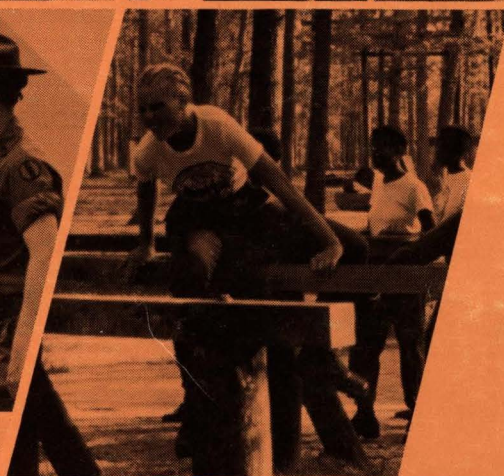


Military Review

The Professional Journal of the US Army

November 1980



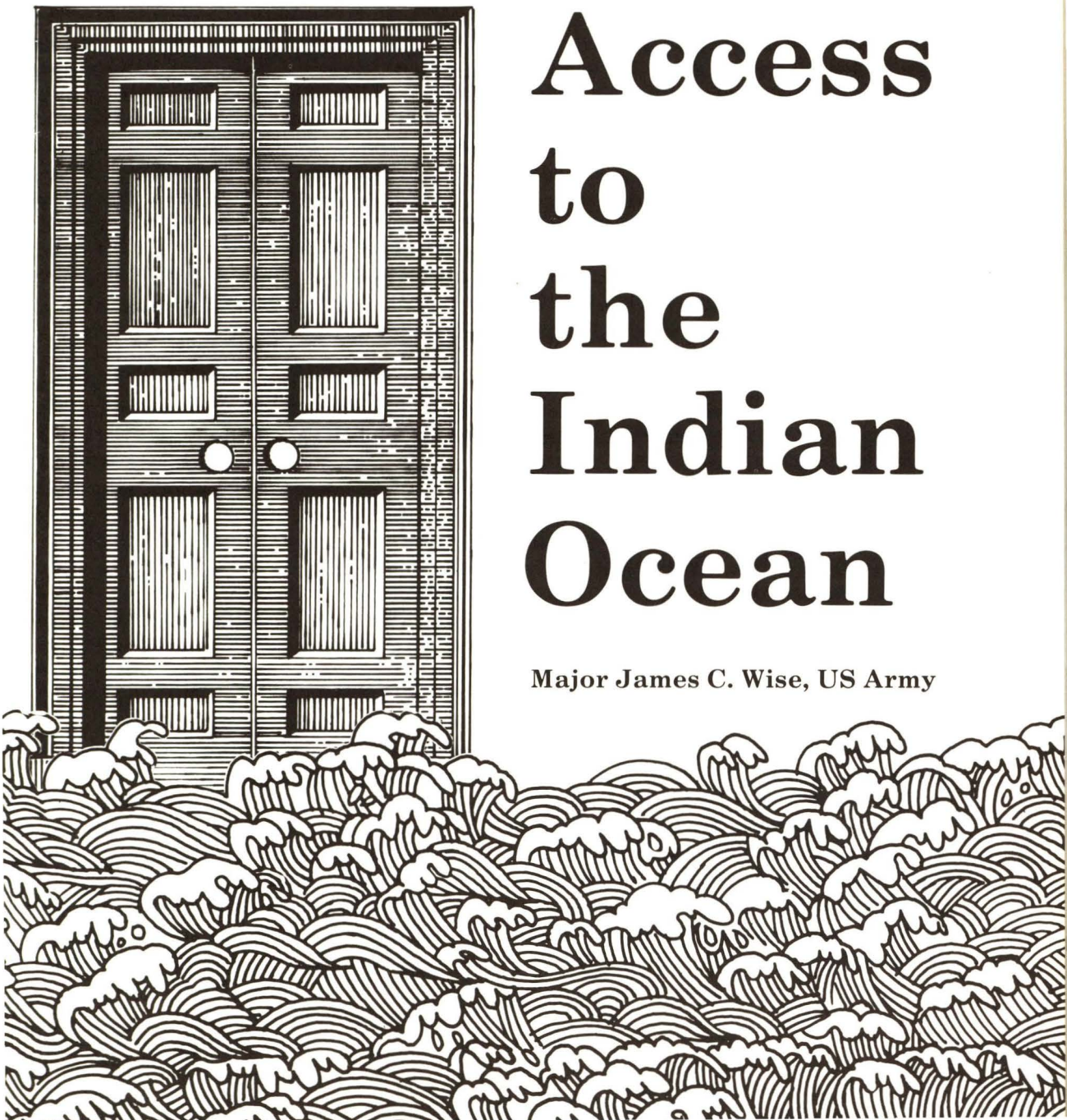
Basic Training . . . see page 47

The Indian Ocean is an area that Americans have not thought about very much. It is as if we wish it would simply go away. Nevertheless, turbulence along the littoral is at an all-time high. Superpower naval activity is at unprecedented levels. An outside military power now controls some of the land approaches to the shore. It is a good time to review the nature of this strategic arena and what it means to the United States.

Copyright © 1980 by Major James C. Wise, US Army.

Access to the Indian Ocean

Major James C. Wise, US Army



How Do You Get There From Here?

FROM the east, the Indian Ocean can be reached through the Straits of Malacca, Sunda, Lombok or Torres. It may also be entered by going south of Australia. Commercially and strategically, the Strait of Malacca is far and away the most important of these. However, deep draft vessels are finding the Lombok Strait much less hazardous. Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore share responsibility for Malacca. Lombok is controlled exclusively by Indonesia.

From the west, ships may pass through the Suez Canal and then through the Red Sea and the Strait of Bab el Mandeb to the Indian Ocean. The only other western passage is around the Cape of Good Hope.

There is a land route originating in Turkey that leads into Iraq and Iran, transits Afghanistan and reaches the Indus and Ganges River valleys through the Khyber Pass. The new Karakoram Highway leads from China's Xinjiang (Sinkiang) province to Pakistan. There is some traffic from Tibet through Nepal into India. There are minor routes from China into Burma and from China through Laos into Thailand.

Commercially, the only land route of any significance is the one from Turkey to India (excluding opium export from the "Golden Triangle"). It has a "strait" at the Khyber Pass. This route is currently unreliable because of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan.

There is a branch route that avoids Afghanistan and leads through the Baluchistan region of Pakistan to the Bolan Pass. However, poor road conditions and turbulence in Iran limit the carrying capacity of this alternative. The potential exists to reopen the famed Silk Route by

using Pakistan's Karakoram Highway to China, but this route is unlikely to have major economic significance.

Before the change of government in Iran, some goods from Japan and Korea were shipped to Iran by way of the Soviet Union's rail system. The current status of this alternative is unknown.

What Is It Like When You Get There?

There are some 33 countries on the Indian Ocean shore. They encompass a vast range of political systems and economies. The region includes the huge island-continent of Australia and the miniature island republics of Seychelles, Maldives and Mauritius; obscure countries such as Djibouti; and the most populous democracy in the world, India.

There are 17 countries in the world with a land area of more than one-half million square miles. Six of them are along the Indian Ocean.¹

Square Miles	
Australia	2,970,000
India	1,210,000
Sudan	970,000
Indonesia	740,000
Iran	740,000
Saudi Arabia	620,000

If we list the countries with populations of over 50 million people, we find that four of the 15 countries in the world that meet that criterion are on the Indian Ocean.²

Population	
India	660,900,000
Indonesia	141,600,000
Bangladesh	87,100,000
Pakistan	79,900,000

The economic powers of the region, as measured by gross national product, energy resources, industrialization and share of world trade are Australia, South Africa, Iran, India, Saudi Arabia and Indonesia.³

There is a bewildering variety of cultures along the ocean's shores. The region shares no common thread although the influence of Islam stretches from Somalia around to Indonesia. Most countries share the experience of having been colonized and of having achieved political independence only after World War II. The boundaries of most of these countries are part of their colonial heritage. There are very few that have anything resembling cultural homogeneity within their borders.

The variety of conflicts within and among these countries is equally bewildering. Almost all have had both internal and external conflict in recent times. While it is usual in the post-World War II era to observe high levels of internal conflict, the high level of state against state conflict is exceptional: Indonesia versus Malaysia, India versus Pakistan, India versus China, Iran versus Iraq, Egypt versus Israel, South Yemen (People's Democratic Republic of Yemen) versus North Yemen (Yemen Arab Republic), Somalia versus Ethiopia, Tanzania versus Uganda and, until very recently, the "front-line states" versus Zimbabwe-Rhodesia.

The region has substantial military establishments for ground warfare, but few have any significant naval capability. Only Australia and India have aircraft carriers (one each). Discounting Iran's navy, the status of which is unknown, only these two plus South Africa can be said to have "blue water" navies. India has by far the largest number of major surface combatants (31 to Australia's 12).

But the armies are impressive. There are some three and a half million men under arms.⁴

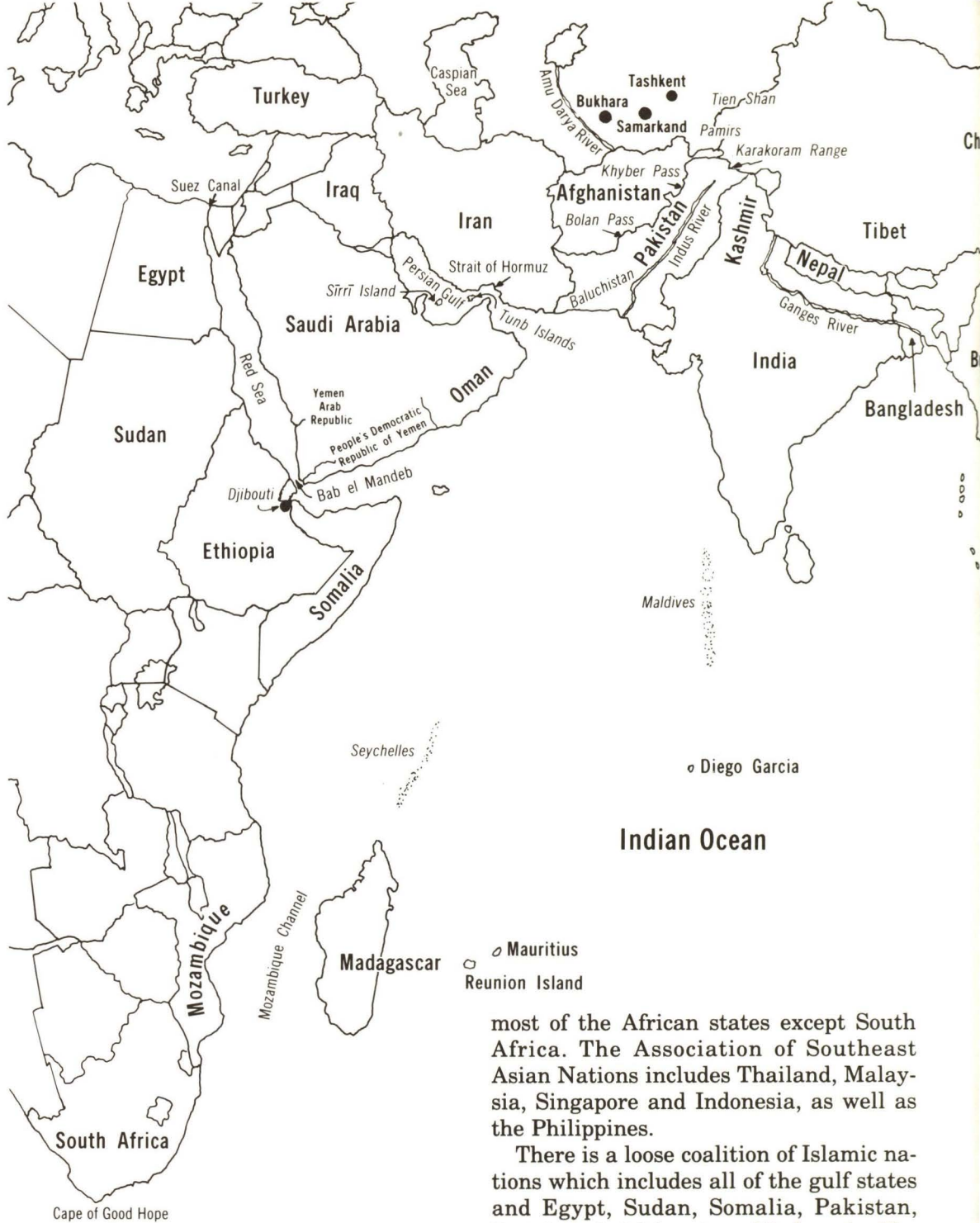
India is the only country in the region with a demonstrated nuclear capability. Australia certainly has the resources to produce nuclear weapons but has never indicated a desire to go into production.

One of the striking features of the region is how little trade the countries have with each other. On average, less than 25 percent of a country's exports go to other Indian Ocean countries. This contrasts with, for example, the Pacific region where trade within the region accounts for 60 to 70 percent of all exports.⁵ What regional trade there is consists primarily of transfers of oil from the Persian Gulf states to South and Southeast Asia and food from that area back to the gulf.

Most commerce in the Persian Gulf region necessarily moves by sea. There are two major choke points for maritime traffic within the region: the Mozambique Channel between the island of Madagascar and Mozambique and the Strait of Hormuz at the entrance to the Persian Gulf. The land routes, with the exception of the previously described route through West and South Asia, are not very important.

There is a large but unmeasured flow of goods through clandestine channels. Dhows coasting along Africa, caravans in and out of Afghanistan and Pakistan, man and mule traveling between Burma and Thailand, small boats between Malaysia and Indonesia—all of these are in the smuggler's trade. Anything illegal or taxed in one country is sure to be moving along these routes into it. The commodities include opium, hashish, gold, gems, cigarettes, cotton, wheat, automobiles, whiskey and even poultry.

There are several supranational group-



ings which provide forums for discussion and cooperation among the littoral nations, but none of them are exclusively oriented to the Indian Ocean region. The Organization of African Unity includes

most of the African states except South Africa. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations includes Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia, as well as the Philippines.

There is a loose coalition of Islamic nations which includes all of the gulf states and Egypt, Sudan, Somalia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Malaysia and Indonesia. The Commonwealth and former Commonwealth countries share important communications links that lead back to Great Britain, but they have not been very successful organizing economic cooperation.



What Is Important About the Indian Ocean?

In a few words, not necessarily in priority, what is important about the region to the United States is oil, other mineral resources such as uranium and chromium, Soviet intrusion, providing for human needs and protecting human rights. The key activity regarding these five concerns is *access* because, without access, the US objectives related to these concerns cannot be achieved.

Not surprisingly, countries within the region do not share either our interest in access or our objectives regarding these concerns. Access into the region is controlled by land and sea "choke points." The nation or nations that control the choke points control access.

The region's geographic "heartland" is Central Asia—that region bounded by the Pamir and Tien Shan mountain ranges in the east, the Caspian Sea in the west and the Amu Darya River in the south. This is the virtually inaccessible nexus of the old Silk Route, the location of the markets of Tashkent, Samarkand and Bukhara. This is where invaders have emerged time and again throughout history, most recently in December 1979.

The only real threat to Soviet control of this heartland, other than intercontinental ballistic missiles, is a resurgent Islam. And this may go a long way toward explaining why the Soviets chose to thrust themselves outward into Afghanistan.

The east-west land choke points, the Khyber and Bolan Passes, can be easily reached from this heartland. The critical maritime choke points are the Cape of Good Hope, the Suez Canal and the Straits of Bab el Mandeb, Hormuz, Ma-

lacca and Lombok.

In addition, South Africa extends some control over the Cape of Good Hope through its air force and navy. It could easily limit commercial access to the ocean but would find it difficult to prevent passage of foreign naval forces.

Egypt now controls the Suez Canal. At the Strait of Bab el Mandeb, no one nation exercises complete control. Saudi Arabia, North Yemen, South Yemen, Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, Djibouti and Somalia all have an interest and some capability. At the moment, the balance is between the French, who have a facility at Djibouti, and the Soviets, who have a facility at Aden in South Yemen.

The Strait of Hormuz, at least the approaches from the Persian Gulf to the Arabian Sea, is controlled by Iran. Iran possesses both the Tunb and Sirri Islands at the mouth of the strait and has a naval facility on the north side. While Oman controls a finger of land on the southern side, it does not possess a navy capable of challenging even Iran's reportedly sad condition. A cooperative effort by Saudi Arabia and Iraq could probably open the strait against Iranian aggression, if necessary.

The Strait of Malacca is long, narrow and somewhat shallow. Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore have a naval and air capability sufficient to police the waterway, but not to defend it. The Soviet presence at Camranh Bay provides a base from which a threat to this strait could be launched.

The Lombok Strait is entirely within Indonesian waters. It is somewhat narrow, but quite deep. Indonesia could exercise some control over the strait and the eastern approaches to it. Australia could have some effect over the western approaches.

There is very little outside military

presence in the Indian Ocean on a permanent basis. France has a base at Reunion Island, and the United States has a facility at Diego Garcia leased from Great Britain. The Soviet Union has troops on the ground, or proxies, in Ethiopia and South Yemen. The United Nations has observers in Kashmir along the cease-fire line between India and Pakistan. Until recently, Australia and New Zealand provided some air capability to Singapore.

The Soviet Union has treaty agreements with at least Iraq, South Yemen, Ethiopia, India and Afghanistan. France has an agreement with Djibouti. The United States is part of the ANZUS Pact with Australia and New Zealand. The Central Treaty Organization and the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization are no longer functioning treaty arrangements. The United States, however, does not control any of the critical geographical locations that affect access.

How Do You Guarantee Access?

I have stated that the United States needs access to the Indian Ocean to obtain oil, other minerals, to prevent Soviet intrusion, to provide for human needs and to protect human rights. Any strategy devised to ensure access must recognize that the rest of the industrialized world shares our concerns, but may never agree to coordinated action to guarantee access.

Great Britain once solved this same problem very neatly. It stationed troops at the Khyber and Bolan Passes and colonized all the rest of the choke points except Lombok and the Mozambique Channel (which were not absolutely vital at the time).

There are at least 12 littoral states with some capability to control access. Re-

cent experience shows us that the concerns of these and other littoral states are simply not the same, or at least not in the same priority, as the United States. Pakistan is much more concerned about India than it is with the Soviets in Afghanistan. Oman is more concerned about South Yemen and Iran than it is with western access to the Persian Gulf.

The United States has generally tried to deal with oil, other minerals, Soviet intrusion, human needs and human rights without dealing with the issue of access. Oil issues were traditionally left to the oil companies. Except for the Rhodesian boycott, access to other minerals was also left to businessmen. Providing for human needs has been approached both through direct assistance and through cooperation with international organizations, especially the United Nations.

Human rights issues are usually dealt with on a country-to-country basis, with a few exceptions (South Africa and Rhodesia). The US efforts in human rights have focused primarily on Indonesia, Pakistan, Iran and South Africa.

The major pre-Iran/Afghanistan crisis efforts at preventing Soviet intrusion were through military sales to Iran and North Yemen. The development of the base at Diego Garcia is expected to allow US ships more station time in the region

which allows the United States to balance the current Soviet naval activity somewhat. The possible creation of a more persistent naval presence depends mostly on ongoing efforts at obtaining permission to use facilities in Kenya, Somalia or Oman.

The officially stated concerns for the region are not those listed here. At least they were not before the embassy takeover in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The major official concerns were human rights, nuclear non-proliferation and reduction of arms sales.

It is obvious that with the possible exception of improved human rights in Indonesia, the situation has deteriorated in all of these areas in recent years. Not only that, these policies have had their greatest negative effect on the nations which control the critical choke points: South Africa, Iran, Pakistan and Indonesia (Good Hope, Hormuz, Khyber/Bolan and Malacca/Lombok).

The ongoing United Nations Law of the Sea Conference may change the rights of passage through the maritime choke points. At the moment, transit occurs under the rules for high-seas freedom of navigation. Extension of territorial waters from 3 to 12 miles has the effect of changing Malacca, Lombok, Hormuz and Bab el Mandeb from international waters to territorial waters. The rules for pas-

Soviet *Krivak* missile frigate that reportedly has been seen in the Indian Ocean



sage change from high-seas navigation rules to those of "innocent passage."

Many littoral states are justly concerned over the terrible damage to the environment that could be caused by a supertanker going aground or sinking while in a strait. They fully intend to exercise their sovereignty if for no other reason than self-defense. At a minimum, innocent passage rules could require submarines to surface. It could mean that the countries that share the strait could legally restrict the passage of any warship.

International politics and ideological concerns prevent the United States from establishing unilateral control of these choke points as Great Britain once did. There is no reason to suppose that even our NATO allies would be comfortable with exclusive US control.

US bases at the choke points would obviously assist guaranteeing access if the very touchy issue of sovereignty could be resolved. It seems that no Third World country wants a full-scale US base regularly manned on their soil. In addition, one of the only times the nations of the region reached consensus on any issue was in a UN vote in 1971 which asked for the creation of an Indian Ocean free of all foreign military, and especially nuclear, presence.

The issue of sovereignty is also involved in the suggestion that control of the straits be put into the hands of some sort of international police force. While the idea has a great deal of merit in the abstract, it is unlikely to succeed without a more cooperative attitude on the part of the littoral states, the United States and the Soviet Union.

The United States and the Soviet Union opened negotiations toward a treaty on the Indian Ocean in 1977. Given the current state of affairs, it is unlikely that this treaty will be signed anytime

soon, and the treaty would have little to do with access. It was aimed more at simply reducing presence in the area.

The United States appears to be approaching the issue of securing the choke points through bilateral relations with the key nations at the points: Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Pakistan, Oman, Iran and South Africa. Unfortunately, choke-point control has not been the top priority of our diplomacy. Even if it were, the countries do not have the same interests as we do.

For example, the United States has never, until recently, emphasized control of the Khyber and Bolan Passes in our dealings with Pakistan. Instead, all of our efforts were directed at prevention of nuclear weapon development and reducing Indo-Pakistani tensions. As another example, our assistance to Indonesia has included improving its navy, but most of our effort has been directed at human rights issues.

Summary

US interests in the region should be prevention of Soviet intrusion, obtaining oil and other minerals, providing for human needs and preventing abuse of human rights. Further, these interests can be secured only by guaranteeing access.

Access is, in turn, determined by who controls the land and sea choke points. The internal characteristics of the region are such that there is little coincidence between the interests of insiders and outsiders. Unable to establish bases at the choke points, the United States needs to at least pursue a policy that sets the control of these choke points as its highest priority.

NOTES

1 *National Basic Intelligence Factbook*, Central Intelligence Agency, Washington, D.C., July 1977.

2 *Data Sheet*, Population Reference Bureau, Inc., Washington, D.C., as cited in *Far Eastern Economic Review: Asia 1980 Yearbook*, Hong Kong, 1980, p 59.

3 Ray S. Cline, *World Power Assessment*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C., 1975, p 49.

4 Dale R. Tahtinen with John Lenczowski, *Arms in the Indian Ocean:*

Interests and Challenges, American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, Washington, D.C., 1977. (Condensed in *Military Review*, September 1977, pp 44-48.)

5 *Direction of Trade: Annual 1970-76*, International Monetary Fund, Washington, D.C., 1977. Data for 1976 are used. Percent exports for 30 countries were averaged. If total dollar value of exports is used as a measure, less than 10 percent of exports stay within the region.



Major James C. Wise is with the Readiness Group Selfridge, Army Readiness and Mobilization Region VI, Selfridge Air National Guard Base, Michigan. He received a B.A. from Stetson University, an M.A. from the University of Arkansas and is a graduate of the USACGSC and the US Army Institute for Military Assistance, Fort Bragg, North Carolina. He has served with the 8th Infantry, 5th Infantry and 101st Airborne Divisions, as well as two tours with the US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam.

Night-Vision Device Contracts Awarded. Two contracts were recently awarded for the continued production of night-vision equipment by the US Army Electronics Research and Development Command at Fort Monmouth, New Jersey. Night-vision devices provide battlefield observation during darkness and poor visibility, giving the Army the capability of literally turning night into day.

Numax Electronics (Hauppauge, New York) received one contract for night-vision sights for individual and crew-served weapons. The two sights have a common eyepiece, image-intensifier assembly, battery and housing which reduces acquisition and life-cycle costs. Only the objective lenses are different. The individual-weapons-mounted scope (AN/PVS4) provides the capability for delivering accurately aimed fire during darkness. When the scope is hand-held, it aids in night surveillance. The device is for use on the M16 rifle and the M60 machinegun.

The AN/TVS5 device is primarily designed for employment on the 106mm recoilless rifle, M2 machinegun and other crew-served weapons. It can also be used as a tripod-mounted forward observer device.

Another contract was awarded to NITEC (Nile, Illinois) for image-intensifier tubes which are used in various pieces of night-vision equipment. The image-intensifier assembly electronically magnifies low-intensity light so that it can be easily observed by the naked eye.