistan’s nuclear programme. The growing Hindu-Muslim schism in India was also underscored by the riots over the site of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya in 1991/1992. The coming into
power of the Hindu-based Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) might result in Hindu India being isolated in a Muslim sea.

However, the idea of a Muslim coalition being formed against India today is still doubtful because Islam has not entirely united the variety of peoples found along the Indian Ocean rim. Pakistan attempted to form an Islamic Defence Pact in the 1970s and failed. In 1986, Pakistan, Iran and Turkey formed the Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO), with the five Central Asian republics joining in 1991, and Afghanistan in 1992. The possibility of turning the ECO into a loose military confederation has been raised, but there are serious obstacles to such a transformation. It calls for a sense of unity and a shared vision and goal which is lacking at the moment. Muslim countries still do not take a united stand against India. For instance, Iran and Egypt (together with China) acted to persuade Pakistan to withdraw its resolution to censure India for human rights abuses in Kashmir at the UN Human Rights Commission in 1994.

India is aware of the Muslim factor’s potential, and is always on the lookout to consolidate its ties with Muslim countries, especially those which are avowedly secular, such as Iraq and Syria. Thus, Indo-Iran ties remain very cordial today. This probably has as much to do with Iran-Saudi rivalry as Iran’s own isolation. Saudi Arabia, a Sunni nation which is close to largely Sunni Pakistan, is in rivalry with Shiite Iran in the Persian Gulf. In May 1995, the US decided on a full trade embargo against Iran. The decision was based on charges of terrorism, human rights abuses, and attempts to dominate the Persian Gulf against Iran. Iran, therefore, has access only to the Central Asian republics and has turned east towards China India, and Russia for trade and technology. Armed turmoil has made access to the Central Asian republics difficult, and Iran has involved India in the construction of a railway from the republics to the Persian Gulf via Iran. More significantly, India is helping Iran with some of its Russian military equipment, notably by increasing the submerged running time of Iran’s Kilo-class submarines, despite the fact that the Iranian navy carries out joint exercises with the Pakistani navy. In 1995, India and Iran signed a comprehensive set of agreements covering shipping, joint ventures and transit and trade between India and the Central Asian republics via Iran.

India: Still Looking West

The evolving strategic order has demanded that India play a more prominent regional role to secure its outer defence “rings”. India’s strategic focus is still firmly fixed west-northwest. To the east, ASEAN provides a secure and traditionally friendly “Malay barrier”, although the potential
for Indo-Indonesian rivalry in the future cannot be discounted. The southeastern corner of the Indian Ocean is dominated by Australia which has no great ambition to project power into the Indian Ocean. South Africa, lying to the southwest, neither has the will nor the power yet to dominate any substantial portion of the Indian Ocean.

To the north, New Delhi has reached a rapprochement with China, a process begun by the late Rajiv Ghandi when he visited Beijing in 1988. In 1991, a Joint Working Group was established to negotiate the settlement of the Sino-Indian boundary disputes in the Aksai Chin plateau and the North-East Frontier Agency. Significantly, Chinese Premier Li Peng did not raise the Kashmir issue during his visit to New Delhi in December 1991. The issue of Kashmir apparently parallels the situation in Xinjiang, whose people have linguistic and cultural affinities with the Central Asian republics. China's attitude towards South Asia, therefore, have changed from that of "one friend (Pakistan), one enemy (India) to "two friends". Overall, except for the western quadrant, the post-Cold War security situation seems to have improved for India where the big powers are concerned.

US-India: A Congruence of Interests

India initially viewed the post-Cold War World with some reservations because, with the disappearance of the Soviet Union, the United States was left as the sole superpower in the region. India's relationship with the superpowers, especially the US, has been an uneasy one. The nominal basis of Indian foreign policy has been the Nehru-an concept of non-alignment. But, together with non-alignment, there is also the implicit belief in India's "great power status", and therefore the desire to be treated as such over a whole range of global issues. The US, however, has tended to treat its relations with India not as one between equals, but as part and parcel of US relations with the South Asian region. India has therefore been very chagrined to find the US playing the "arms embargo card" against both Islamabad and Delhi by withholding arms supplies. India eventually turned to the Soviet Union for its weapons, and this relationship eventually ended in the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Co-operation in 1971. The Treaty, and the Soviet Union's intervention in Afghanistan in 1979, meant that at least India's outer "ring" in the northwestern quadrant was secured during those years. Nevertheless, India's tacit support of the Soviet presence in Afghanistan soured its ties with the US even more.

The breakup of the Soviet Union had two serious consequences for India. It meant that its most reliable source of sophisticated weapons had
virtually disappeared overnight, and it could no longer count on the Soviet Union to balance other powers in the region. India, however, has on balance, managed the post-Cold War world remarkably well. In the first instance, Indian and US strategic interests are beginning to come closer together. The US is starting to realise that India could be an important strategic partner in security and economics. The opening up of the Indian economy since 1991 is seen as an important opportunity for US business. US multinational corporations has become India's single largest source of Direct Foreign Investments, and India has been identified by the US Commerce Department as one of the 10 "Big Emerging Markets" (BEMS). Indeed, India is now considered to be a safer investment bet than China because the former has a clear democratic (albeit chaotic) process; has an established legal system; and has a deep and vast pool of English-speaking technical and managerial talent.20

US security concerns in the Indian Ocean involve both the nuclear and conventional arenas. One of US President Bill Clinton's primary security concerns is nuclear proliferation. A key US aim is to stop the production of nuclear weapons by both South Asian countries and to eventually persuade them to eliminate weapons of mass destruction. Washington passed the Pressler Amendment in October 1990, prohibiting all exports of weapons to Pakistan on suspicion that it was pressing ahead with a nuclear weapons programme. India however, had been less susceptible to embargo pressure because of its arms links with the Soviet Union. But even after the loss of its Soviet ally, India still has been less than cooperative with regard to the nuclear issue. Without going into the rights and wrongs of the issue, India decided not to become party to the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and tested its first nuclear warheads in 1998, followed shortly after by Pakistan. The US has apparently come to terms with India's position and has given up any attempts at nuclear "rollback". The US stress is now on capping the Indian and Pakistani nuclear arsenals.

In the Indian Ocean itself, the US is beginning to realise that there is a congruence of US and Indian interests. As the US begins to gradually draw down in the Indian Ocean after the Gulf War of 1991, it sees a strong, status quo power as an asset in the region. Indian Ocean SLOC security, and the maintenance of regimes friendly to the US in the Middle East oil states of Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, is of primary concern to Washington. If any country can contribute to burden-sharing, it would be democratic and secular India. On its part, India is not averse to taking on such a role in principle, since it shares the US concern for oil security and the freedom of navigation. As such, India has taken the opportunity to conduct naval exercises with as many
countries in the Indian Ocean as possible, including the US. US-India cooperation is of course viewed with alarm by Pakistan, and the Indo-US relationship has been described as:

"...a regional deal...cut by India and the United States for their joint projection of their power in the region, including the Persian Gulf".21

While India has traditionally looked west rather than east because of the region’s strategic oil supply and potential instability, it is still hard to imagine that India has cut a deal with the US to project power into the Gulf region. Not only would such a move be against India’s non-alignment principle, but any alliance with a Western power would give the wrong signals to Muslim countries of the Indian Ocean that India has become part of a Western alliance. India, of course, shares US concerns over freedom of navigation in the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf. But at the same time, the complex of problems Delhi faces is not confined only to the maritime sphere. It has a range of problems on land as well. As such, India needs to maintain independence of action in the region. India’s independent strategy is not only a matter of its own “big power” notion, but a necessity.

India, Russia & the Central Asian Republics

India’s relationship with its former ally, the erstwhile Soviet Union, is today defined by the “balance of power, and common interests”.22 Russia remains important as a source of sophisticated armaments for India. However, India no longer enjoys a special relationship with Russia, and is ranked seventh in Moscow’s list of priorities.23 This is reflected in the affair of the cryogenic rocket engines which Russia agreed to sell to India. Russia, however, stopped the sale in 1993 because of US pressure and its insistence that the engines would contravene the Missile Technical Control Regime (MTCR). At the strategic level, Russia has lost interest in the Indian Ocean. It finds common ground with India only in the Central Asian republics.

India regards the republics as part of its outer defence “ring”, and is attempting to neutralise any possible Pakistani influence in the region. Afghanistan’s involvement in the Tajikistan conflict also worries India, because instability in Tajikistan and Afghanistan could spread to Kashmir. India and Russia are therefore both concerned about militant Islam in Central Asia, and both are obviously keen that the status quo in Central Asia should remain. Pakistan on the other hand, regards the situation in the Central Asian republics as an opportunity to spread its influence and to create for itself an Islamic hemisphere which will also include the Central Asian republics and Afghanistan. Pakistan sees the Central Asian republics as both an economic and security opportunity. As such, it embarked
on a programme to develop economic ties with the new republics. To counter Pakistani influence, India also adopted a strategy of economic engagement. India, on paper, has a fair number of projects with Central Asia, and with Uzbekistan in particular.\textsuperscript{24}

\textbf{India-Pakistan Relations}

Indo-Pakistan tensions have entered the nuclear arena. Despite the cuts in real spending on defence by India, there is no doubt that the Indian military machine has become much stronger relative to that of Pakistan. While Pakistan was constrained from receiving US arms under the Pressler Amendment, India continued to enjoy almost unrestricted imports of Soviet arms until the late 1980s. Already, India has overcome some of the problems with regard to arms purchases from the Commonwealth of Independent States and is reported to be on the verge of closing deals for advanced Russian aircraft and tanks, including a production license for the advanced SU-30 fighter.

This asymmetry in conventional forces has made nuclear weapons appear more attractive as a cheap "equaliser" for Pakistan. The Indians are believed to possess from 20 to 100 nuclear warheads, with Pakistan possessing one-fifth the Indian total. Most analysts believe that the use of nuclear weapons by either power is highly unlikely. However, Pakistan is unlikely to launch a first strike because of its lack of strategic depth, and because of the numerical inferiority of its nuclear arsenal.

\textbf{III. INDIA AND THE IORI/IORARC}

Given the above circumstances, it would appear that the situation in the two adjacent Indian defence "rings" as well as the Indian "heartland" has become more complex and challenging. The larger external threats may have disappeared for India, but in their stead have come a host of problems which could destabilise India internally. To the northwest are the Central Asian republics, where both Pakistan and Iran are vying for influence. Afghanistan's civil war goes on, but once that nation consolidates itself, it could once again begin "exporting" Muslim fighters to liberate Kashmir, or meddle in the affairs of the Central Asian republics. The situation in the Gulf and Arabian peninsula is uncertain, with the regimes in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait all under pressure from both reformist and Islamic forces. Kuwait, too, still feels threatened by Iraq, while Iran is becoming politically and militarily more assertive despite the US embargo.\textsuperscript{25}

The new environment calls for adroit management to ensure continued regional stability. India, however, is in no position to impose its will to
secure the Indian Ocean rim. Its naval expansion has been put on hold, and the Air Force and Army are still grappling with the problems of lack of cash and spares. While the external security environment vis-a-vis China might have improved, domestic unrest and dissension in Punjab, Kashmir and Assam still demand military forces. India’s experience in the Central Asian republics since 1991 could well have proved that economic cooperation in today’s increasingly multilateral world is a far better option than coercive diplomacy in sanitising its defence rings.

Seen in this light, the IORI/IORARC process provides a logical framework, from New Delhi’s point of view, for India to engage itself in the region without raising hackles. Whether India was the driving force behind the original IORI process or not is not that important. What is significant that the process provides New Delhi the opportunity to engage the region at a number of levels. As such, India will want to play a leading role in the IORI/IORARC process. The process, again from the Indian viewpoint, is too important to be left to states whose vital interests are not involved.

The IORI/IORARC process is fashioned, in some ways, after the Pacific Economic Cooperative Council (PECC) process which resulted in APEC. On balance, however, there seems to a greater resemblance to ASEAN, especially where the IORI/IORARC Charter is concerned. The objective of IORI/IORARC is ostensibly purely economic, with the stress on economic cooperation. Seen in this light, IORI/IORARC would seem to be a problem in search of a solution. For one thing, most analysts recognise that, apart from the geographic dimension, there is very little in common between most countries of the Indian Ocean rim. There is the disparity in size between island states such as the Seychelles, the Maldives, and Singapore, and continents and subcontinents such as Australia and India. Income disparity is vast, ranging from the GNP per capita of US$19,670 for Singapore to the US$74 GNP per capita for Mozambique. The region includes countries which are almost economic basket cases on the African coast as well as countries with very high growth rates in the eastern rim. Most trade is also extra-regional, with intra-regional trade accounting for only 20 percent of total trade (much of it in oil) compared with 66 percent for the Asia-Pacific. Given the absence of a common basis for economic cooperation, why is it that the whole IORI/IORARC process is being pushed so hard and so fast? Why is this larger initiative being pursued instead of the more modest but more attainable goal of strengthening sub-regional initiatives?

Some light may be shed on the above questions if we examine the genesis of the IORI/IORARC process, its charter and its agenda. Interestingly enough, the Indian Ocean initiative was first broached by South African Foreign Minister Pik Botha during a visit to India in November 1993.
He proposed an economic grouping involving India, Pakistan, South Africa, the Gulf States, and East African nations. Both apparently raised the issue again during a visit to Australia. Significantly, the first IORI meeting was hosted by Mauritius in March 1995. While it might be quite natural for a regional power like South Africa to suggest such an ambitious initiative, it seems a little strange that it was left to a small island state like Mauritius (area: 2,045,455 square kilometres) to lead the way in operationalising the concept. This Indian Ocean state of one million people has apparently taken the lead in a process which today involves 14 countries, including India with its population of one billion.

Twenty years ago, a writer remarked that Mauritius is

“geographically isolated, a weak state which cannot and should not have ambition to play an outstanding role in international politics”.30

It is no secret that India has a special relationship with Mauritius, “the gateway to India”.31 The island not only has an Indian majority, but the ruling elite is dominated by Mauritians of Indian origin. As such, one is left wondering whether Mauritius is not acting as a proxy for India with regard to IORI/IORARC.

The evolution of the IORI process is equally interesting. The March 1995 IORI “first-track” (i.e. official) meeting involved seven “core states” — Australia, India, Kenya, Mauritius, Oman, Singapore and South Africa. That Singapore should be invited as a “core state” while Pakistan, Iran and Indonesia were left out is telling. Australia, which has a great interest in free trade, was apparently a little peeved at the exclusive nature of the “Mauritius process”. (personal communication). It responded by hosting the first, and so far the only, meeting of the International Forum on the Indian Ocean Region (IFIOR) in Perth in June 1995. This “second track” meeting was an inclusive process, with representatives from 23 states participating. There has reportedly been a tension between the Australian “all-inclusive” approach and the Mauritian “all-exclusive” approach. Significantly, leading participants in the first-track process, India in particular, “have sought to ensure that the ‘second track’ only has a restricted role”.32 A compromise was apparently reached during the second inter-governmental IORI meeting in Mauritius in May 1966, where it was decided to extend membership to seven more countries—Indonesia, Madagascar, Malaysia, Mozambique, Sri Lanka, Tanzania and Yemen. A third meeting was held in May 1996. At the fourth inter-governmental meeting in Mauritius in September 1996, the new 14-member grouping decided that the initiative should be known as the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IORARC). In the interim, Iran, left out of the process, decided to hold its own Indian Ocean Community meeting in Teheran in November 1996. The IORI/IORARC process advanced another step when it was formalised at the first Ministerial meeting in March 1997, again held in Mauritius.
What is striking about the IORI/IORARC process is its speed. The process became institutionalised and locked in with its own charter within a year, giving "outsiders" hardly any opportunity to provide inputs or to have their say in the process. There are parallels between IORI/IORARC and the ASEAN process during the latter's early days. ASEAN, like IORI/IORARC, was set up ostensibly as an economic and cultural association. Security was a dirty word for ASEAN until after a generation. Yet, ASEAN's primary achievements have been in the political and security arena. In this sense, the IORARC Charter contains strong political undertones. It is long on rhetoric on the benefits of economic cooperation without being in any way explicit. IORARC's key objectives are to "promote the sustained growth and balanced development of the region... and to create common ground for regional economic cooperation", and "to focus on those areas of economic cooperation which provide maximum opportunities to develop shared interests and reap mutual benefits".

In contrast, the Charter is explicit about the foundations of cooperation, i.e. the fundamental principles, which will be based on "respect for the principles of sovereign equality, territorial integrity, political independence, non-interference in internal affairs, peaceful co-existence and mutual benefit". This stress on territorial integrity and non-interference mirrors ASEAN's preoccupation with non-interference and territorial sovereignty. The IORARC Charter, therefore, like the ASEAN Charter, places great emphasis on the maintenance of the political status quo. And like ASEAN, the IORARC seems to emphasise the consensual approach, with "decisions on all matters and issues and at all levels... taken on the basis of consensus". The exclusive, almost club-like approach adopted by ASEAN is reflected in the IORARC membership clause. All sovereign Indian Ocean rim states are eligible for membership, except that membership "will be decided by Member States".

The IORARC Charter hints at why the association has adopted an exclusive approach, since "bilateral and other issues likely to generate controversy and be an impediment to regional cooperation efforts will be excluded from deliberations". The unofficial reason why Pakistan, for instance, has been left out of IORARC is that India does not want the association to become embroiled in security issues and hence distract IORARC from economic issues. Nevertheless, it is remarkable that an association whose ostensible primary aim is to promote sustained and balanced regional development based on historical bonds and "with a sense of recovery of history" and "geo-economic linkages" should leave out countries like Iran and Pakistan.

From a purely economic viewpoint, it makes little sense to exclude Iran and Pakistan from the IORI/IORARC process. In political terms, however, Pakistan would most likely bring on board with it a highly politicised agenda which main aim would be to thwart the growth of
Indian power and influence. This would polarise IORARC and frustrate its nominally economic agenda.

Iran has been left out for an even more fundamental reason. It would be difficult to manage Iran, in the first place because it is an increasingly assertive regional power. Iran, of course, sees IORI/IORARC as an opportunity to break the economic and technological stranglehold imposed by the US-led embargo. Given this need to break the embargo, Teheran is bound to introduce its own specific economic/political agenda. Iran thus represents a potential alternative focal point to India in the IORI/ IORARC process. Iran’s agenda might not only diffuse Indian influence, but run directly counter to Indian interests. In other words, Iran could eventually “hijack” the IORI/IORARC process. Politically ambitious Iran is a regional power whose influence must not be underrated. As such, it is imperative (from the Indian viewpoint) that Teheran be left out of the process, unless of course New Delhi can be 100 percent certain that the Iranian agenda will coincide with and reinforce India’s own agenda. One is therefore left with the feeling that a political agenda is just as important, if not more so, than the economic agenda. Officials at the various IORARC meetings have reported, for instance, the lack of an economic focus, and that cooperation has been touted for the sake of cooperation. However, if we look at IORARC as an instrument to ensure regional stability through the maintenance of the status quo, then the Mauritius process does make sense.

CONCLUSION

India is at the centre of the post-Cold War security complex in South Asia. India, as the largest and most powerful resident power in the Indian Ocean, is faced with the problem of securing both the Indian heartland as well as the outer rings on its periphery. While some features of the new strategic environment favours India, for example its rapprochement with China and the US, there are other disturbing developments from Delhi’s point of view. The most potent of these appear to be the growing schism between a more assertive and militant Islam in the region, and the Hindu revival in India. This politico-religious schism can isolate India externally and destabilise it internally. The crescent of Muslim states west of India appear to be increasingly more militant, more Islamic and less secular. In addition, the creation of five new Muslim nations in Central Asia, as well as the disappearance of the secular regimes of the Iranian Shah and the communist Afghan government, seems to tighten the Islamic ring around India. The Muslim factor can thus become a dangerous enemy without and within for India, given the fact that an increasingly weak Pakistan is only too eager to exploit the Islamic factor.
The use of traditional military force to sanitise India's two outer defence “rings” is therefore unlikely to be a permanent solution. Indeed, military force is becoming prohibitively expensive to project, both economically and politically, in today's multilateral world. Yet, India is aware that Islam is not a monolithic force ranged against India. Delhi is aware in its dealings with Iran, Iraq, Turkey and other Middle Eastern countries that nationalism, ethnicity and economics are sometimes stronger forces than Islam. India's experience of the economic engagement of the Central Asian republics has revealed that bread is more effective than the gun. More than that, it has seen Pakistan's attempts to woo the Central Asian republics being undercut by Turkey and Iran. These two Muslim countries are interested in maximising economic opportunities for themselves, not merely undermining Indian interests. As such, the IORARC initiative seems to be a logical instrument for India to extend its influence in the Indian Ocean rim by offering the opportunity for a win-win situation for all participants.

The economic engagement of such a vast region might prove to be very costly for a single player. Thus, an exclusive approach might limit the extent of engagement to those countries deemed most responsive to any Indian advances, or most likely to provide economic opportunities for India, while at the same time leaving out the two most potentially dangerous spoilers of the modern “Great Game”, namely Iran and Pakistan. The IORI/IORARC may thus be seen as a non-military instrument for India to socialise the Indian Ocean rim, and to ensure that the Muslim countries will not come together as an anti-India coalition. It fits rather neatly into the British-Indian strategy of securing the “barrack”, and sanitising (socialising in this instance) the two outer defence “rings”. IORI/IORARC might not be economically successful, but it might have considerable political returns for India. However, if IORI/IORARC succeeds in its economic objectives as well, then India will enjoy an added economic bonus as well, which will only enhance its stature and power in the Indian Ocean region. In the final analysis, India, the status quo power, wants to maintain the political status quo, and IORI/IORARC holds promise in achieving this goal. Whether this process will empower India in the long run, and turn India into a regional hegemon, or whether India will become more neo-liberal in its dealings with the rest of the region is a subject for debate. However, in the light of Southeast Asia's dealings with India, there seems to be no reason to worry even if the Indian Ocean becomes an Indian lake. India has not looked farther than its outer defence rings beyond the Andamans and the western coast of Thailand. As such, Indian domination of the Indian Ocean region will ensure, at the very least, that ASEAN Southeast Asia will not have to worry about protecting its back while it looks firmly east towards the South China Sea, and China and Japan in the years to come. In this sense, ASEAN and India have played, and can continue to play, complementary security roles by ensuring the stability of their respective regions.
REFERENCES


Derek McDougall, "Indian Ocean Regionalism: Perspectives from Mauritius, the Seychelles and Reunion", *The Round Table*, 1997.


NOTES


2 Tellis, *op cit*, p. 8.


6 Vali, *op cit*, p. 93, footnote 4.

7 Mansingh, *op cit*, p. 151.


9 The term "Muslim factor" is used in this paper rather loosely as a convenient shorthand for Muslim states and interests in the region. It is not implied in this paper that Islam is a monolithic, unifying force whose main aim in the Indian Ocean is to counter India.


13 In Pakistan itself, ethnicity comes before religion. As such, the distinctions between Punjabis, Balochis, Sindhis, Pashtuns, and Mohajirs still remain very sharp.


18 Raju Thomas, *op cit*, p. 11.


21 Former Pakistani Foreign Secretary Agha Shahi, cited in Thomas, *op cit*, p. 9.


Derek McDougall, “Indian Ocean Regionalism: Perspectives from Mauritius, the Seychelles and Reunion”, *The Round Table*, 1997, p. 60.

Roy-Chaudhury, op cit, p. 8.


V.P. Dutt, op cit, p. 64.

McDougall, op cit, p. 60.