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**CROUCHING TIGER, HIDDEN DRAGON:  
THE INDIAN OCEAN AND THE  
MARITIME BALANCE OF POWER  
IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**

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## ABSTRACT

The Indian Ocean since ancient times was an important geo-strategic arena of inter-regional unities held together informally by trade winds and diplomatic relations. In the geographical and historical convergence of East and West, Asians, Africans and Europeans interacted with one another over a period of many centuries, participating in a sophisticated structure of commerce and politics underpinned by the system of monsoons.

It was therefore only a matter of time before the ‘balanced’ geography of the Indian Ocean gave rise to balances of power. But when exactly, and how, did the geo-strategic, inter-regional character of the Indian Ocean translate into maritime balance-of-power considerations?

This paper explores the historical roots and changing dynamics of that geopolitical equation. In so doing, it evaluates the evolving matrix of intra-regional and extra-regional players as well as the comparative importance of varieties of power in the Indian Ocean arena: ‘hard’ or ‘soft’, ‘state’ or ‘non-state’, ‘land-based’ or ‘seaborne’. The paper then examines some of the long-term implications of these changing balances for the future of the region—especially in view of the present, concurrent rise of India and China.

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**CROUCHING TIGER, HIDDEN DRAGON:  
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IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE<sup>1</sup>**

*Unlike the Atlantic and the Pacific, merging at their extremes into the polar seas, this is an entirely tropical ocean; to mention it calls up a vision of palm-fringed islands and lagoons where rainbow-hued fish dart amid the coral. That is the tourist-brochure image, but behind it lies the Indian Ocean of history—a centre of human progress, a great arena in which many races have mingled, fought and traded for thousands of years.*

- Richard Hall, *Empires of the Monsoon* (1996)<sup>2</sup>

The geography of the Indian Ocean, the world's third largest ocean, bears resemblance to a gigantic water basin. It is framed by the continental land masses of Africa (to the west), Asia (to the north), Australia (to the east), and Antarctica (to the south). At the same time, it is connected to the world's other oceanic divisions via several strategic waterways: the Cape of Good Hope and the Red Sea, on the western side; and the funnel-like Straits of Malacca, leading to the Indonesian and Philippine Archipelagos, opening out to the South China Sea, on the eastern side. Situated prominently in the middle, the Indian subcontinent has broadly dominated the ocean's northern waters, further dividing them into the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal. The final geographical shape and size of the Indian Ocean have largely depended upon the extent to which one might be prepared to incorporate a separate Southern Ocean, stretching towards the Antarctic.<sup>3</sup>

While some of these precise geographical boundaries have remained a matter of debate, there is hardly any dispute over the historical evidence pointing to the Indian Ocean as the world's first 'cosmopolitan' maritime arena. Indeed, the earliest networks of seaborne commerce and cross-border interaction were made directly possible by the compact and closed character of the Indian Ocean, with its narrow entrances and exits,

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<sup>1</sup>An earlier draft of this paper was presented at the inaugural joint conference organized by India's National Maritime Foundation and Singapore's S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, held in New Delhi on 11-12 October 2007. The overall theme of the conference was 'Regional Security and the Role of Maritime Forces in the Indian Ocean Region'.

<sup>2</sup>R. Hall, *Empires of the Monsoon: A History of the Indian Ocean and its Invaders* (London: HarperCollins, 1996), p. xxi.

<sup>3</sup>F. A. Vali, *Politics of the Indian Ocean Region: The Balances of Power* (New York: Free Press; London: Collier Macmillan, 1976), pp. 24-30; cf. V. L. Forbes, *The Maritime Boundaries of the Indian Ocean Region* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1995).

vast and varied hinterlands, as well as climatic conditions favourable to both coastal and high-seas navigation. Unlike the Mediterranean (always controlled by people of its coasts), or the Atlantic ('created' by people from one part of its coasts), or the Pacific (as a concept constructed only fairly recently by people from very distant lands), the Indian Ocean since ancient times was an important geo-strategic arena of inter-regional unities held together informally by trade winds and diplomatic relations. In the geographical and historical convergence of East and West, Asians, Africans and Europeans 'mingled, fought and traded' over a period of many centuries, participating in a sophisticated structure of commerce and politics underpinned by the system of monsoons.<sup>4</sup>

It was only a matter of time before the 'balanced' geography of the Indian Ocean gave rise to balances of power. But when exactly, and how, did the geo-strategic, inter-regional character of the Indian Ocean translate into maritime balance-of-power considerations? In order to redress perceived imbalances caused by the emergence of dominant players and hegemonic powers, did such 'balance of power' take the form of associative partnerships and collaboration, or more adversarial posturing and conflict?<sup>5</sup> This paper explores the historical roots and changing dynamics of that geopolitical equation. In so doing, it evaluates the evolving matrix of intra-regional and extra-regional

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<sup>4</sup>K. McPherson, *The Indian Ocean: A History of People and The Sea* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 1-15; A. Das Gupta and M. N. Pearson (eds.), *India and the Indian Ocean 1500-1800* (Calcutta; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 8-13; P. Beaujard, 'The Indian Ocean in Eurasian and African World-Systems before the Sixteenth Century', *Journal of World History*, 16:4 (2005), pp. 411-65; and S. Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 4-22. For 'classic' overviews of Indian Ocean history, see A. Toussaint, *The History of the Indian Ocean* (trans. J. Guicharnaud; London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1966); K. N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); and more recently, M. N. Pearson, *The Indian Ocean* (London; New York: Routledge, 2003). The original meaning of 'monsoon' in Arabic (*mawsim*) is 'season', a term used by sailors from earliest antiquity to denote the sheer regularity and steady rhythms of the trade wind cycle, blowing half the year from the southwest (April to October) and then alternating from the reverse northeast direction during the other half of the year (November to March). From the Arabic word, the Portuguese would derive *moncao*, the Dutch *monssoon*, and the English *monsoon*.

<sup>5</sup>General historical treatment of the 'balance of power' concept would include M. Sheehan, *The Balance of Power: History and Theory* (London; New York: Routledge, 1996); and S. J. Kaufman, R. Little, and W. C. Wohlforth (eds.), *The Balance of Power in World History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). For a crisp exposition of the 'balance of power' in the Asian context, see M. Leifer, 'Truth about the Balance of Power', in K. W. Chin and L. Suryadinata (eds.), *Michael Leifer: Selected Works on Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2005), pp. 152-54. In the view of the late Michael Leifer, Emeritus Professor of International Relations at the London School of Economics, 'balance of power' refers to a situation—the distribution of power—as well as a policy of preventing the excessive dominance of one or more states that would monopolize the terms upon which regional order was made and maintained.

players as well as the comparative importance of varieties of power in the Indian Ocean arena: ‘hard’ or ‘soft’, ‘state’ or ‘non-state’, ‘continental’ or ‘maritime’. The paper then examines some of the long-term implications of these changing balances for the future of the region—especially in view of the present, concurrent rise of India and China.

### **The Discovery of Equilibrium**

From ancient times through to the early modern period, the history of the Indian Ocean and its peoples was one characterized by long stretches of collaboration that led to the peaceable exchange of commodities and culture, with only occasional naval conflict directed towards the domination of maritime trade. The latter would arguably include episodic naval rivalries, such as emerged during the eleventh century between the Chola rulers of southern India and the ‘Indianized’ kingdom of Srivijaya in Sumatra; and the spectacular naval expeditions of Admiral Zheng He during the fifteenth century, which expanded the Chinese maritime sphere of influence westwards, for a brief and shining moment, as far as the shores of Arabia and Africa. But there was hardly any maritime balance of power to speak of, whether in terms of associative partnerships or adversarial posturing that revolved either around a *Pax Indica* or a *Pax Sinica*.

Naval rivalries did emerge episodically out of long and largely peaceful centuries of Indianization in the pre-modern Indian Ocean arena. Such was the case during the eleventh century when southern Indian and Sri Lankan dynasties embarked on ambitious overseas naval campaigns following maritime trade disputes with kingdoms in Bengal, Burma and Sumatra.<sup>6</sup> Between 1025 and 1050, the Hindu kingdom of the Cholas was transformed into a raiding naval power capable of challenging the maritime hegemony of the Buddhist kingdom of Srivijaya, which had dominated seaborne commerce between India and China through its control of the Malacca and Sunda Straits. Although the Chola invasion of Southeast Asia proved to be unsuccessful in the end, it served to dislocate Srivijayan authority and enable the formation of new Indianized successor states (such as Singhasari and Majapahit) based upon intensive agriculture rather than maritime trade. Having said that, and probably more important than the naval campaigns from southern

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<sup>6</sup>McPherson, *The Indian Ocean*, pp. 89, 101.

India, what ultimately decided the fate of Srivijaya was the extra-regional presence of Chinese shipping. The growing incursions of Chinese junks, especially during the twelfth century when the Southern Sung looked to develop trade with western Asia, significantly reduced the importance of indigenous shipping and the influence of local rulers upon the flow of maritime trade. The effect was to disperse authority throughout maritime Southeast Asia and raise the profile of local ports with independent access to the Malacca Strait.<sup>7</sup>

The naval expeditions of Admiral Zheng He, on the other hand, have been characterized as part of a more ambitious extra-regional attempt by Ming China to impose a *Pax Sinica* over the Indian Ocean world. In tandem with the military expeditions into Yunnan and Vietnam, the maritime expansion ordered by the Yong-le Emperor was calculated to bring more distant regional polities to submission, obtain recognition of suzerainty, and thus dominate East-West commerce. Like the Portuguese voyages a century later in the opposite direction, the Ming voyages were intended to control port-cities and trade routes—nodes and networks—as a means of economic exploitation.<sup>8</sup> The Ming voyages would certainly inspire evocative and grandiloquent expression, in words and phrases ascribed to the ‘Admiral of the Western Seas’ himself:

We have traversed more than one hundred thousand *li* of immense water-spaces and have beheld in the ocean huge waves like mountains rising sky-high, and we have set eyes on barbarian regions far away hidden in a blue transparency of light vapours, while our sails,

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<sup>7</sup>P. M. Munoz, *Early Kingdoms of the Indonesian Archipelago and the Malay Peninsula* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 2006), pp. 165-67; N. Tarling (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, vol. 1: *from Early Times to c.1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 174-75. Also see G. B. Souza, ‘Maritime Trade and Politics in China and the South China Sea’, in Das Gupta and Pearson (eds.), *India and the Indian Ocean*, pp. 317-30.

<sup>8</sup>For critical revisionist analysis of the Ming voyages, see G. Wade, ‘The Zheng He Voyages: A Reassessment’, *Asia Research Institute, Working Paper Series No. 31* (October 2004). Other fresh perspectives include C. Salmon and R. Ptak (eds.), *Zheng He: Images and Perceptions* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2005); and S. K. Church, ‘The Giraffe of Bengal: A Medieval Encounter in Ming China’, *The Medieval History Journal*, 7:1 (2004). The latter chronicles the development of diplomatic relations between China and Bengal by sea, culminating in the presentation of a giraffe to the Ming court in 1414. This event underscored the cosmopolitanism of the Yong-le period: the internal desire to assimilate the foreign into the Chinese tribute system, coupled with the outward fascination and relative openness of China toward the ‘other’. Whereas the foreign relations that China conducted by sea have been traditionally studied in isolation from those conducted over land, this particular gift cemented a maritime friendship that led to China’s landward involvement with a third country, when China intervened against Jaunpur on Bengal’s behalf in order to stop a land invasion.



loftily unfurled like clouds day and night, continued their course [as rapidly as] a star,  
traversing those savage waves as if we were treading a public thoroughfare.<sup>9</sup>

Yet the seven voyages of Zheng He constituted a fairly benevolent seaborne ‘proto-colonialism’ since there was no real control over people or land; the Ming treasure fleets provided imperial China with a capacity to merely influence politics and derive short-term economic advantage. When the last of the voyages came to an end in 1433, China retreated into centuries of splendid (and typically land-bound) isolation.<sup>10</sup>

As such, the ‘swimming dragons’ of the Ming armadas drew Indian Ocean states such as the Malacca Sultanate only momentarily into the protective embrace of imperial China’s tribute system, before China itself became a ‘Hidden Dragon’.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps more significant was the fact that the Ming voyages, in staving off the impending hegemony of Siam over the Malacca Strait, prepared the way for Malacca’s own ascendancy within a wider fraternity of Muslim port-cities, extending from the Middle East and South Asia to Southeast Asia and East Africa. The elite culture of these Islamic maritime emporia was directly opposed to the hierarchical Hindu-Buddhist mixture of great agrarian states such as Majapahit in Java, which were soon challenged by the power, wealth and aspirations of the new port-based mercantile communities.<sup>12</sup> Even then, the emergent mercantile

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<sup>9</sup>From a tablet erected by Zheng He, Chang-le, Fujian, 1432, quoted in L. Levathes, *When China Ruled the Seas: The Treasure Fleets of the Dragon Throne, 1405-1433* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 17. Louise Levathes’ more traditional narrative furnishes much else besides, being a well researched, elegantly illustrated and engagingly written account of the Ming voyages.

<sup>10</sup>A Eurocentric analysis of the Ming voyages is provided by P. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987), pp. 4-9. More nuanced observation is offered in the seminal writings of distinguished overseas Chinese historian Wang Gungwu: see the chapters on Ming foreign relations in G. Wang, *China and the Chinese Overseas* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1991), pp. 41-78; *Community and Nation: China, Southeast Asia and Australia* (St Leonards, New South Wales, Asian Studies Association and Allen & Unwin, 1992), pp. 77-130; and *The Chinese Way: China’s Position in International Relations* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, Norwegian Nobel Institute Lecture Series, 1995), pp. 54-69. See also L. Suryadinata (ed.), *Admiral Zheng He and Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies and International Zheng He Society, 2005).

<sup>11</sup>See G. Wade, ‘Ming China and Southeast Asia in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century: A Reappraisal’, *Asia Research Institute, Working Paper Series No. 28* (July 2004); and Tarling (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, vol. 1, pp. 216-17. It should be noted that Yuan China’s expansionism also had a passing impact on the region, when Mongol expeditionary forces were despatched to discipline the rulers of Dai Viet, Champa, Bagan and Java during the second half of the thirteenth century. In contrast, the Ming voyages tended to emphasize the traditional practice of *heqin*, whereby indigenous states were encouraged to send tribute to the Ming court as a symbol of ‘harmonious relations’ between vassal and suzerain.

<sup>12</sup>Das Gupta and Pearson (eds.), *India and the Indian Ocean*, p. 246; Tarling (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, vol. 1, pp. 175-76, 215-26; and McPherson, *The Indian Ocean*, p. 114.

culture and configuration of port-cities in the Indian Ocean arena would, at this stage, scarcely translate into geopolitical confrontation or realignment based upon maritime balance-of-power considerations. Rather, as cosmopolitan nodes positioned strategically along evolving networks of seaborne commerce, they filled an autonomous inter-regional space and performed a vital intermediary role that linked extra-regional forms of capital from China or Europe to intra-regional, local communities.

Neither did the advent of the Europeans and the so-called ‘Vasco da Gama epoch’ after 1498, predicated upon supposed European command of the seas, result in any immediate polarization of maritime power. Whilst appreciating that all historical writing reflects the particular period and cultural context in which it was written, here is where contemporary scholarship must refute mistaken yet influential arguments outlined in the more deterministic nationalist historiography—notably the views of Indian historian K. M. Panikkar—which still pervade the thinking in certain policy-making circles and continue to gain currency as a justification for naval expansion or force modernization.<sup>13</sup> As an apologist for newly independent India and the emerging post-colonial order in Asia, Kavalam Madhava Panikkar espoused the ideas of American naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan regarding the influence of sea power on history. In so doing, he tended to overstate India’s past role in naval and maritime issues, highlighting sea battles in which Indian forces like the Cholas fared well, and assigning sea power an altogether prominent place in India’s destiny: “In fact it may truly be said that India never lost her independence till she lost command of the sea in the first decade of the sixteenth century.”<sup>14</sup> According to Panikkar, the decline of Indian naval power and the capitulation

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<sup>13</sup>Das Gupta and Pearson (eds.), *India and the Indian Ocean*, p. 4. Other pieces of nationalist maritime history include R. K. Mookerji, *Indian Shipping: A History of the Sea-borne Trade and Maritime Activity of the Indians from the Earliest Times* (Bombay: Orient Longmans, 1957), designed to show the central role of seagoing Indians in the Indian Ocean (and sometimes the wider world); and K. Sridharan, *A Maritime History of India* (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1965), preoccupied with ‘the maritime developments of which we should be justifiably proud, and the study of which makes a person learn the lessons of history and appreciate better the need for the country’s defence by maritime forces’ (p. vii).

<sup>14</sup>K. M. Panikkar, *India and the Indian Ocean: An Essay on the Influence of Sea Power on Indian History* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1951), p. 7. Also see P. A. Crowl, ‘Alfred Thayer Mahan: The Naval Historian’, in P. Paret (ed.), *Makers of Modern Strategy: Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 444-77. With the gradual eclipse of the European colonial empires and the rise of American sea power, the last decade of the nineteenth century saw the first publications of the American naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan on the influence of sea power upon history: namely, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783* (published 1890) and *The Influence of Sea Power*

of Arab-Islamic naval forces at Cochin (1503) and Diu (1509) were pivotal in enabling the Portuguese to construct a ‘naval empire’ and pursue an ‘oceanic policy’ that led to ‘the European mastery of the Eastern Seas which continued for over 400 years’.<sup>15</sup> Panikkar called this period of Western domination ‘the Vasco da Gama epoch of Asian history’, in which European nations alone controlled the seas until the emergence of Japan and the United States as major naval powers at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>16</sup> Given that from the 1500s ‘till today the Ocean has dominated India’ and ‘that the economic life of India will be completely at the mercy of the power which controls the seas’, Panikkar advocated the building-up of an adequate navy for independent India.<sup>17</sup> However, regardless of the merits of the nationalist-oriented strategic vision, it should be stressed that the weight of historical evidence does not support notions of an early and decisive ‘swing to the West’ as far as Indian Ocean geopolitics are concerned. It is debatable whether India ever had command of the sea in the first place, and Western domination of the Indian Ocean arena was neither as straightforward nor inevitable as suggested by Panikkar’s thesis.

In search of the fabulous riches of the East, it was the Europeans—the Portuguese, and after them the Dutch, the English, and the French—who gave the Indian Ocean its name, after the land they were all striving to reach.<sup>18</sup> But once their carracks

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*upon the French Revolution and Empire, 1793-1812* (published 1892). Panikkar was consciously following the tradition of Mahan; his book *India and the Indian Ocean* was subtitled ‘An Essay on the Influence of Sea Power on Indian History’.

<sup>15</sup>Panikkar, *India and the Indian Ocean*, pp. 41-43.

<sup>16</sup>K. M. Panikkar, *Asia and Western Dominance: A Survey of the Vasco da Gama Epoch of Asian History, 1498-1945* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1953). Once again, influenced by the naval strategic thinking of Mahan, Panikkar selected as the starting-point of his periodization the arrival of Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama at Calicut (on the southwestern coast of India) in May 1498.

<sup>17</sup>Panikkar, *India and the Indian Ocean*, pp. 8, 14-16. In K. Vaidya, *The Naval Defence of India* (Bombay: Thacker, 1949), we find further arguments for Indian blue-water naval expansion: “even if we do not rule the waves of all the five oceans of the world, we must at least rule the waves of the Indian Ocean... the Indian Ocean must become an Indian Lake. That is to say India must become the supreme and undisputed power over the waters of the Indian Ocean... controlling the waves of the vast mass of water making the Indian Ocean and its two main offshoots, the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal” (pp. 1, 91, 101). Consequently, Vaidya argued for the creation of three self-sufficient and fully-fledged fleets to be stationed at the Andamans in the Bay of Bengal, at Trincomalee in Sri Lanka, and at Mauritius. Like Panikkar, he advocated a ring of Indian Ocean bases for India—from the Cape of Good Hope, Mozambique, Mombasa, Aden, Oman and Muscat (on the western side), through to Trincomalee, Rangoon, Penang and Singapore (on the eastern side), and the Maldives, the Seychelles, Mauritius and Madagagascar (to the south)—which might stand India in good stead to face China as a potential future challenger and rival in the region.

<sup>18</sup>Vali, *Politics of the Indian Ocean Region*, p. 27. Following on from the Treaties of Tordesillas (1494) and Saragossa (1529), in which the world beyond Europe was divided somewhat arbitrarily by the Catholic

had actually reached the fabled 'Indies', the *Estado da India* of Portugal and the East India Companies of the other European powers all experienced varying degrees of success, as well as failure, in dominating commercial networks across the maritime domain. The chain of fortified trading bases (or 'factories') established by the Europeans along the shores of the Indian Ocean might still look fairly impressive in the historical maps. The Portuguese set up trading outposts at Aden, Goa, Sofala, Mombasa and Mozambique (on the western side), and Bantam, Timor, Amboina and Ternate (on the eastern side), which buttressed the two great Indian Ocean entrepôts that Portugal wrested from Muslim control: Malacca and Hormuz. The Portuguese settlements were followed, in due course, by the Dutch settlements in coastal Sri Lanka, Malabar, Malacca (wrested from Portuguese control), Makassar and Batavia; the English settlements at Madras, Bombay and Calcutta; and the French settlements at Pondicherry and later, Mauritius and Réunion.<sup>19</sup> And yet, however disruptive they proved to be at times, those early circuits of Western colonial expansion were relatively tentative and limited on the whole.

The Indian historian Ashin Das Gupta has observed that after the initial cross-cultural collision in the sixteenth century, the Portuguese 'settled within the structure and were, in a way, swallowed by it'.<sup>20</sup> K. G. Tregonning, formerly Raffles Professor of History at the University of Singapore, has gone so far as to characterize the Iberian power as 'a few infidel voyagers in a Muslim sea'.<sup>21</sup> Whether adversarial or associative by nature, the net effect of Portuguese imperialism was redistributive rather than transformational: in trade, they skimmed off profits for themselves without radically changing routes, products, or productive techniques; in society and culture, they altered or redirected existing patterns short of actual transformation.<sup>22</sup> The Portuguese were ultimately disadvantaged in the maritime sphere by their inability to develop any blue-water strategy comparable to the Dutch and the English, who pioneered high-sea fleets

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authorities between the Iberian powers of Spain and Portugal, the Spanish would concentrate on empire-building in the Americas and their Pacific Ocean colony of the Philippines.

<sup>19</sup>McPherson, *The Indian Ocean*, pp. 167-87.

<sup>20</sup>Das Gupta and Pearson (eds.), *India and the Indian Ocean*, p. 28.

<sup>21</sup>K. G. Tregonning, *A History of Modern Malaysia and Singapore* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 1972), p. 29.

<sup>22</sup>Das Gupta and Pearson (eds.), *India and the Indian Ocean*, pp. 208-11; cf. S. Subrahmanyam, *The Portuguese Empire in Asia, 1500-1700* (London: Longman, 1993).

capable of operating at long range from their home bases.<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, with all their superior ships and seamanship, even the Dutch and the English continued to work within the indigenous structure, becoming ‘one more strand in the weave of the ocean’s trade’: supporting the networks of seaborne commerce, strengthening its carrying capacity and sharpening competition.<sup>24</sup>

Notionally, of course, the Dutch and the English would make an early yet enduring contribution to the international law of the sea. In *Mare Liberum* (published 1609), the eminent Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius postulated the principle that the sea was international territory and all nations were free to use it for seaborne commerce, thereby supplying ideological justification for the Dutch to break up rival trade monopolies through their naval power and thus impose their own monopoly. The English contested the use (or abuse) of the Grotian principle, and claimed sovereignty over the waters adjacent to English *terra firma*. In *Mare Clausum* (published 1635), the English jurist John Selden argued that the sea was, in practice, as capable of appropriation as territory on land. As conflicting claims grew out of the controversy between ‘free seas’ and ‘closed seas’, maritime states came to moderate their demands and base their maritime claims upon the principle that it extended seawards from land.<sup>25</sup> For all the bluster, Dutch imperialism only achieved a measure of dominance in the archipelagic waters of the East Indies, where Dutch monopolistic policies were enforced by the draconian *hongi-tochten* (law-enforcement ships).<sup>26</sup> The English, who succeeded the Portuguese as the leading

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<sup>23</sup>Forbes, *The Maritime Boundaries of the Indian Ocean Region*, pp. 43-45; McPherson, *The Indian Ocean*, pp. 178-79. “Although the Portuguese had seaworthy ships,” writes the Australian cartographer V. L. Forbes, “their limited navigational ability made them reluctant to venture too far from the coast.”

<sup>24</sup>Das Gupta and Pearson (eds.), *India and the Indian Ocean*, p. 39.

<sup>25</sup>H. Grotius, *Mare Liberum*, translated with a revision of the Latin text of 1633 by R. Van Deman Magoffin, *The Freedom of the Seas, or the Right Which Belongs to the Dutch to Take Part in the East Indian Trade* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1916). Also see R. P. Anand, *Origins and Development of the Law of the Sea: History of International Law Revisited* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1982). Another Dutch jurist, Cornelius Bynkershoek, would eventually propound a workable formula in his *De Dominio Maris* (1702), restricting maritime dominion to the actual distance within which cannon range could effectively protect it. This became universally adopted and evolved into the three-mile limit.

<sup>26</sup>P. Borschberg, ‘Hugo Grotius, East India Trade and the King of Johor’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 30:2 (1999), pp. 225-48; P. J. Marshall, ‘Western Arms in Maritime Asia in the Early Phases of Expansion’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 14:1 (1980), p. 20. Dutch imperialism represented an intermediate stage between the earlier, predatory imperialism of Portugal and the later, more productive imperialism of Britain. The commercial and naval operations of the Dutch East India Company were more sophisticated and powerful than those of the Portuguese. Dutch shipping was more numerous and better gunned. By 1626, there were 29 Dutch ships in the Indian Ocean, and by 1635, 76 of them. The *hongi-tochten* consisted

European traders in India during the seventeenth century, operated from the confines of a handful of fortified enclaves in coastal areas. Neither the Dutch nor the English were able, at this stage, to challenge the land-based power of major indigenous states in West and South Asia.<sup>27</sup>

For most of the early modern period, the dominant actors in that transoceanic milieu were the great imperial dynasties of monsoon Asia: the Ottomans, the Safavids and the Mughals. Sir Christopher Bayly, currently Vere Harmsworth Professor of Imperial and Naval History at the University of Cambridge, has identified three vital pillars that underpinned the hegemony of these Muslim land empires. First, there were political instruments and military resources: all three dynasties were able, by diplomacy and by deploying powerful cavalry armies, to dominate internal magnates and to protect their flanks from dangerous coalitions of armed tribal warriors. Second, there were financial inducements and cultural incentives: all three dynasties were able to offer provincial elites and some of the frontier tribesmen attractive rewards of service and a share in the vibrant cosmopolitan cultures of the great cities. Third, there was accommodation of religious difference and ethnic diversity: all three dynasties were able to offer protection to mercantile families and scribal communities from non-Muslim elites (Armenians, Greeks, Jews, Hindus) that, in turn, promoted an inter-regional commercial culture over land and sea.<sup>28</sup>

Of the three land empires, only the Ottomans possessed a navy powerful enough to prevent the Portuguese from closing the Red Sea to Turkish, Persian, Arab and Indian trade.<sup>29</sup> The Mughals relied much more upon military-fiscal organization, the profitable symbiosis of military power and revenue resources, than the exercise of maritime power

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of specialized warships stationed permanently in the East Indies to enforce the Dutch Company's monopoly of the spice trade, whether by policing offshore areas to prevent smuggling or engaging in slash-and-burn tactics to destroy the clove and nutmeg crops of rival cultivators.

<sup>27</sup>S. Bose and A. Jalal, *Modern South Asia: History, Culture, Political Economy* (Second edition; New York; London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 34-35.

<sup>28</sup>C. A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World 1780-1830* (London: Longman, 1989), pp. 19-23.

<sup>29</sup>Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, pp. 10-11; cf. A. C. Hess, 'The Evolution of the Ottoman Seaborne Empire in the Age of the Oceanic Discoveries, 1453-1525', *American Historical Review*, 75:7 (1970), pp. 1892-1919; and F. Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, 3 vols. (Second revised edition trans. by S. Reynolds, 1972-73, re-issued as special Folio edition; London: Folio Society, 2000), vol. 3, pp. 182-235. In southern European waters, it even took a grand naval coalition backed by an alliance of Catholic powers to check the advance of Ottoman naval forces across the Mediterranean, at the Battle of Lepanto (1571).

*per se*. Even though Jahangir and Shah Jahan ruled an empire heavily dependent on oceanic connections, served by sizable numbers of merchant and pilgrim ships, Mughal India lacked a strong navy. This allowed European powers to assert some control over the sea-lanes of the Indian Ocean, although they were as yet incapable of projecting their political and military power further inland. Conflicts at sea were mostly fought out amongst Europeans in mercantilist pursuit of a larger share of maritime trade, while the Mughals themselves remained largely unassailable on land until the upheavals of the eighteenth century.<sup>30</sup>

Ironically, the greatest military engagements of the Indian Ocean arena in the early modern period appear to have been fought on land. With regard to the comparative importance of land and sea battles in the Mughal conquest of India from the sixteenth century onwards, and the Anglo-French contest for India in the eighteenth century, it is telling that the military historian Jeremy Black identifies only two major land battles: the first Battle of Panipat (1526), in which the Mughals gained the ascendancy on the subcontinent by winning a decisive victory over the last of the Delhi Sultans; and the Battle of Plassey (1757), which paved the way for the eventual creation of a ‘British Raj’ in India and a ‘British Lake’ across the Indian Ocean.<sup>31</sup>

### **The Trauma of Disequilibrium**

Whereas the juridical formulation of the Grotian paradigm had emphasized the freedom of the seas from the seventeenth century onwards, it was only from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that maritime power played a significant part in tilting the balance in

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<sup>30</sup>Bose and Jalal, *Modern South Asia*, pp. 27-37; McPherson, *The Indian Ocean*, pp. 174-180. The Mughals began as a land-based power and finally ended up as a land-locked dynasty. ‘Mughal’ is, of course, the Persian word for ‘Mongol’. The Mughals claimed descent from the Mongol hordes of Genghis Khan, thereby being distantly related to the Yuan dynasty in China and likewise perpetuating their hegemony as a continental (predominantly agrarian) power. The Mughals first invaded India overland across its northwestern frontier; their early military successes were achieved by armies much smaller than those of their opponents, and attributed to cohesion and mobility but especially the impact of horse-mounted archers. The first Mughal Emperor of India is more commonly known by his nickname Babur, meaning ‘Tiger’, a regal beast noted for its power on land as well as its proficiency in water. However, even though legend holds that Emperor Babur swam across every major river he encountered, it may have been the third Mughal Emperor, Akbar the Great, who viewed the sea for the first time upon his conquest of Gujarat.

<sup>31</sup>J. Black, *The Seventy Great Battles of All Time* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2005), pp.107-109, 163-164. Black’s choice of such ‘battles’ includes both land and sea engagements. This could stimulate further debate about whether all battles are ultimately fought for, or in defence of, land.

favour of the West. European seaborne commerce and naval power accelerated the gradual disintegration of the indigenous imperial cores and aided the global projection of increasingly competitive, aggressive forms of European imperialism that were, in turn, legitimated by Western notions of transcendent law and unitary sovereignty. Consequently, the finely balanced and layered concept of sovereignty shared by pre-colonial states in the Indian Ocean arena, which had opened up various autonomous spaces for the denizens of port-cities, was progressively displaced by the Western idea of indivisible and monolithic sovereignty imported under colonial conditions from Europe.<sup>32</sup>

By the mid-eighteenth century, a sequence of interlocking crises had begun to grip societies around the Indian Ocean arena. The great empires of monsoon Asia had become victims of their own success, falling prey to imperial overstretch. Many of the old imperial centres, hollowed-out to a mere shell of their former glory through the ascendancy of provincial elites, now faced even greater challenges: tribal breakouts in the resurgence of great warrior coalitions from Arabia, Central Asia and Southeast Asia; the building-up of new successor states across Indian Ocean regions; and the breaking-in of sustained European capital flows and commerce over land and sea.<sup>33</sup>

On the Indian subcontinent, the waning of Mughal hegemony soon gave rise to greater autonomy, speculation and conflict among the internal magnates and various forms of indigenous capitalism. The English East India Company was drawn into—and benefited greatly from—this turbulent scenario of war and opportunity: playing off one native state against another, selling its own services and supplies in the ‘all-India military bazaar’.<sup>34</sup> The internal disequilibrium was compounded by an intensification of extra-regional pressure: the British and French clashed on the subcontinent between 1740 and 1815 as part of a worldwide extension of their European conflict. The Anglo-French duel for empire was conducted with blazing intensity in southern India during the War of the Austrian Succession (1740-48), resuming in the Seven Years’ War (1756-63), and persisting until the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1792-1815). The

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<sup>32</sup>Bose, *A Hundred Horizons*, p. 25.

<sup>33</sup>Bayly, *Imperial Meridian*, pp. 16-74.

<sup>34</sup>C. A. Bayly, *New Cambridge History of India*, 2.1: *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 47-48. Also see the earlier, influential study by A. Lyall, *The Rise and Expansion of the British Dominion in India* (London: J. Murray, 1910).



upsurge in military activity on the subcontinent by Indian armies as well as the European East India Companies created an ever-expanding market for military equipment that the European sea captains eagerly supplied from the coast.

The British would eventually turn the tide to emerge victorious over indigenous and Western opponents. In the process of doing so, however, it became something of a paradox that a company of primarily seaborne traders were themselves gradually transformed into a land-based military despotism with continental ambitions, blending amphibious tactics of sea and land domination with the military-fiscal methods of the Mughals, and bringing in their wake authoritarian British institutions of law and sovereignty.<sup>35</sup> On the subcontinent, this was achieved from 1757, when the British defeated the French-supported Nawab of Bengal at the Battle of Plassey; from 1761, when the British drove the French out of Pondicherry; and from 1765, when the British acquired the vast land revenues of Bengal that enabled them to finance a huge native army, which could also be deployed overseas.<sup>36</sup> At sea, the British proved their mettle as a free and conquering island race: Britain's naval victory over France at the Battle of the Nile (1798) effectively ended French pretensions to a seaborne empire in Asia, and marked the beginnings of a 'British Lake' in the Indian Ocean. The absence of indigenous naval opposition and the elimination of naval challenges from other Europeans would prove far more significant after 1798 than 1498, even as Britain gained singular command of the sea with strategic flexibility to outmanoeuvre as well as outclass opponents. In the Indian Ocean, as elsewhere, the elements that sustained British naval mastery would include superior leadership and seamanship; a sound economic and fiscal basis; industrial strength with ample shipbuilding capacity; a supportive mercantile marine capable of backing up naval power in times of conflict; and a transoceanic

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<sup>35</sup>D. M. Peers, 'Gunpowder Empires and the Garrison State: Modernity, Hybridity, and the Political Economy of Colonial India, circa 1750-1860', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 27:2 (2007), pp. 245-58; D. P. Marston and C. S. Sundaram (eds.), *A Military History of India and South Asia: from the East India Company to the Nuclear Era* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2007), pp. 1-15.

<sup>36</sup>Bayly, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire*, pp. 50-53, 84-87; Bose and Jalal, *Modern South Asia*, pp. 46-59; cf. P. J. Marshall, *New Cambridge History of India*, 2.2: *Bengal: The British Bridgehead: Eastern India, 1740-1828* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

network of naval stations and maritime bases, located not only at key choke-points but also along critical sea-lanes.<sup>37</sup>

Around the wider Indian Ocean arena, the maritime balance of power between internal and external forces was altered in much the same fashion. Old imperial centres and new indigenous powers were caught up in their own regional transformations even as they were increasingly subjected to the extra-regional impact of European colonial expansion and the *Pax Britannica*. Out of the fragmentation of Safavid Persia in the western Indian Ocean region, and disintegration of the Malay imperium (once centred upon Malacca) in the eastern Indian Ocean region, would arise a new constellation of regional powers and elite groups to contest the profits of the mercantilist system and primacy of the maritime domain. From the waters of the Gulf region, Oman would emerge first as a raiding naval power and then a regional commercial empire, with twin centres at Muscat and Zanzibar. Across maritime Southeast Asia, with the growth of trading entrepôts such as Singapore and Jolo, the Bugis, the Tausug and other seafaring peoples would likewise interpose themselves as power-broking intermediaries between the old sources of internal authority and the new sources of global authority.<sup>38</sup> While the Indian Ocean was being turned into a primarily ‘British Lake’, the ‘huge asymmetry in economic power relations on a world scale [also] led Indian and Chinese intermediary capitalists to build their own lake in the stretch of ocean from Zanzibar to Singapore’; the

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<sup>37</sup>See P. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (London: A. Lane, 1976); Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, pp. 154-55; and C. A. Bayly (ed.), *Atlas of the British Empire* (London: Hamlyn, 1989), pp. 72-73. Britannia had clearly begun to rule the waves by the dawn of the nineteenth century, and not just the Indian Ocean but also the other oceans of the world. The Royal Navy evolved a new command structure during the great maritime struggle against Napoleonic France. It pioneered a powerful intelligence tool in naval charts and maps, and acquired access to massive supplies of timber from Britain’s global empire, including the Indian Ocean hinterland. The Royal Navy’s ability to sail the seas unchallenged paved the way for the expansion of the Merchant Marine as much as Britain’s share of East-West commerce. Economic power and naval power were mutually reinforcing. Technological innovation—the development of the iron ship, the steam engine, and the electric telegraph—all helped to keep Britain ahead of its competitors, particularly after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. Consequently, in 1870, the mercantile tonnage of the British Empire nearly equalled the combined tonnage of all other countries in the world and, in 1880, actually exceeded it. This came close to proving the dictum attributed to the great Elizabethan Sir Walter Raleigh: “Whosoever commands the sea commands the trade; whoever commands the trade of the world commands the riches of the world, and consequently the world itself.”

<sup>38</sup>J. B. Kelly, *Britain and the Persian Gulf 1795-1880* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), pp. 1-2; Das Gupta and Pearson (eds.), *India and the Indian Ocean*, p. 139; and B. W. Andaya and L. Y. Andaya, *A History of Malaysia* (London: Macmillan, 1982), pp. 77-113. Also see J. F. Warren, *The Sulu Zone 1768-1898: The Dynamics of External Trade, Slavery, and Ethnicity in the Transformation of a Southeast Asian Maritime State* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1981); and J. F. Warren, *Iranun and Balangingi: Globalization, Maritime Raiding and the Birth of Ethnicity* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2002).

combined Indian and Chinese networks of trade and finance would provide a crucial intermediate ‘bazaar nexus’ that linked European capital to diverse indigenous communities.<sup>39</sup> Meanwhile, even with the advent of steamships, traditional sailing vessels such as dhows and prahus would continue to serve the port-cities and complement the caravan trade that operated further inland.<sup>40</sup>

In the evolving patterns of Indian Ocean trade and production, rising levels of profit and violence would revolve particularly around the movement of arms, slaves, ivory, opium and other exotic local commodities. The disruption of the traditional economy by a growing European monopoly of trade had driven many ‘non-state’ seafaring communities to marauding and trafficking on a large scale, often in conjunction with the raiding and trading activities of regional states. As a consequence, such ‘piracy’ often took the form of an annual cycle whose very regularity shows how far such activities were bound up with the socio-economic structures of the region. Marauding (and its corollary, trafficking) functioned as an integral, legitimate and time-honoured means of enlarging and consolidating the power bases of rival chiefs during periods of turbulence.<sup>41</sup>

Such maritime pursuits were, however, suppressed by European naval power when further increases in trade convinced colonial regimes of the need to provide greater security for commercial shipping. For the first time in Indian Ocean history, there would be actual legal frameworks for prohibition and protection, patrols to hunt ‘pirates’, and expeditions to destroy ‘pirate nests’. Once the ‘sea-robbers’, their perceived ‘banditry’, and native institutions of ‘slavery’ had been demonized through the liberal-humanitarian lenses of Western colonial stereotyping, it was only a matter of time before the outlawing of these indigenous maritime groups and the interdiction of contraband would serve to further advance Western conceptions of law and sovereignty in the region.<sup>42</sup> In the 1810s

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<sup>39</sup>Bose, *A Hundred Horizons*, pp. 13, 274; cf. R. K. Ray, ‘Asian Capital in the Age of European Expansion: The Rise of the Bazaar, 1800-1914’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 29:3 (1995).

<sup>40</sup>McPherson, *The Indian Ocean*, pp. 31-37.

<sup>41</sup>L. Subramaniam, ‘Of Pirates and Potentates: Maritime Jurisdiction and the Construction of Piracy in the Indian Ocean’, in D. Ghosh and S. Muecke (eds.), *UTS Review: The Indian Ocean*, 6:2 (2000), pp. 14-17; O. Rutter, *The Pirate Wind: Tales of the Sea Robbers of Malaya* (London, 1930; reprinted Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 26-28.

<sup>42</sup>‘Oriental Pirates’, *United Service Magazine and Naval and Military Journal*, 2 (1835), pp. 34-42; and J. R. Logan (ed.), ‘The Piracy and Slave Trade of the Indian Archipelago’, *Journal of the Indian Archipelago*

and 1820s, the ‘pirates’ of the Red Sea and Persian Gulf were duly chastised; the Royal Navy’s efforts at pacification were even reflected in the British lexicon, where the ‘Pirate Coast’ was transformed into the ‘Trucial Coast’ (after ‘truce’).<sup>43</sup> In the 1830s and 1840s, the Straits of Malacca and the archipelagic waters of the Eastern Seas were likewise cleared of marauders and ‘made safe for the intercourse of nations’.<sup>44</sup> The Royal Navy served as a crucial tool in securing new markets around the Indian Ocean and beyond the South China Sea—from Zanzibar to Canton—during the great age of ‘gun-boat diplomacy’ when Lord Palmerston was Britain’s Foreign Secretary (1830-41 and 1846-51).<sup>45</sup>

Even so, there were still limits to what could be achieved by the European colonial navies and their systems of surveillance and interdiction. For example, in order to cope with the acceleration of arms transfers from metropolitan Europe over the decades of ‘high imperialism’ that preceded the outbreak of the First World War (c.1870-1914), European colonial regimes were compelled somewhat ironically to expand their scope of authority and exercise stricter controls throughout the Indian Ocean. The European balance of power was again played out across the various colonial frontiers: there were new arms bans; naval blockades along the coastline of notorious gun-running areas; and novel methods of surveillance and disarmament. To help secure their respective colonial interests in the lands flanking the western Indian Ocean, British, German and Italian warships stepped up naval patrols off the East African, Somali and Gulf coasts, in anticipation of seasonal changes in local maritime traffic as determined by

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*and Eastern Asia*, 4 (1850), pp. 619, 626. Just as the Wahhabi raiders of the western Indian Ocean region in the early 1800s had been stigmatized as ‘pirates’, so the Sulu marauders of the East were castigated as ‘sea-banditti’.

<sup>43</sup>Bose, *A Hundred Horizons*, pp. 43-48.

<sup>44</sup>The historical term ‘Eastern Archipelago’ or ‘Eastern Seas’ was used broadly to describe the eastern Indian Ocean zone, the geographical region between India and China, encompassing coastal areas of mainland Southeast Asia as well as all of maritime Southeast Asia. At the heart of this maritime region were the ‘East Indies’, the islands of the Malay and Indonesian Archipelagos. See Rutter, *The Pirate Wind*, which illustrates how marauding in the Eastern Seas provoked reprisals from European cruisers and gave occasion for the extension of European ‘protection’ to areas such as Sarawak and Labuan. In the Malay Archipelago, the long-drawn crisis in Kedah and the Malay ‘piratical system’ operating around Penang—‘from whence ... they were recruiting their scattered forces and obtaining supplies of arms and ammunition without the possibility of prevention by our police’—prompted Robert Ibbetson, the Resident at Singapore, to propose a new naval blockade in consultation with Governor-General Lord William Bentinck and naval commander Rear-Admiral Sir Edward Owen. [India Office Records, F/4/1331 (53245), Bentinck to Owen, 18 January 1832; Ibbetson to Swinton (Bentinck’s Secretary), 25 April 1832, pp. 45, 93.]

<sup>45</sup>Bayly (ed.), *Atlas of the British Empire*, p. 73.

the monsoon. But in spite of their vigilance, only a small percentage of dhows were actually intercepted, while rival French flags protected others, thus enabling arms trafficking to persist. Likewise, the efforts of the British and Dutch authorities to delineate their colonial spheres in maritime Southeast Asia were similarly challenged by the smuggling activities of the gun runners, opium traders, currency counterfeiters and human traffickers who enjoyed considerable success—with their prahus and junks—in penetrating newly drawn colonial boundaries.<sup>46</sup>

Finally, in the changing global balance of maritime power, it was to become increasingly obvious that Britannia herself no longer ruled the waves. The United States and Japan emerged from the end of the nineteenth century as major naval powers. Conversely, in the years following the firmamental exhaustion of the First World War and preceding the economic wreckage of the Great Depression, Britain's naval power was pegged back by the terms of the naval armaments treaty at the Washington Conference (1921-22), which fixed future construction of capital ships at a ratio of five British to five American to three Japanese ships. What then ensued was a stunning case of British imperial and naval overstretch. Although construction of a new naval base at Singapore would commence in 1924, the aim of which was to help Britain defend the region, delays meant that the base was not opened until 1938. British defence chiefs already knew that the strategy of sending the main fleet to Singapore at a time of crisis in the East would fail if Britain were simultaneously engaged on another front. When war pierced the eastern periphery of the Indian Ocean, Britain was fully committed in the Mediterranean and Atlantic; Japan's sinking of the capital ships H.M.S *Repulse* and H.M.S *Prince of Wales* (1941), through a combination of sea and air power, would come to symbolize the very twilight of British naval primacy. With the end of the Second World War in 1945, and the setting of the sun on Britain's Indian empire in 1947, it was

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<sup>46</sup>E. M. Chew, 'Arming the Periphery: The Arms Trade in the Indian Ocean during the Nineteenth Century' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge, 2001), pp. 105-118, 138-52. Also see E. Tagliacozzo, *Secret Trades, Porous Borders: Smuggling and States Along a Southeast Asian Frontier, 1865-1915* (New Haven, Connecticut; London: Yale University Press, 2005). At least on paper, the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824 had reduced the region to two separate spheres of colonial influence, partitioning the Eastern Archipelago through the Straits of Malacca and Singapore, with the British taking the territories north of the agreed dividing line and the Dutch taking territories to the south. It would take the better part of a century, however, to stabilize the expanding colonial frontier and enforce colonial authority along porous borders.

just a matter of time before the Indian Ocean ‘east of Suez’ was drawn progressively into the Cold War geopolitics of non-alignment and bi-polar superpower rivalry.<sup>47</sup>

### **The Quest for a New Equilibrium**

As the South Asian historian Sugata Bose has reflected, empires in the pre-colonial Indian Ocean arena often knew how to share power and divide sovereignty. In that manner, they were able to accommodate religious and ethnic differences. Yet the experience of divide-and-rule under modern, Western colonial empires is so raw and recent that it may have de-legitimized the very concept of empire stripped of all its nuances and creative possibilities.<sup>48</sup> Since 1945, many an Indian Ocean state has had to earn its freedom by winning a hard-fought struggle for independence. Critically, one of the principal reactions to the colonial past, as exemplified by the long shadow of the *Pax Britannica* across the Indian Ocean region, is the instinctive nationalist tendency to prevent or pre-empt any recurrence of extra-regional domination.<sup>49</sup>

Moreover, the post-colonial order that emerged after 1945 inherited the legacy of a system of sovereign states with fixed maritime and territorial boundaries. Where a British Leviathan and other Western colonial navies had once ruled the ‘free seas’, the maritime authorities of each nation-state—navy, marine police or coastguard—were now given responsibility for maintaining law and order at sea within their own three-mile territorial water limit.<sup>50</sup> This overall sea-change in sovereignty in the Indian Ocean largely explains why the former ‘British Lake’ east of Suez cannot be transformed so

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<sup>47</sup>Bayly (ed.), *Atlas of the British Empire*, pp. 183, 222-31; M. Murfett, J. Miksic, B. Farrell and M. S. Chiang, *Between Two Oceans: A Military History of Singapore from First Settlement to Final British Withdrawal* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 145-202; and McPherson, *The Indian Ocean*, pp. 252-60. Also see W. D. McIntyre, *The Rise and Fall of the Singapore Naval Base, 1919-1942* (London: Macmillan, 1979); J. L. Neidpath, *The Singapore Naval Base and the Defence of Britain’s Eastern Empire, 1918-1941* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981); M. Middlebrook and P. Mahoney, *Battleship: The Loss of the Prince of Wales and the Repulse* (London: A. Lane, 1977); and C. G. Reynolds, *Command of the Sea: The History and Strategy of Maritime Empires* (Second edition; Malabar, Florida: R. E. Krieger, 1983). ‘Capital ships’ refer to the key warships of a navy, typically battleships and cruisers of more than 10,000 tons, possessing the heaviest firepower and armour.

<sup>48</sup>Bose, *A Hundred Horizons*, p. 71.

<sup>49</sup>Vali, *Politics of the Indian Ocean Region*, p. 37.

<sup>50</sup>Forbes, *The Maritime Boundaries of the Indian Ocean Region*, pp. 61-85. Nowadays, sovereignty and jurisdiction over the territorial sea and contiguous zone may extend up to 12 nautical miles; the Exclusive Economic Zone stretches 200 miles seaward from land.

easily into an ‘American Lake’ in post-colonial times, despite American attempts during the Cold War to establish a naval force and naval installations (like the Anglo-American base on Diego Garcia) to meet the Soviet challenge in the Indian Ocean. If anything, the superpower confrontation and reconfiguration of geopolitics that occurred over the course of the Cold War period would serve to sharpen intra-regional rivalries and competition: from the resurgence of longstanding tribal, ethno-religious or separatist conflicts in Iraq, Turkey and Iran, and across both the northwestern and northeastern flanks of the Indian subcontinent, through to the onset of guerrilla activities or military rule in parts of East Africa, the Middle East, South Asia and Southeast Asia.<sup>51</sup> The ‘evil empire’ of the Soviet Union may have since disintegrated and the United States today exercises some measure of hegemonic dominance, but the sole remaining superpower finds itself operating within the constraints of a multi-polar Indian Ocean milieu of sovereign regional powers, independent nation-states and autonomous non-state actors.

Meanwhile, the Indian Ocean still occupies a position of unique geo-strategic importance amid the maritime arenas of the world, and perhaps more than at any other point in history is integral to the worldwide maritime balance of power. Indeed, the ‘Indo-Pacific maritime space’—encompassing the Indian Ocean as well as the South China Sea—has acquired a new strategic complexion in the post-Cold War era and the present epoch of globalization and nuclearization. Evolving dynamics of governance, commerce, demography, knowledge and religion in what has always been a cosmopolitan

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<sup>51</sup>See R. B. Rais, *The Indian Ocean and the Superpowers: Economic, Political and Strategic Perspectives* (London: Croom Helm, 1986); S. S. Harrison and K. Subrahmanyam (eds.), *Superpower Rivalry in the Indian Ocean: Indian and American Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); A. J. Cottrell *et al*, *Sea Power and Strategy in the Indian Ocean* (Beverly Hills, California; London: Sage, 1981); and D. L. Berlin, ‘Neglected No Longer: Strategic Rivalry in the Indian Ocean’, *Harvard International Review* (June 2002). In the closing decades of the Cold War, the Indian Ocean was an arena of fairly intense superpower competition. The United States and the Soviet Union vied for political advantage, while their navies competed for refuelling facilities and bases in places such as Socotra Island in the former South Yemen, Gan in the Maldives, and Port Victoria in the Seychelles. The Indian Ocean was also significant in the nuclear arms race as both navies operated ballistic missile submarines in the region. In view of such superpower rivalry and the Indian Ocean states’ perception of these powers as interlopers in their region, the United Nations General Assembly declared the Indian Ocean a Zone of Peace in 1971. The following year, the United Nations created an Ad Hoc Committee on the Indian Ocean to find ways to implement this declaration. To date, despite over 450 meetings of this Committee, the Zone of Peace has not materialized. Moreover, key Western members of the Committee withdrew in 1989, arguing that superpower rivalry in the Indian Ocean had diminished with the end of the Cold War, rendering a Zone of Peace purposeless. The Indian Ocean strategic analyst Donald Berlin has nonetheless concluded that since the end of the Cold War, it is a more adversarial combination of confrontation and rivalry—not conciliation—that tend to characterize interstate relations in the Indian Ocean region.

arena, together with shifting patterns of collaboration and conflict in an increasingly interconnected world, are today compounded by energy security and environmental concerns that dominate any meaningful contemporary analyses of the region.<sup>52</sup>

The stakes in the maritime balance of power are being raised continually by the unprecedented volume and value of ‘globalized’ maritime trade transiting strategic choke-points and dense sea-lanes of communication. At the same time, the region is being troubled by new forms of marauding and contrabanding, a spectrum of asymmetric conflicts and the spectre of maritime terrorism, which range across the fluid frontiers and porous borders of the Indian Ocean’s maritime and littoral domains. The geo-strategic importance of the Indian Ocean arena and its waterways ensures that nations beyond this region would continue to have a major stake as well as presence in these waters. But echoing anti-colonial sentiment from the days of European naval dominance, there is also underlying suspicion that extra-regional powers would use the threat posed by trafficking in weapons (conventional and nuclear), drugs and humans, as well as piracy and terrorism, to justify their longer-term naval presence in the region.

In the quest for a new equilibrium based upon mutual understanding and co-operation, the extra-regional maritime activities of the United States, Britain, France, Russia, Australia and Japan would no doubt continue to influence the security environment and balance-of-power equation in the Indian Ocean milieu. On the other hand, a good deal hinges upon the blue-water ambitions, strategic alliances and economic agendas of a concurrently renaissance India and China—an India ‘looking East’ and a China ‘looking West’.<sup>53</sup> The Chinese idiom ‘Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon’ originally

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<sup>52</sup>McPherson, *The Indian Ocean*, pp. 260-62. The Indian Ocean historian Kenneth McPherson has noted: “Offshore oil and gas fields now engage national attentions in India, Bangladesh, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and Australia, as do seabed mineral resources for a range of other nations in the region. National boundaries have been pushed further out to sea and Exclusive Economic Zones have been declared: such actions represent attempts to secure new mineral resources and also to protect the vital fisheries resources of the Ocean. The Indian Ocean has been divided politically by the nations on its shores, and currently attempts are underway to develop legal regimes to take into account this new area of political and economic activity.”

<sup>53</sup>For a comprehensive survey of contemporary issues in the maritime domain, see L. W. Prabhakar, J. H. Ho, and S. Bateman (eds.), *The Evolving Maritime Balance of Power in the Asia-Pacific* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2006). For a wider angle on the geopolitical landscape, see C. R. Mohan, ‘India and the Balance of Power’, *Foreign Affairs* (July/August 2006); S. Devare, *India and Southeast Asia: Towards Security Convergence* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006); C. G. Kwa, ‘ASEAN-China Relations’, *RSIS Commentaries*, 8/2007 (5 February 2007); and H. G. Gelber, *The Dragon and the Foreign Devils: China and the World, 1100 BC to the Present* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007).



describes a scenario in which the actors conceal their strengths from the others in order to preserve the element of surprise. As we survey the myriad horizons of the Indian Ocean from our historical perspective, and weigh the scales of the current balance of power in the maritime arena, such characterization would seem more appropriate than ever to describe the defence posture of an enigmatic Indian Tiger and a reticent Chinese Dragon. Poised at the dawn of the twenty-first century, it remains to be seen whether the two major regional powers of the Indo-Pacific are able and willing to transcend their historically conditioned roles as continental powers in order to assume expansive new roles as maritime powers.<sup>54</sup> For those who are positioned betwixt these rising powers, amid Grotian notions of the oceans and Mahanian visions of sea power, there remains an historic challenge as well: the member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations must find fresh ways of averting confrontation and facilitating co-operation that would contribute, in sum, to the rediscovery of equilibrium.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup>See Prabhakar, Ho, and Bateman (eds.), *The Evolving Maritime Balance of Power in the Asia-Pacific*, pp. 12, 71-116; C. J. Pehrson, 'String of Pearls: Meeting the Challenge of China's Rising Power Across the Asian Littoral', *SSI Carlisle Papers in Security Strategy* (July 2006); A. Kumar, 'A New Balance of Power Game in the Indian Ocean: India gears up to tackle Chinese influence in the Maldives and Sri Lanka', *IDSA Strategic Comments* (24 November 2006); and D. Scott, 'India's "Grand Strategy" for the Indian Ocean: Mahanian Visions', *Asia-Pacific Review*, 13:2 (2006). In contemplating whether a string of Chinese 'pearls' really possesses the ability to encircle or strangulate, even when 'nuclearized', it is still useful to recall historical antecedents such as the aberration of the Ming voyages in China's largely continental mentality or the limitations of the chain of European fortified enclaves. The 'string of pearls'—a current euphemism for China's Indian Ocean bases—forms the centrepiece of an interim maritime strategy to guarantee access to energy supplies in the Middle East as well as unimpeded access to trade. Conversely, flying in the face of arguments by advocates of Mahanian strategies based on sea power (such as K. M. Panikkar), it should be remembered that independent India's traumatic defeat by China in the war of 1962 had once again come over land rather than from the sea.

<sup>55</sup>For further analysis of balance-of-power considerations for Singapore (and ASEAN) in relation to the two giants of the Indo-Pacific, see A. I. Latif, *Between Rising Powers: China, Singapore and India* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2007).

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