

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

The Indian Ocean as a territorial zone has for many years been little discussed as an integrated area of strategic importance. By comparison with the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, the Indian Ocean has been generally ignored. Two broad developments which occurred in the seventies and eighties have ended the obscurity attached to the Indian Ocean zone and have enhanced the attention and importance focussed on this area as a stage for the interplay of international politics and strategy. The gradual withdrawal of the British Royal Navy from an area that was once regarded as its sole preserve and the emergence of the Soviet Union as a naval power in the Indian Ocean are two factors that combined to inaugurate a new era in the Indian Ocean's long, complex and turbulent maritime history.

An added factor that has served to intensify the importance of the Indian Ocean zone has been the increased American naval presence arising from the Cold War and the consequent competition for power and influence between the United States of America and the Soviet Union.

One outstanding feature of the history of the Indian Ocean is that at no time did a single littoral country ever exercise exclusive power across its face. During the period under study the Ocean was unique among the great seas of the world in counting no major global naval power on its shores. Historically, when the Ocean had been dominated, it has been dominated by external naval powers intruding through its seaways. At various points in history, important trading empires have arisen around the Ocean, but whether they were based in the west, on the Persian Gulf or Red Sea, in the center on the Indian coast, or in the islands of the East, it was not until the arrival of the Portuguese and, later, other European powers that a single maritime state could impose its policies on both the eastern and western zones of the region. This European naval hegemony lasted for over four and a half centuries, and although the period of imperialism is now at an end it would be illusory to assume that the patterns of trade and national relationships that were established during that period have come to a similar dramatic end.

In the course of this study, various aspects of the Indian Ocean have been studied. Chapter One constitutes the introduction to the study in which a general framework and the organisation of the study is laid out. In this chapter, the research methodology and the limitations of the study are stipulated. Chapter Two constitutes the foundation for the rest of the study dealing with the factors of history, geography and politics which continue to determine the various configurations and political positions of the littoral countries. Chapter Three focuses on the various elements constituting the geography relating to the Indian

Ocean and also examines the geopolitical factors that have shaped the Indian Ocean into an arena for political, naval and economic rivalry in the decades of the Cold War following the end of hostilities associated with the end of the Second World War. Within the framework and constraints of this chapter, an effort was made to identify the peculiar characteristics shaping the geopolitical significance of the Indian Ocean. The strategic importance of the Indian Ocean is brought out in Chapter Four. Within the scope of this chapter, the various elements, both political and economic, which have enhanced the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean within the context of the superpower rivalry between the Soviet Union and the United States, were examined. In Chapter Five, the various dimensions of superpower competition and conflict in the Indian Ocean were examined. These focused primarily on the political, economic and strategic dimensions. Chapter Five also provided the basis for examining various strategic concepts and doctrines in the context of East-West rivalry. In Chapter Five, the geographical contexts and historical background of the superpower rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union were also analysed. The origins of the interests of the superpowers in the Indian Ocean area were also briefly detailed.

In discussing the evolution of naval power in the Indian Ocean, the first factor that has to be taken into account is the enormous size of the Indian Ocean. In terms of area, the Indian Ocean measures 17 million square miles and is smaller than the

Atlantic or the Pacific but much larger than the Mediterranean. (This is on the assumption that the Antarctic Ocean is excluded from the Indian Ocean area.) Two factors explain why the Indian Ocean was not dominated by any one single power until the nineteenth century. One was the sheer size of the Indian Ocean and the other was the fact that none of the littoral societies and states could be perceived as being predominantly maritime. Consequently, the peoples and countries of the Indian Ocean were subjected to intrusions and pressures overflowing from the Mediterranean, the Atlantic and the Pacific Ocean areas.

According to one historical analysis, it is possible to recognise in the historical time frame of the Indian Ocean three great periods or eras when the Mediterranean, the Pacific and the Atlantic were dominant. According to this analysis, "Historical divisions, however, are more generally reduced to only two: 'pre-Gaman' and 'post Gaman'. Vasco de Gama's circumnavigation of South Africa in 1498 being regarded as the dividing line between the ancient and the modern histories of the Ocean."¹

From the geographical perspective, the physical configuration of the Indian Ocean clearly shows that it is made up of two distinct maritime zones: a 'western sea' on the left of the Indian Peninsula, and an 'eastern sea' on the right. Maritime rivalries are observed early in the western sea, with the

¹ Auguste Toussaint "Shifting Power Balances in the Indian Ocean" in The Indian Ocean: Its Political, Economic, and Military Importance. Edited by Alvin J. Cottrell and R.M. Burrell, New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973 p.3.

Mediterranean influence uppermost and India's role being largely passive. The history of maritime rivalries have been long and intensive in the Indian Ocean area beginning with the Egyptians and the Phoenicians to the Soviet Union and the United States.

Within the decade 1968-75, the geopolitically important Indian Ocean fell squarely within the primary strategic concerns of the United States. Although the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff recommended a joint U.S. - U.K. base in the Indian Ocean in 1968, the Department of the Navy had its eyes on the world's third largest ocean since the early 1960's, and even before. The long-range planners in the office of the chief of naval operations formulated a future contingency plan for the Indian Ocean as soon as the British incapability for a prolonged presence in the ocean became evident in the aftermath of the Suez fiasco (1956).

Known also as the 'strategic island concept', the plan aimed to secure for the United States a preeminent position in the Indian Ocean area through a strong naval presence secured by firm control of the ingresses and egresses of the vital sea-lanes. Establishing bases on certain strategically located, sparsely populated islands was seen as a preferable alternative to securing bases on the populated shores, which tended to generate 'problems.' The island of Diego Garcia was selected as an ideal site by virtue of its strategic location and geographic characteristics.

The British Indian Ocean Territory was itself an American concept, designed primarily to secure the strategically located

islands for future military uses without encumbrances. The British association, moreover, was seen as offering legitimacy to U.S. intrusion into an area that long had been considered a British lake.

The U.S. Congress rejected the navy's initial request for a base on Diego Garcia as unnecessary. In 1971, however, a pared down proposal for an 'austere' communications station on the island was approved. The shift had come in response to the changing political climate of the area. Growing unrest in Ethiopia threatened the security of the navy's major communications facility at Asmara, and the search for a safer alternative led to the isolated and more stable British-owned Diego Garcia.

A chain of fortuitous development - increasing Soviet activity in the ocean, the Arab-Israeli War of October 1973, the oil embargo that followed the war, and the prospective opening of the Suez Canal - offered the Department of Defense a set of "shifting rationales" for expanding facilities at Diego Garcia. Congressional approval was soon obtained for upgrading the previously approved communications facility into the present status of a multipurpose logistics-cum-communications base.

The United States stands today at the crossroads with respect to its Indian Ocean strategy.

In the course of the foregoing study, the following themes have emerged: The Soviet entry into the Indian Ocean was a natural outcome of its recently acquired 'blue water' capability.

The Soviet presence in the Indian Ocean is also logical in terms of its political, economic, and strategic interests in the region. Soviet activity in the ocean has expanded with the growth of its overall naval capability and its capability for projecting power.

The Soviet presence and capability in the Indian Ocean have remained considerably less than those of the United States. The U.S. Navy's overemphasis on ship-days as a measure of respective naval capability and presence is faulty, inasmuch as it neglects certain important considerations. A more valid means of measurement would include such factors as port calls, tonnage, force characteristics, and underway replenishment capability. Such factors would show that the United States has maintained its lead over the Soviets in both terms of presence and capability in the ocean. When the combined Western presence (the United States, Great Britain, and France) is considered, the relative Soviet presence and capability appear even lower, and by a substantial margin.

The attempt to overestimate the so-called Soviet threat must be viewed in the light of the belief that congressional appropriations increase in proportion to the projected threat from the Soviets, that is, the more potent the threat, the greater the allocations. In the process of making its case, the Department of Defense tends to ignore the political costs to the United States of differing third-party perceptions of the respective U.S. and USSR capabilities.

The apprehension of the possibility of a Soviet threat to the sea lanes, particularly a disruption in the flow of vital oil, has been unfounded. The Soviets have neither the capability nor the gumption for such adventure. The possibility of a disruption of oil flow to the West by a cutoff at the oil heads is much greater than that of interception by the Soviets at sea.

Although the Soviet capability and buildups are limited, the Soviet presence in the Indian Ocean has reduced the scope and extent of the U.S. freedom to resort to show of force or gunboat diplomacy. The United States no longer enjoys the naval superiority that ensured its unchallenged intervention in Lebanon (1958) or in the Dominican Republic (1965).

The American naval presence in the Indian Ocean undoubtedly provides a credible and visible deterrent to any future oil embargo. The stated U.S. decision to intervene militarily in the case of a calamitous oil embargo still remains a potent force. In the present context, however, such an intervention would be prohibitively costly in both terms of immediate losses and long-term repercussions.

The Nixon doctrine assigned a considerably increased role for the navy in the development of U.S. Indian Ocean strategy.

The United States has secured a position of influence in the lands that control the ingresses and egresses of the ocean. The recent rapprochement with Egypt ensures U.S. influence over the Suez Canal route to the Indian Ocean. The Cape route, the Straits

of Malacca, and the strategic Gulf of Hormuz were earlier brought under increased U.S. influence through closer relations with South Africa, Australia, Indonesia, Iran, and Saudi Arabia.

U.S. Indian Ocean policy has been largely determined by the Department of Defense, a fact that has led to charges of a militarized Indian Ocean policy. Congress itself was kept in the dark concerning the nature, extent, and cost of the creation of BIOT and about the nature of developments surrounding Diego Garcia. Even the threats that were cited as justification for the proposed expansion of the; communications facility on Diego Garcia were not properly revealed to Congress. The Department of Defense successfully used shifting rationales to circumvent the reservations of some of the congressional members.

The development of U.S. strategy in the Indian Ocean also raises questions concerning the nature of departmental bargaining. The sudden switch of the Department of State from a position of low profile and coolness toward expansion of Diego Garcia to one of support of the Defense Department's request for expansion raises the speculative possibility that Secretary of State Henry Kissinger traded off his reservations for Defense Secretary James Schlesinger's support of strategic arms limitation talks.

Fundamental to a U.S. Indian Ocean strategy for the future are the concerns and interests of peoples in the area. The U.S. buildup involves not only current money cost but also forces and factors of a more general nature that will shape the future. The buildup of an Indian Ocean fleet will escalate the power rivalry

and will pave the way for the expenditure of billions of dollars in newer units and millions of dollars in annual operating costs.

Although differences in the private and public responses of foreign nations to the U.S. buildup on Diego Garcia are understandable, U.S. justification of its expansion on the basis of such 'private' encouragement appears unhealthy in the aftermath of the Vietnam experience.

U.S. identification with the littoral aspirations for a zone of peace offers substantial advantages for long-term political and diplomatic gains. Such an identification restores the traditional U.S. leadership for peace and peaceful developments of the region. The concept of the zone of peace does not contravene the traditional rights of freedom of the seas and the right of innocent passage. In fact, the concept; offers a workable model for future U.S. negotiations relating to other oceans.

Opportunities for reducing the intensity of great-power rivalry are presented in the current situation in the Indian Ocean. By exercising leadership, the United States can seize those opportunities for its advantage. A comprehensive naval arms limitation agreement appears an ideal and essential means for securing U.S. and world interests in the Indian Ocean. The United States has lost some diplomatic and political ground by its failure to reciprocate the expressed Soviet willingness for an Indian Ocean arms limitation agreement. The present is an opportune moment for recovering that ground by taking initiatives leading to such an agreement. Such an agreement offers the United States

the best course of action to maintain freedom of the seas, secure global sea-lanes, ensure access to raw materials, and, above all, preclude escalation of an arms race that will cost the world billions of dollars in unnecessary armaments.

While negotiations for an agreement are under way, the United States can gain additional diplomatic and political leverage by unilaterally issuing an Indian Ocean military posture statement. In the absence of such efforts, the Indian Ocean will become the center of intensified great-power rivalries and the scene of ever-increasing deployments of military might, possibly leading to a calamitous military confrontation.