



India is Set to Play a Key Role in the Indian Ocean

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Abstract

Today, experts throughout the world generally concur that the Indian Ocean is set to play a pivotal role in world politics. But why, in contrast to the Cold War era, is the Indian Ocean now poised to gain in importance? How should we respond? The present paper takes a further analytical glance at these questions.

There are currently at least three reasons why the Indian Ocean Region is set to become so important. Firstly, the emergence of new powers in Asia is accordingly shifting the centre of gravity in world politics. Secondly, the arms race, which is already underway, started in this region. Thirdly, there is a plurality of other challenges have an impact not only locally, but also carry wider implications on a global scale.

Given this situation, what viable ways are there for responding to it? One, most practical way to solve group problems is to elect a group leader. The logical inference to be drawn from Alfred Thayer Mahan's theory is that India is set to become the most influential player throughout the region. Hence, the present paper seeks to offer an anticipatory analysis of the ways in which India is most likely to act in the region.

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ANALYSIS

Experts generally concur that the Indian Ocean is set to gradually emerge as a pivotal factor in world politics. Thus, as Robert Kaplan points out in his book *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power* "It is my contention that the Greater Indian Ocean, stretching eastward from the Horn of Africa past the Arabian Peninsula, the Iranian plateau, and the Indian Subcontinent, all the way to the Indonesian archipelago and beyond, may comprise a map as iconic to the new century"¹.

But why, in contrast to the Cold War era, is the Indian Ocean now poised to gain in importance? What are the possible ramifications? How should we respond?

The present paper addresses the following: "The question as to why the Indian Ocean Region is set to become important"; "the question as to who should assume responsibility"; "why India's role will be pivotal."

1. Why the Indian Ocean Region is set become Important?

There are at least three reasons as to why the Indian Ocean Region is set to assume a pivotal significance in the region?

1. The Rise of the New Powers

Firstly, the emergence of the new powers is currently shifting the centre of gravity in world politics. It is a simple fact that Asian countries such as India, Southeast Asian countries, and China are currently undergoing rapid economic development. The US National Intelligence Council published a report entitled '*Global Trend 2030: Alternative World*', which pointed out, among other things, that "by 2030 Asia will be well on its way to once again become the world's powerhouse, just as it was before 1500"². These countries are fast developing economically, and they need to import energy from the Middle East now, more than ever. Furthermore, the Indian Ocean is a vital route for transporting energy sources from the Middle East to these countries. Half the world's container traffic and 70 percent of petroleum products pass through the Indian Ocean on the way from the Middle East to the Pacific³.

Enhanced military power is the concomitant to such economic developments. *The Military Balance 2014*, published in the UK by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), pointed out that "nominal defence spending in Asia has risen by 23% since 2010, from around US\$ 261.7 billion, to US\$ 321.8 billion in 2013"⁴, and "exceeded total official defence spending not just in NATO Europe, but throughout Europe, including spending by non-NATO European states"⁵. Thus, the centre of gravity in world politics is likely to shift to the Indian Ocean Region, not only economically but also militarily, as an integral aspect of this emergent Asia.

2. Competition for Influence

However, a further crucial aspect implied by the data is the regional arms race. Increases in submarine forces signalize an arms race since the main task of submarines is the execution of war and the deterrence thereof.

¹ Robert D. Kaplan, "Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power", Random House, 2011, p.x.i

² The National Intelligence Council, *Global Trend 2030: Alternative World*, (2012), p.2.

Web source: <http://www.dni.gov/index.php/about/organization/national-intelligence-council-global-trends> (accessed on 16th September, 2014).

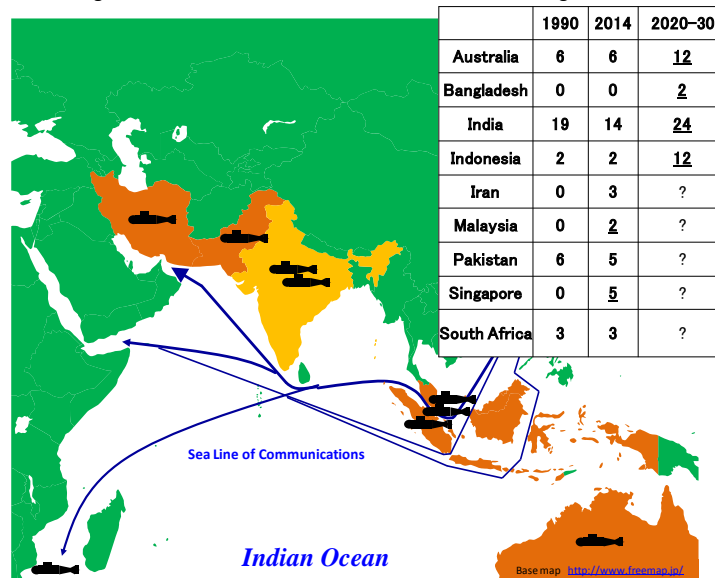
³ Robert D. Kaplan, "Center Stage for the Twenty-first Century", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 88, no. 2, March/April 2009, pp.16-32.

⁴ International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2014*, p.204.

⁵ International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2013*, pp.32-33.

And in war situation, submarines are capable of attacking SLOCs. In the Indian Ocean Region, for example, seven countries (Australia, India, Indonesia, Iran, Pakistan, Singapore and South Africa) currently possess submarines. Australia, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia and Pakistan are planning to increase their number of submarines. In addition, at least two non-coastal countries in the Indian Ocean, namely, the US and China patrol the region with submarines⁶. The increasing number of submarines in the Indian Ocean indicates that the region will be more militarized in the near future (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Number of submarines in the Indian Ocean Region



Source: The author drafted this illustration with Open Source and the International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance*

Another sign of competition among great powers may be seen in port development. Although port-development projects have a civilian purpose, there are concerns that the developer’s navy is set to use these ports as supply bases. Concern about China’s “String of Pearls Strategy” is just one such well-known example of this type of competition. At least two Chinese submarines and submarine support-ships docked at a port in Sri Lanka, in 2014.

3. Other Important Issues

Moreover, other issues in this region will also exert an impact on a global scale. Despite the fact that countries around the Indian Ocean have been undergoing increased economic development, there are still many other challenges to face, such as piracy, smuggling, terrorism, failed states, climate change, rising sea levels etc. These problems not only exert an impact locally, but also have wider, global-scale implications. For example, after the 9/11 terrorist attack on the USA people realized that Islamic extremism in this region substantially affects world politics, which cannot thus ignore what happens within the region. And if competition among the great powers escalates then competitors will use these weak points to drain their opponent. There is ample evidence suggesting that some countries support “rebels” or “terrorists” in this region. This is one such example.

⁶ China has started the patrol. “Chinese N-Sub Prowled Indian Ocean: Two Month Patrol Demonstrated Glitch-Free Deployment”, *Indian Military Review*, vol. 5, no. 4, April 2014, p.8.



Thus, there are pros and cons in being at the centre of gravity in world politics. One of the advantages is that countries within the region in question inevitably acquire power for influencing world politics. One of the disadvantages is the region potentially becoming the theatre of competition among the great powers. Thus, efforts must be directed at maintaining stability in this competition, and at establishing a system of order capable of tackling the variety of issues likely to appear.

2. Who will Take Responsibility?

One of the most practical ways of solving group problems is to choose a leader from among the group. By way of a brief historical excursus of the region an attempt is made to answer the question as to which country has the potential of becoming the most influential in the Indian Ocean Region.

Great Britain was the most influential country in the area from the 18th century through to the 1970s. How did the British acquire such a decisive influence in this region? It is important to note that its naval power facilitated its global presence. Since it was subsequently unable to maintain its naval power, Britain was obliged to withdraw from the eastern Suez during the 1970s.

In his analysis of British naval power, Alfred Thayer Mahan listed six important factors that make a country a powerful sea power. These six factors are 1) "Geographical Position", 2) "Physical Conformation (especially, the length of coast line)", 3) "Extent of Territory (especially the balance between the extent of coastal line and military defence resources)", 4) "Size of Population (for working at sea)", 5) "Character of the People", and 6) "Character of the Government"⁷. In his opinion, the British dominated the sea because they did not need to concentrate on defending land borders; they had a long coast line and sufficiently effective military power to defend it; there was a sufficiently sizeable population for working at the sea; they were able to adjust to new societies and develop these colonies: their government supported maritime expansion, and the British dominated the sea. Thus, if Mahan is right, these factors were crucial in Britain maintaining its influence in maritime affairs.

Like the British, the US became an influential country in this region, especially after the 1970s. The US Navy is the most influential naval power in the Indian Ocean. They dispatched aircraft carrier battle groups several times in order to respond to conflicts within the region, such as the third Indo-Pakistan War, the Gulf War, *Operation Enduring Freedom* after 9/11, The Iraq War etc. The US used the island of Diego Garcia as a hub to deploy military power. Thus, the US continues to be the most powerful presence within the region.

However, much like the United Kingdom's naval power, North American naval power is also on the decline. In 1990, the US Navy possessed 15 aircraft carriers, 230 "big surface combatants" with more than a 3000 ton full-load displacement and 127 submarines, which included 126 nuclear submarines. However, there has been a severe decline in numbers and, in 2014, the US Navy consists of only 10 aircraft carriers, 101 "big surface combatants" and 73 nuclear submarines. Moreover, due to budgetary limitations, the US may reduce the number even more in the near future.

The US may not be in a position to deploy many warships in the Indian Ocean Region because US also has to deal with problems in other parts of the world. Our concern is with a potential future scenario in which the US

⁷ Alfred Thayer Mahan, "Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783", Amazon kindle edition, location 558.

becomes involved in conflicts in East Europe, Middle East, Central and South America or the West Pacific and is consequently unable to deploy sufficient military power in the Indian Ocean Region.

Hence, there are two lessons to be learned from contemporary history. The first is that an influential country must be in possession of a naval power. And, secondly the fact that a new influential country will emerge in this region due to declining US power. There is sufficient reason to suspect that India has the required potential to become this new player.

3. India's Role will be Pivotal

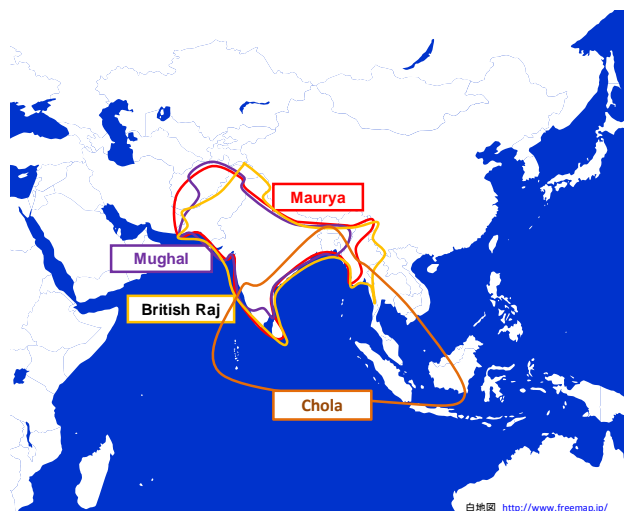
Why is India so important? There are three main reasons why India is expected to become the most important leading security provider in the India Ocean Region.

1. India has Sufficient Potential to become a Sea Power

Will India be an influential sea power? To repeat, if Mahan is right, the aforementioned six factors listed by him are: 1) "Geographical Position", 2) "Physical Conformation (especially, the length of coastal line)", 3) "Extent of Territory (especially the balance of coast line and military power to defend it)", 4) "Number of Population (for working at sea)", 5) "Character of the People", and 6) "Character of the Government".

First of all, India has the advantageous "Geographical Position" because the Indian subcontinent is separated from the Eurasian continent by high mountains. Historically, one can see the influence of this area which supports present-day India. There are only three empires that dominated most of the sub-continent in Indian history; the Maurya Empire, the Mughal Empire and the British Raj. The territories of these three empires are very similar and all their territories are based on the mountain range. The sole exception is the Khyber Pass, which was used by Alexander the Great (figure 2). The Indian sub-continent is thus one kind of island. And India can concentrate its naval forces only if it possesses the necessary will.

Figure 2: Influential area of empires in the sub-continent



Source: Satoru Nagao, "The emerging India is not a threat. Why?: An assessment from Japan" Asia Pacific Journal of Social Science, Vol. III, Jul.-Dec. 2012, pp.99-109.

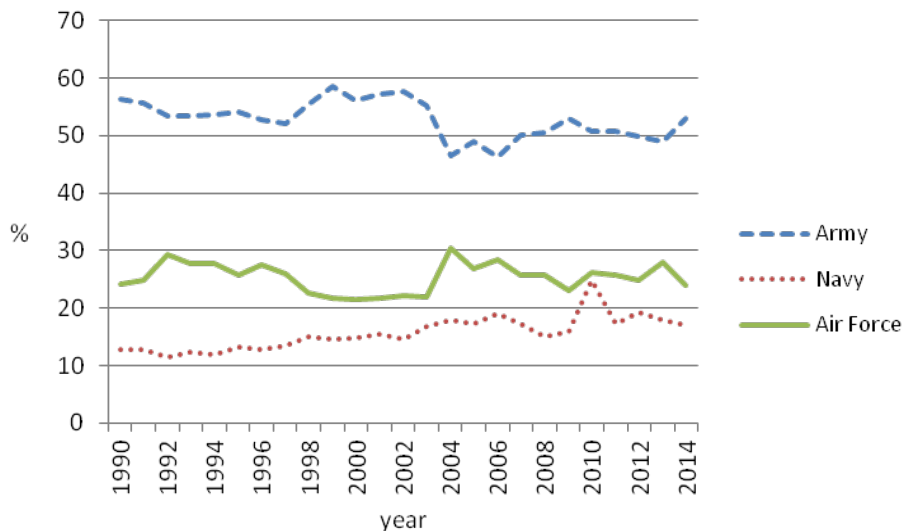
Web source: <http://www.isaps-india.org/APJSS/6.5.%20Satoru%20Nagao.pdf> (accessed on 26 August 2014).

In addition, the history of Cholas indicates another geographical advantage of India. Representatives of the Chola Empire, which was located in Southern India, made an expedition to Southeast Asia in the 11th century. The sphere of its influence was expanded along the entire coastal area off the Bay of Bengal. This historical fact is another prominent example of the India’s geographical advantage. Since India is located at the northern centre of the Indian Ocean, the country is not only able to access Southeast Asia, but also all sides of the Indian Ocean, including Middle East and East Africa.

India has “Physical Conformation” because it has 7517 (only mainland 6100) km of coastline. And India has the fifth or sixth largest population at sea, consisting of 55,000 sailors, employed in various countries. Thus, India also satisfies the condition of “Number of Population” to work at sea. Based on the history of the Chola Empire, there is also a possibility that the “character of the people” in India could be sea-power oriented. And finally, two reasons could be cited that indicate that the Indian government is interested in sea power. The report “Nonalignment 2.0: A Foreign and Strategic Policy for India in the Twenty First Century”, based on the discussion of all former National Security Advisors of India states that “presently, Indian military power has a continental orientation. Emerging as a maritime power should thus be India’s strategic objective.⁸” And India India’s defence budget has accordingly increased the share of its navy from 12.7% in 1990 to 17% in 2014 (figure 3).

Thus, according to Mahan’s theory, India has sufficient potential to become a sea power, also suggesting that India could become an influential country in the Indian Ocean Region.

Figure 3: The share of army, navy and air force in the total defence budget of India



Source: Ministry of Defence, Government of India, “Annual Report” and other Open Source

⁸ Sunil Khilnani, Rajiv Kumar, Pratap Bhanu Mehta, Lt.Gen (Retd.) Prakash Menon, Nandan Nilekani, Srinath Raghavan, Shyam Saran, Siddharth Baradarajan, “Nonalignment 2.0: A Foreign and Strategic Policy for India in the Twenty-first Century”, (2012), P.38.

Web source: http://www.cprindia.org/sites/default/files/NonAlignment%202.0_1.pdf (accessed on 16th September, 2014).



2. Naval Capabilities

Secondly, India is the only country in possession of a strong navy around the Indian Ocean Region. Currently, the Indian Navy disposes over 136 warships including two aircraft carriers, 25 big surface combatants, 14 submarines, including one nuclear submarine. In addition, India is building and planning to build about 100 warships. As a result, it is expected that India is set to possess three aircraft carrier battle groups and nine nuclear submarines by 2030.

To operate these naval forces far from their coast line and to communicate with them, India needs to collate data on the Indian Ocean and develop new communication methods for controlling fleets. Above all, India requires data on the Indian Ocean and to locate the best venue for concealing its three nuclear powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBN) with six nuclear powered attack submarines as escorts for these SSBNs by using survey ships and satellite data.

India has already started to use its own satellite communications for surface fleets and is also planning to construct very low frequency (VLF) communication stations for nuclear submarines. And India fortified their military facilities in the Andaman Nicobar islands of India to the east of the Indian Ocean, and has already set up naval staging posts and listening stations in Seychelles, Mauritius, Madagascar to the west. In addition, due to the Indo-US cooperation, India today receives sufficient naval information.

These factors demonstrate that India has considerable information on the Indian Ocean for operating these naval forces. Except for India, there is no other coastal state in the Indian Ocean which possesses such a big naval power. This kind of physical and informative power determines which country is likely to be influential.

3. International Cooperation

Thirdly, international cooperation inevitably leads to greater Indian influence since the country has a long experience of joint international military operations. The Indian Army homepage, for example, states that "The Indian Army's participation in the UN peacekeeping operations spans a period of 57 years, covering 43 UN Missions in which over ninety-thousand Indian soldiers served in various parts of the world." "Indian troops have taken part in some of the most difficult operations, and have suffered casualties in the service of the UN".⁹ And India's payment of 110 million US dollars is the second highest related to UN peacekeeping operations and troops.

Anti-piracy measures and joint exercises also indicate India's collaboration with other military organizations for achieving objectives; joint exercises are among other such examples. India organized the multilateral joint exercise *Miran*. And there are annual joint exercises or joint patrols with Singapore, Thailand and Indonesia. There have been more than 60 joint Indo-US exercises over the foregoing decade. Japan and India have also so far implemented six joint exercises.

Military capacity-building measures are also one form of international cooperation. Many foreign students from coastal countries such as Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Myanmar, Singapore, Oman etc., study at various military schools in India. India has trained fighter pilots and land crews of the Malaysian Air Force. It

⁹ Official website of the Indian Army, *Web source*:

<http://indianarmy.nic.in/Site/FormTemplate/frmTempSimple.aspx?MnId=e40A2YG3r3hzP0xjK/4HmA==&ParentID=g+ZAdzxF3BlnESzGMYNuQg==&flag=tq4Ra01CaeT2XFy40ByUXQ==> (accessed on 16th September, 2014).



has given and is planning to give patrol vessels and planes to Maldives, Seychelles and Mauritius with relevant training courses.

Why is international cooperation so important for an influential country? When we think about who should be the leader of a group, those living in democratic countries emphasize that leaders should be elected by their supporters. Leaders are supposed to care about the supporters they lead. Any influential country that approaches problems by using multi-national cooperation may face a similar situation. They need to care about the supporting countries. The experience gained through several multi-national operations, such as the PKO, contributes to acquiring the know-how for India to become an influential country in this region.

4. Conclusion

As mentioned above, although the Indian Ocean is poised to become the centre of gravity in world politics, there are still many problems which need to be addressed. To deal with these problems, the influential country in question must assume responsibility. Since US power is on the decline, another country is likely to emerge as influential within this region in the future. There are three major factors that argue in favour of India emerging to fill the gap opened by US decline. It has the potential of becoming a sea and naval power and it has long experience of international cooperation.

Hence, platforms such as the 'India Ocean Rim Association' have major potential in this context. One of the tools for dealing with problems democratically is to hold conferences facilitating the exchange of opinions and promoting negotiations. The present paper argues that international associations, such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association, will have greater power and practical space to negotiate and tackle problems in the near future.

The question is whether India has the will to take initiatives and bear responsibilities within this region? If India does, indeed, have such a will, then it must demonstrate a clear future-oriented plan for the maintenance of peace, stability and freedom in the navigation of Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs) in the Indian Ocean. Furthermore, its initiatives will be of key importance in the region. And, if this is the case, it would make sense for many countries, including Japan, to support India politically, technologically and financially such that we may hope for a further deepening of cooperation.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.



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