International Journal of Research
Available at https://edupediapublications.org/journals
e-ISSN: 2348-6848
p-ISSN: 2348-795X
Volume 05 Issue 01
January 2018

Strategic Significance of the Indian Ocean Region

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Abstract

The importance of the Indian Ocean as a geopolitical focal area is increasingly being recognized. However, the IOR is difficult to deal with as an integrated entity. Geography, combined with historical, cultural, racial, ethnic, economic, political and ideological factors, makes conceptualizing the IOR as a unified entity highly problematic. In modern times and until recently, the Indian Ocean has been viewed by external powers as primarily a maritime trade route, an extensive waterway that connects west with east. In geopolitical terms, the IOR is perceived to be a largely disaggregated oceanic and littoral region, more a collection of sub-regions than a single region.[1] However, there is a developing consensus that the Indian Ocean, as a vital component of the Indo Pacific confluence, will play a much more important role in shaping the contemporary and future international context than it has done for centuries.[2] The notion of a merged and continuous 'Indo-Pacific' has gained currency, particularly in western policy pronouncements.

Keywords- security paradigm, maritime trade, strategy, China, cosmopolitan, multipolar.

Introduction

A central factor that dominates the IOR strategic context is the sea. It is a common strategic medium for internal and external actors. The major routes of the Indian Ocean are central to extra- and intra-regional trade that is vital to the global economy. They provide the essential means for facilitating the transport of vast volumes of energy resources and other bulk cargoes, and increasingly manufactured goods[1], between West Asia, Europe, East Africa, South Asia, East Asia, North America and Australia. As the global economic and strategic balance swings towards Asia, with India, Indonesia and other Indian Ocean states emerging, and as an increasingly powerful China looks south and west, so the geopolitical focus on the Indian Ocean magnifies. Changes in Indo-Pacific regional power balances are major factors that support realists' notions of security challenges and dynamics. However, it is the potential consequences from climate change that are likely to have the greatest impact in the medium-to- longer term. They will present profound challenges to regional human, food and economic security. Many security issues come together at sea. Regional and extra-regional states are increasingly focused upon maritime security, with rising regional investment in naval and other maritime security capabilities.

Significance of the INDIAN OCEAN REGION

The Indian Ocean region consists of 30 littoral, 5 islands and 12 hinterland states

making a total of 47 independent sovereign countries having about 30 per cent of the world population. These Indian Ocean rim countries are part of three continents- Asia, Africa and Australia. Its littoral states as well as the ocean are rich in natural resources. The developed world has two interests in this region natural resources and market. The Indian Ocean holds 65 per cent of strategic raw minerals and 31 per cent of gas. It comprises 30 per cent of the world population. Natural gas is rapidly emerging as a major sector in energy security issues. Environmental scientists have raised the importance of natural gas as a future source of eco friendly energy. The region therefore has importance not only for India but also for the other major economies of the world.

The Indian Ocean regions uniqueness stems from the facts that It is the home of about two billion people. One of the largest oil producing regions of the world is located in IOR gulf region. The 10 rim countries accounts for 70 per cent of the world petroleum products. Presently, Saudi Arabia is the largest supplier of crude oil to India. About 40 per cent of sea borne crude oil traverses through the Strait of Hormuz annually. It has been estimated that the share of gulf oil exports in world export will increase from 42 per cent in 1995 to 59 per cent in 2020. About 33 per cent of the global trade and 50 per cent of world container traffic passes through in annually. According to World Bank information in 1999, the world sea borne trade was pegged at 21,480 billion ton miles. It is expected to reach 35,000 billion ton miles in 2010 and 41,800 billion ton miles in 2014. Now sea line of communication has become the arteries of IOR economy.

A Conceptual Nexus: Security, Risk and Vulnerability

The security/risk paradigm is changing (Beck 2009a; Jayasuriya 2009). According to Ulrich Beck (1999, 4), risks "have become a major force of political mobilization". It may be easier for nation-states to set aside differences and to compromise upon aspects of sovereign control in order to face mutual external threats, such as those from international terrorism and the impacts of climate change, if there is a common understanding of the shared risks. A critical issue is what 'tipping point' is necessary to convince political and other leaders that they must act. Will reactive 'crisis management' continue to prevail, with collective action only likely *after* a major disaster, as evinced in the responses to the 2004 Asian tsunami and the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks? A key challenge is to devise ways of presenting risks so that leaders can clearly understand the extent of the uncertainty, and therefore feel compelled to impose pre-emptive mitigation to reduce existential risks. Security issues such as those arising from climate change, ocean resource availability and energy affect the common interests of peoples. They combine and magnify to present massive challenges that underscore the need for effective collective security governance and policy responses. Dealing with the threats, vulnerabilities and, critically, risks to the achievement of national, regional and global objectives and interests in the IOR requires understanding, cooperation and action at sea, which must extend from and be coordinated with political action on land. The need for enhanced maritime security cooperation offers the prospect of becoming a key agency that can bind regional and extra-regional actors together to protect common interests by collectively and cooperatively treating the risks .

Changing Notions of Security

Changing the notion of what constitutes security, broadened to encompass such matters as human, environmental, economic, food and energy security, combined with perceptions of risk and vulnerability (Brauch 2011), opens the way for new, or at least largely untested, ways of approaching IOR maritime security strategic policy options. Shared perceptions of incalculable and uncontrollable risks, such as those that arise from climate change, terrorism and piracy, can provide the catalyst to generate collective and cooperative risk mitigation responses. An amenability of regional actors to consider "cosmopolitan alternatives" (Beck 2009a, 3 and 20) can result from risk treatment and mitigation considerations. A workable and widely accepted definition of maritime security is necessary to support cooperative and collective security agendas. Traditional military strategic concepts and theories remain relevant, particularly those that apply to maritime strategy, and grand and military strategy along with contemporary theorists*.

The Changing Indian Ocean Geostrategic Context

The importance of the Indian Ocean as a geopolitical focal area is increasingly being recognized. However, the IOR is difficult to deal with as an integrated entity. Geography, combined with historical, cultural, racial, ethnic, economic, political and ideological factors, makes conceptualizing the IOR as a unified entity highly problematic. In modern times and until recently, the Indian Ocean has been viewed by external powers as primarily a maritime trade route, an extensive waterway that connects west with east. In geopolitical terms, the IOR is perceived to be a largely disaggregated oceanic and littoral region, more a collection of subregions than a single region (Bouchard and Crumplin 2010, 41–44). However, there is a developing consensus that the Indian Ocean, as a vital component of the Indo Pacific confluence, will play a much more important role in shaping the contemporary and future international context than it has done for centuries (Bratton and Till 2012, 243). The notion of a merged and continuous 'Indo-Pacific' has gained currency, particularly in western policy pronouncements. The term is not precisely defined; however, it is taken to refer to a wider Indo-Pacific maritime strategic system. This system encompasses the trade routes and sea lanes that cross the Indian Ocean and extend past the Straits of Malacca and the Sunda and Lombok Straits into the South China Sea, the western Pacific Ocean to North Asia, and across the Pacific to North America. This oceanic geography embraces the most important trade routes in the world today. The Indo-Pacific idea can be played out at a high political level. It includes several of the most economically and militarily powerful nations in the world, the United States, China and India, and many important middle and smaller nations (Rumley 2013, 11). The US government (2010, 60–61), for example, declared: "The Indian Ocean region as a whole … will play an ever more important role in the global economy … (it) provides vital sea lines of communication that are essential to global commerce, international energy security, and regional stability." The IOR is now perceived as representing the "geographic nexus of vital economic and security issues that have global consequences" (Garofano and Dew 2013, ix). There are past notions of the Indian Ocean as a peaceful, largely unclaimed maritime thoroughfare. The water body has been described as presenting a "well-integrated interregional arena of economic and cultural interaction and exchange" (Bose 2006, 15) where Arab and Asian traders plied their wares. Along with

subsequent depictions of the Indian Ocean as a pre–Second World War "British Lake"#,these perceptions have mostly faded into history. And they may not have been entirely accurate. There are other historical views of an earlier region or collection of subregions woven together by economic and cultural networks and interdependencies.

For centuries, the waters of the Indian Ocean have carried religions, languages, traditions and people across thousands of nautical miles and bound them together in a 'cultural brotherhood'. It has been asserted that it was the failure of the inhabitants to record the maritime history of the region that has impacted perceptions of earlier cohesive regional entities (Cordner 2011, 70). In reality, the constant Indian Ocean 'churn' was accompanied by significant conflicts and, at times, massive and brutal bloodletting as various groups in parts of the IOR sought to gain the ascendancy (Sanyal 2016). Bose (2006, 6–7, 31, and 282) somewhat optimistically characterized the past Indian Ocean as a quiescent and peaceful "interregional arena". He argued that the peoples living along the vast Indian Ocean rim shared an "extraterritorial identity and universalist aspiration … bound in a strong symbiotic embrace" where the sea provided the common medium. This historical identity, according to Bose, offers hope for "a new cosmopolitanism in a postcolonial setting". Developing a common sense of identity and purpose in the contemporary IOR, drawing upon ancient connections despite often divisive historical baggage, presents daunting challenges. The extensive and uneven impact of colonization, combined with ancient cultures and traditions, has resulted in Indian Ocean states demonstrating a disparate mix of pre-modern and postmodern influences exacerbated by globalization. In considering prospects for future strategic cooperation building upon the pre-colonial past, key questions arise: is the nature of the IOR continuing to change? In terms of regional engagement, is the Indian Ocean a virtual 'blank canvas' open to new regional cooperative initiatives, relatively unencumbered by past associations? One factor is clear: external and internal geopolitical perceptions of the strategic importance of the IOR are rapidly changing (Bouchard and Crumplin 2010). As Kaplan (2009) put it: "More than just a geographic feature, the Indian Ocean is also an idea. It combines the centrality of Islam with global energy politics and the rise of India and China to reveal a multilayered, multipolar world."

Conclusion

The IOR contains some of the world's wealthiest nations, such as the Persian Gulf States and Australia, and many of the poorest, such as Bangladesh, East Timor and Myanmar (Burma), plus emerging nations, such as India and Indonesia. The Indian Ocean sea lines of communication (SLOCs) have become the world's most important as the highest tonnage of goods globally are transported, including more than two thirds of the world's crude oil, more than half of the container trade and one third of bulk cargo. The integrity of the Indian Ocean SLOCs is a strategic priority; the unfettered flow of maritime trade is a shared economic necessity for regional and extra-regional states, and other actors. The extensive Indian Ocean SLOCs present significant strategic vulnerabilities for regional states, such as India and Australia, and extra-regional states, such as China and Japan. This factor alone is generating renewed focus upon maritime security that underpins the changing and rising balance of power dynamics. Keeping shipping flowing through the international straits at the northwest and northeast corners of the Indian Ocean is of vital strategic importance, with more than 80 per cent of the world's seaborne trade in oil passing

e-ISSN: 2348-6848
p-ISSN: 2348-795X
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through them. Bab-el-Mendeb provides access through the Suez Canal to the Mediterranean Sea and Europe; the Straits of Hormuz is the strategic choke point.