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indian ocean strategy

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THE Indian Ocean covers a vast area which is composed of an expanse of water, a network of islands, and a number of oceanic states. The strategic interests in this region have developed in a peculiar way. There was a time when practically no such interests existed. Then there came a period, which lasted for nearly four and a half centuries, when strategy was sought to be concentrated under a single authority, and for one-third of the period was, in fact, concentrated.

This span of time has now been superseded by another, which has already lasted a quarter century, in which strategic unity has disintegrated and multiple strategies have arisen.

Of the three forces behind this evolution of strategic interests—geography, political and economic impulse, and technology—geography has been primary. The Indian Ocean, which is the most extensive part of the region, has an area of 73.5 million square kilometers and is the third largest ocean in the world after the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. The entire region falls roughly between the latitudes 30° north and 60° south and longitudes 30° east and 120° east, embracing belts of the Equator, the Tropic of Cancer, and the Tropic of Capricorn, and portions of the landmasses of three continents—Africa, Asia, and Australia—but excluding parts of the Pacific. Four geographical features of the region bear on strategy:

- Its location on the globe. The Indian Ocean area is a bridge between the east and the west, providing lines of communications and contact which are comparatively free, easy, and reliable. Compare these with the arctic route and the cross-Eurasian routes. The former was not even dreamed of in the past. The land routes through China, the Soviet Union, and Europe, always dangerous, have been closed for the last six centuries for purposes of free movement.

• Distances—not as long as those in the Pacific, but which are considerable. It is approximately 2,660 kilometers from Aden to Bombay and about the same distance from Madras to Singapore. From Durban to Colombo it is 5,800 kilometers and to Melbourne 8,370 kilometers. Air travel has reduced the time between those points, but even the fastest steamship today still requires several weeks to traverse the distances. This factor highlights the importance of islands in the ocean, serving, as they do, as indispensable halting centers. Compared to the size of the ocean, the lines of communications are by no means prolific, and in the south they are particularly sparse.

• Winds. They are related to the rotation of the earth and to the distances from the Equator. North of the Equator the winds blow southwest in summer and northeast in winter; south of the Equator the directions are reversed. Not as important today, the movements of the air were vital determinants of oceanic traffic for commerce or for war in the days of sailing vessels. Moreover, these winds do exert a profound influence on the adjoining lands, being concerned with rains, with the formation of deserts and forests, with the living chores of the people, and quite often with political and military calculations.

• Most important, there is the configuration of the Indian Ocean. While the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans run generally north and south, from one to another, the Indian Ocean ends at a landmass, thus forming a gigantic bay. Overlooking this bay from the north are the countries of the Middle East, Pakistan, India, and Burma which, with the exception of Burma, have given rise to some of the oldest civilizations, densest populations, and richest materials worth struggling for and fighting for. Unlike the frozen north of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, the northern sector of the Indian Ocean is hospitable and full of lures and incentives. Both the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal have been theaters of human intercourse since times immemorial.

For purposes of intercourse, Arabia and Iran have been important. But India's role has been even more so. Her peninsula juts deep into the waters; her location is central to the east-west traffic and her coastline offers numerous halting points.

Negative Influence

Africa's influence has also been profound, but in a negative way—it acts as a barrier between the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, so that for century upon century the seafaring peoples of the west were practically cut off from the peoples of the east. It was not until 1486 that a Portuguese sailor discovered the Indian Ocean after a grueling travel of 6,440 kilometers. Five centuries have gone by since then, and while the barrier Africa has created has been toned down, it has not completely disappeared.

The eastern ramparts of the Indian Ocean, on the other hand, consist of splintered bits of land of which Sumatra, New Guinea, and Australia

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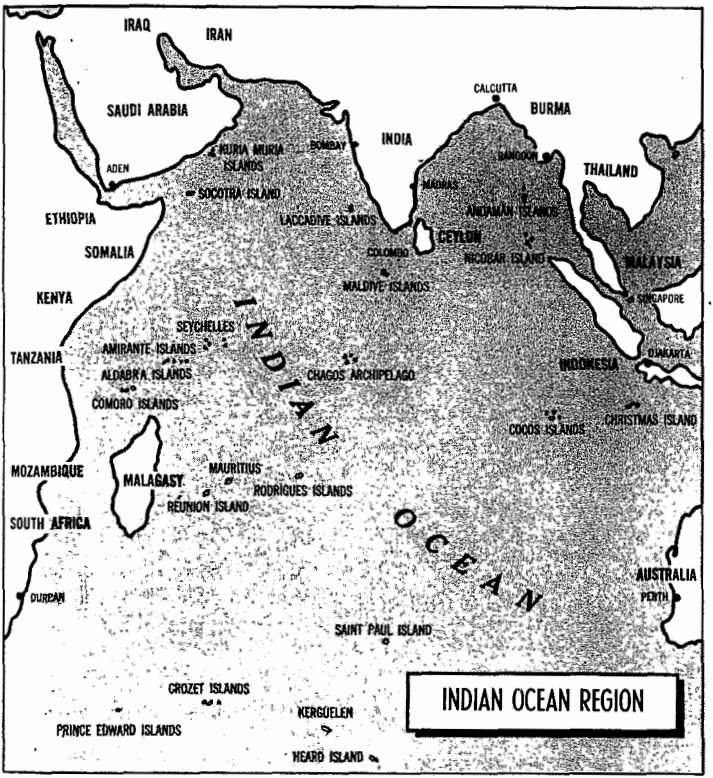

constitute the bigger samples. In between, the sea has carved its alleys through which movements have taken place throughout the ages.

Strategy, in the sense that it promotes policy with the aid of military power under organized authority, is of comparatively modern growth. But instances of ancient commanders using the Indian Ocean in military situations are not lacking. One such instance is provided by Alexander who, having battled his way through the deserts and mountains of the Middle East, found it difficult to return overland with all his troops and booty. He sent a portion of his holdings back by sea—quite a feat at that time—using a Punjab-built flotilla which sailed from the Indus to the Euphrates.

The seafaring art progressed so much that 14 centuries after Alexander's feat, the kings of south India mounted conquering expeditions across the Bay of Bengal to the regions of Indochina and Malaya.

The advent of the Portuguese toward the end of the 15th century marked the first deliberate attempt to control the Indian Ocean. They had larger and better-built ships than the Arabs, who had been in the Arabian Sea for a long period of time, and their ships were fitted with more powerful guns with longer range. They captured Mauritius, established fortifications at Goa, and controlled Hormuz and Muscat at the mouth of the Persian Gulf and Aden on the Red Sea. When Malacca in the East Indies also fell to them, the Portuguese strategy took an all-oceanic character. They also prescribed that in the application of seapower all ships follow only certain predetermined courses.

Trade Oriented

This system, which prevailed throughout the 16th century, was trade oriented and did not aspire, after conquest of territory, beyond a few islands and coastal towns. The British, who dominated the Indian Ocean for 150 years until 1939, followed as well as extended the Portuguese system. Instead of confining themselves to a few towns or islands, however, they conquered large territories in all the three continents adjoining the ocean.

India was the hub of the British Empire, which also included territories on the eastern seaboard of Africa, the Middle East, Burma, a number of Malaysian islands, and Australia. The two vital entrances into the ocean, the Red Sea and the Strait of Malacca, also rested in British hands. So secure was this "British lake" that in the war of 1914-18 only one enemy cruiser entered it—the *Emden*—and it was destroyed.

This great and mighty security system was breached during World War II by the Japanese. Sweeping south from the Home Islands, the Japanese stormed Singapore, overran Malaya and Burma, and knocked at the gates of Australia. Their dive bombers and torpedo planes sank British battleships. From their aircraft carriers their planes bombed Ceylon and Madras. From the Andaman Islands, which they occupied, their aircraft took off and bombed Calcutta.

But the Japanese sun shone no more than three years. Meanwhile, an era in the history of the Indian Ocean ended and another began. Instead of the well-knit complex of colonies and autonomous states under one authority, there arose a medley of completely disintegrated units.

Mosaic of Powers

Since 1945 the Indian Ocean region has developed a mosaic of powers, dependent as well as independent, engulfed in still larger power patterns, and conditioned, like other regions, by the revolutionary technological innovations of the post-World War II period.

Along the 9,660 kilometers of eastern and southern shores of Africa there are now seven independent states: the Republic of South Africa, Tanzania, Kenya, Somalia, Ethiopia, the Sudan, and the United Arab Republic; across the Mozambique Channel is also the Malagasy Republic. Along the coastline of Asia, more than 18,000 kilometers long, there are the 12 independent states of Saudi Arabia, Yemen, the Federation of South Arabia, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, India, Ceylon, Burma, Thailand, the Federation of Malaysia, and Indonesia. In between there are territories like Mozambique in Africa, Aden in

Asia, and Mauritius in the ocean, seeking a new political expression, while Australia and New Zealand have developed a new stature and outlook.

The gateways of the Indian Ocean also appear in a new political setting. The Suez Canal has been taken over by the United Arab Republic, Aden is in the grip of convulsions, while the Strait of Malacca is in the cockpit of a power struggle which involves many countries.

Islands of the Indian Ocean have not been redistributed as drastically as territories around it, but even these are still held by as many as seven countries:

- Britain has the largest number of the more important islands, including Kuria Muria, Socotra, Maldive, Seychelles, Mauritius, the Chagos Archipelago, Aldabra, Rodrigues, Amirante, and Christmas.
- India has the Andaman, Nicobar, and Laccadive Islands.
- France holds the Réunion, Crozet, Comoro, and Saint Paul Islands.

US Army

The efficiency of the mountain barrier which runs from Afghanistan to Burma has become questionable

- Australia has the Cocos and Heard Islands.
- South Africa holds the Prince Edward Islands.
- Indonesia, the Mentawai Islands, among others.
- Burma, the Mergui Islands and several others.

Many of these islands have played important roles in the military history of the Indian Ocean, and will undoubtedly play important roles in the future.

While old powers have shed their supremacy in whole or in part, no consolidated authority has emerged to occupy a position of dominance. At the same time, a system of power blocs has come into being which operates on a worldwide basis. Like many similar sectors of the world—the Mediterranean, the Atlantic, and the Pacific—the Indian Ocean has become an integral part of the fabric of global strategy.

Security of Region

In a general way, all the states around the ocean are interested in the security of the region, for their own stability and their ability to enjoy benefits from contact with the sea largely depend upon this security. Not every state, however, has the power to influence developments significantly in the ocean area.

In east Africa, while every state can claim some kind of a strategic advantage, only two—the United Arab Republic and the Republic of South Africa—are particularly important. Forming a crossroads between Asia and Africa, facing Europe, and located at the junction of two seas, the United Arab Republic has some unique advantages. In practically every assessment of the military situation in the Indian Ocean area, the Suez Canal must figure.

Tiny though it is, that canal is indispensable for the bulk of contacts between the east and west, the economy of the United Arab Republic, and the needs of the developing countries east of the Suez. The United Arab Republic has reasonable military strength, with her fleet of 450 bombers and fighters and two dozen warships, but the limitations of her strength are obvious.

South Africa's location is also important, and that country comes into prominence every time the Suez Canal is closed and ships have to enter the Indian Ocean via Cape Town. South Africa has about the same annual defense budget as the United Arab Republic—about 300 million dollars—but her armed forces are smaller, and are significant only for purposes of regional strategy.

The oceanic states of south Asia present some conditions strikingly different from those of east Africa. The seat of ancient civilizations, their contacts with the outside world are deep rooted. Their economy—oil, raw material, and tropical produce—has a global character. Now and again they have served as a buffer between central Asia and the Indian Ocean. In this belt lies India.

Two Groups

Countries in this part of the world may, perhaps, be considered in two groups. There are those which are members of a military alliance—Iran, Pakistan, Thailand, Australia, and New Zealand. While these countries seek to influence strategy through alliance, their own intrinsic significance may not be ignored.

Iran with her oil and location on the Persian Gulf, Pakistan facing the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea, and with her considerable resources, and Australia with more than 4,830 kilometers of coastline along the Indian Ocean are all individually significant in the strategic balance sheet.

But they, too, have their limitations. Australia is off the beaten path and is underpopulated. The other two are capable of influencing only local strategy.

The second group consists of the nonaligned states—Burma, Indonesia, and India. Burma has not developed

any considerable naval or airpower, but her western coastline covers almost the entire eastern shore of the Bay of Bengal. What is more, she is a backdoor outlet of Communist China, and presently forms a sensitive buffer between Mainland China and the Indian Ocean.

Indonesia lies at the junction of the Pacific and Indian Oceans athwart the trade routes of Asia and Australia. With her more than 3,000 islands, which are scattered in the form of an arc in both waters, she occupies a very important position. For over a decade she has been trying assiduously to build military power, which presently includes a navy of some 200 vessels. Her submarine fleet, while small, is, perhaps, the best in southern Asia.

Indonesia's ambitions to extend her influence are unmistakable, and she has been brought into conflict with Holland, Malaysia, Britain, Australia, and the United States. These ambitions are likely to remain circumscribed for the present, but it must not be forgotten that she has a population of 100 million and that her resources, not yet fully tapped, are great.

With the tongue of her peninsula jutting into the sea, India faces the ocean on three sides, has a coastline of 5,633 kilometers, and has two groups of islands—one of which is far out in the Bay of Bengal and has a southeast Asia look. By virtue of her geography and resources, India possesses a potential for naval strategy on an oceanic scale. Presently, however, her navy is small, consisting of a small aircraft carrier, two cruis-

Southeast Asia Treaty Organization Headquarters in Bangkok, Thailand

ers, three destroyers, a dozen frigates, and a number of other vessels, but no submarines. Her air force is also small.

The Andaman Islands have recently been strengthened, but, by and large, India's sea and air forces are essentially designed for defensive purposes and would hardly be effective beyond halfway to the Equator.

India is interested in the security of the Indian Ocean area both for her own development and trade—which is now 3.2 billion dollars a year—and the safety of world communications of which she is a focus. Apart from a few shipping lines which go direct to Australia via Cape Town or the Suez, there are no routes between the east and the west which do not converge at or pass over India.

British Interests

Britain's interests in the Indian Ocean are still surprisingly varied and farflung, even though there is no British Empire. A bulk of the Commonwealth people live in this area and here, too, lies a greater part of Commonwealth territory. Britain has two military alliances here—the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) and the Southeast Treaty Organization (SEATO)—and one defense arrangement, with Malaysia, in addition to a rather nebulous defensive link with South Africa.

A large number of British islands are located in the Indian Ocean, and across it or over it pass British shipping and air routes. These account for a high proportion of British trade and contacts which go right up to Hong Kong in one of the longest sweeps of communication in the world. Britain's fear of Soviet penetration into this region fills many pages of history; a similar fear is now being expressed about Red China.

Elements of British strategy in this area are made up of a string of bases in Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and the Far East; control of a number of island posts; alliances; a powerful navy which includes aircraft carriers and submarines; and a home-based strategic reserve which depends largely on air transport for mobility. Implementation of British strategy, however, has been confronted with increasing difficulties in which costs of maintenance, distances, military inadequacy, and politics all figure prominently. Since bases in Africa or along the Red Sea, which once ensured smooth entrance, are becoming untenable, there is a search in Britain for alternative outposts which could be developed and would be reliable. In this connection, the names of Seychelles, Mauritius, Aldabra (257 kilometers from Malagasy Republic), and Diego Garcia in the Chagos Archipelago (2,575 kilometers from Ceylon) have been mentioned.

US Interests

The United States has no bases in the waters of the Indian Ocean and her military power so far has been based east of Singapore. But thanks to her technological superiority, the United States has the capacity to influence the region even while remaining out of it.

Her interests in the area are considerable. Nearly one-fifth of US trade lies here; here also are a considerable proportion of her aid programs; and she has military alliances with a number of Indian Ocean countries. The security of the Indian Ocean is an important factor in US attempts to stem communism in the west Pacific and in southeast Asia.

American ability to influence In-

dian Ocean areas was demonstrated in the fall of 1962 when Red China invaded India. Great quantities of military equipment were immediately flown into Assam from stockpiles held in Europe. While this was being done, a US aircraft carrier of the 7th Fleet was on its way to the Bay of Bengal when the fighting stopped.

Critical Areas

Following the disintegration of the old political system, the Indian Ocean area has been in the throes of convulsion and upsurge. There have been revolutions and civil wars, disputes over frontiers, and armed conflicts among states. Old ideas have been dying, sometimes causing explosions.

Some particularly critical areas have emerged. One of them lies roughly around Singapore; another is around Aden.

The mosaic of land and sea that is Indonesia and Malaysia is the bridge between two oceans and two worlds, as well as between Australia and the Asian mainland, and thus is of international importance. An Indonesian attempt to demolish the Malaysian state could be a signal for the escalation of conflict on a large scale. The southern sector of Arabia does not pose a comparable threat, but the situation there will remain fraught with anxiety so long as the conflicts call for the use of military force again and again.

In another part of the region, however, there are portents of a much more serious explosion. The mountainous belt of land from Afghanistan to Burma—over 4,830 kilometers long—appears far from the Indian Ocean, and yet, but for it, the history of southern Asia would have been different. For centuries it has barricaded Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, India, Nepal, and Burma from the massive, ruthless sweep of the conquerors of central Asia. Under the new technological conditions, and after the Chinese invasion of India, the efficiency of this barrier has become questionable.

Major Routes

In the 19th century this buffer zone, beyond which lie the Soviet Union and Communist China, was called "the land frontier of the Indian Ocean." There were few lines of communications through it then, as, indeed, there are not many even today. But routes of invasion were not lacking; and strategists were wont to contemplate what routes the Soviet Union could take if she made a bid to reach the Indian Ocean. It was thought that the major routes would be:

- Through the Persian Azerbaijan to the Tabriz railhead and then via Tehran to the Persian Gulf.
- From Bandar Shah on the Caspian Sea by rail via Tehran to the Persian Gulf.
- From the Kushka railhead to Herat, Kandahar, Quetta, to the Indus River and the sea.
- From the Termez railhead by Kabul, through the Khyber Pass to Peshawar, and then to the sea.

Possibilities of advance east of Afghanistan did not come seriously into strategic equations.

All this speculation appears to have become somewhat of a piece of geopolitical fiction when, in the fall of 1962, the Communist Chinese broke through the mountains of Assam and overran in a month the entire Himalayan slope. They followed a route hardly, if ever, thought of before, even though it is the shortest from the crest of the Himalayas—which forms the Chinese frontier—to the shores of the

Bay of Bengal which lie only 805 kilometers to the south.

Serious as it was, this aggression has had even more critical, long-range repercussions. It has shown how modern weapons and techniques have practically softened natural obstacles and how they can play havoc when harnessed with explosive elements.

If Assam can be overrun, so can Burma. Against the background of the declared and often repeated techniques of Mao Tse-tung—infiltration, sabotage, occupation by force—this breach of the Indian Ocean land frontier through Assam assumes a sinister significance.

Search for Strategy

A strategic outlook concerning the Indian Ocean region must, therefore, take into account numerous factors, including the large size of the area, its heterogeneous makeup, historical developments, the impacts of technology, the emergence of critical areas, and possibilities of massive aggression from certain quarters. It must also vary from conditions of a large-scale war to those of localized conflicts. All this is baffling, a tangled skein not easy to unravel.

In a large-scale war, should one erupt, this area would be involved much more closely than ever before. A concerted drive to breach its land frontier would be made. On a scale unprecedented in history, there would be a colossal confrontation between land and seapowers, aided in each case by airpower. Comparatively immune in the past, the Indian Ocean region is likely to suffer destruction reminiscent of the havoc caused in the Eurasian Continent or in the west Pacific during World War II.

But what if total war is ruled out as an instrument of national policy?

The outstanding fact of the situation is that, unlike what prevailed before 1939, there is no single authority in the region, and, consequently, no single strategy. Instead of one strategy as before, there is today a bundle of strategies, some with meager, others with powerful resources. Quite often there is a conflict between them, making for additional confusion. Since militarily such a situation may not be tenable, is there a possibility that a single strategy might be evolved for the entire region?

Obvious Difficulties

The difficulties of this kind of approach are obvious if we recall how Britain was able to maintain her supremacy. To begin with, she enjoyed better political stability at home than her rivals, Portugal, Holland, and France. In the course of centuries she accumulated immense technical and material wealth. Between the home base and the farflung empire her control of the seas was unchallenged and lines of communications were uninterrupted.

Within the Indian Ocean region, while Portugal held Mozambique, France Madagascar, and Holland the East Indies, these and other foreign possessions were negligible compared to Britain's vast domain. Even at the dawn of the 20th century Britain had no rival in Europe. Japan and the United States were just building their naval power, China was in the throes of civil war, Russia was weak and only a landpower, and units of the empire were underdeveloped. From within as well as without British supremacy was unchallenged.

Since most of these prerequisites of ascendancy have ceased to exist and cannot be recreated, a single strategic outlook applicable to the area

would have to be ruled out. Therefore, wise strategists would have to think in terms of multiple interests and approaches, and even some friction between these now and again.

Despite this multiplicity, can some over-all consensus be evolved? I think yes, but only if certain common aims for the region are accepted:

- The human aspect. There are over one billion people living in this part of the world, mostly in underdeveloped countries, lacking in the more modern resources, and trying to make headway through conditions of turbulence. Their commonly held desire is to forge patterns of welfare and advance. It is imperative, in the interests of the region and of the world at large, that this great mass of humanity be assisted in its progress with minimum internal disturbance and maximum external security.
- All the states of the region have developed national pride to an unprecedented degree, with a strong belief in the sanctity of frontiers and a desire for noninterference by outside powers. A strategy with even a semblance of what is called colonialism is completely unthinkable. At the same time, it must be appreciated that the area cannot be closed, that it is important for the world at large, and that ultranationalistic conceptions are outdated and not acceptable.
- While accepting for the time being the idea that limited conflicts cannot be eliminated, the aim should be that these conflicts are kept localized and are not allowed to escalate into widespread, large conflagrations.
- It must be accepted that confrontation between the coastlands and heartlands of Asia is more real today than ever before, that the intervening mountain barrier has eroded. A serious effort is necessary to avoid collisions and explosions.

A strategy which accomplishes these aims will have to be broadly based, built with the cooperation of many nations, charged with a political talent of a high order, and backed by a reserve of military power. It would be idle to presume that a consensus on the above lines exists.

And yet glimpses of a community of interests are not lacking. America rushing to India's assistance is one instance. Another is a desire recently expressed in Britain to strengthen island bases in cooperation with others or to make a part of her *V* bomber nuclear force available to this region to counter Red Chinese threats. The SEATO and CENTO alliances are yet another instance.

These are, however, merely pointers; by no means are they accomplishments. A strategist must be continuously on watch to keep track of developments and to take a hand in the shaping of things in this most crucial area of the globe.