

No. 164

**A Merlion at the Edge of an Afrasian Sea:
Singapore's Strategic Involvement
in the Indian Ocean**

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Singapore

14 July 2008

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ABSTRACT

The temporal-spatial dimensions of the Indian Ocean have been variously explored and described, the historical narrative adapted according to the interests of its invaders and inhabitants alike. Yet against the sometimes overlapping claims of *Pax Indica*, *Pax Sinica*, *Pax Islamica*, *Pax Britannica* and *Pax Americana*, the ocean was never a 'lake' controlled or owned exclusively by any single power based outside or inside its geographical boundaries. For millennia, it was a cosmopolitan arena animated by encounters between East and West, where Asians, Africans and Caucasians participated together in a sophisticated structure of commerce and politics shaped by the cycle of monsoons. The Indian Ocean arena, extending to the South China Sea, had been central in international history well before the rise of the Atlantic and the Pacific. The Indian Ocean's centrality in international geopolitics is again becoming apparent, with the end of the Western colonial empires and the emergence of independent nation-states throughout Africa and Asia; and, more recently, the conclusion of the Cold War, the concurrent rise of India and China, the growing concerns over energy supplies, and the continuation of post-9/11 asymmetric conflicts.

But what has all this meant for Singapore, a 'global' port-city located at the eastern fringe of that 'globalizing' arena? To what extent are the fortunes of Singapore bound up with the security and destiny of the Indian Ocean? From a geo-economic viewpoint, the stability of the Indian Ocean arena remains vital to Singapore, which, overlooking a key choke point and sea-lanes between two oceans, has long relied upon seaborne commerce for its viability. From a geo-strategic viewpoint, Singapore continues to espouse a multiplicity of policies and partnerships that it perceives would better guarantee its survival and success in the region. This paper examines the evolutionary dynamics of Singapore's strategic involvement in the Indian Ocean.

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Royal United Services Institute, October 2003). In addition to his research interests, Emrys has taught undergraduate courses on Imperialism and Nationalism at the University of Cambridge, examining cross-cultural interactions that have generated and shaped much of the modern world. He has also taught a course on Indian Ocean Security in the MSc (Strategic Studies) Programme at RSIS.

A MERLION AT THE EDGE OF AN AFRASIAN SEA: SINGAPORE'S STRATEGIC INVOLVEMENT IN THE INDIAN OCEAN¹

The Indian Ocean across time and space has been variously explored and described. Its historical narrative has been ignored or adapted according to the interests of its invaders as well as its inhabitants. Western narrators have often treated the Indian Ocean as an inert entity, part of a static and superstitious East, impacted upon by extra-regional and largely Western influences. Indigenous narrators have told the other side of the story from their own cultural and national perspectives. Yet against the sometimes overlapping claims of *Pax Indica*, *Pax Sinica*, *Pax Islamica*, *Pax Britannica* and *Pax Americana*, the ocean was never a 'lake' controlled or owned exclusively by any single power based outside or inside its geographical boundaries. Bounded by the continental land masses of Africa and Asia, there is a sense in which it was less of an 'Indian' ocean than a vast 'Afrasian Sea'.²

For millennia, and not merely centuries, it was a cosmopolitan arena animated by waves of cross-cultural interaction between East and West. Over the rhythms of the *longue durée*, Asians, Africans and Caucasians became collective participants in a sophisticated structure of commerce and politics shaped by the cycle of monsoon winds. The Indian Ocean arena, extending to the South China Sea, had been central in international history well before the rise of the Mediterranean-Atlantic and the Pacific. It encompassed as a core region the earliest processes of 'pre-modern' as well as 'modern' globalization, in which varied indigenous patterns of commercialization and consumption were only gradually subordinated to the market-driven, profit-maximizing forces of Euro-American capitalism and subsumed within an evolving Capitalist World System.³ The Indian Ocean's centrality in the international system

¹An earlier draft of this paper was presented at a conference sponsored by the Levy Chair of Economic Geography and Security and the Strategic Research Department, US Naval War College, Newport, Rhode Island. The conference was held on 14-15 May 2008 and its overall theme was 'The Indian Ocean: Security Challenges and Opportunities for Cooperation'.

²M. N. Pearson, *The Indian Ocean* (London; New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 13-14.

³C. A. Bayly, "'Archaic" and "Modern" Globalization in the Eurasian and African Arena', in A. G. Hopkins (ed.), *Globalization in World History* (London: Pimlico, 2002), pp. 47-73; 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. Also see K. N. Chaudhuri, *Asia before Europe: Economy and Civilisation of the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). Historians have broadly applied the term 'pre-modern' to the era before A.D. 1500, and the term 'modern' to the era thereafter. Some scholars have been tempted to apply yet another term—

has again become apparent with the end of the Western colonial empires and the emergence of independent nation-states throughout Africa and Asia. More recently, this focus has been sharpened with the conclusion of the Cold War, the concurrent rise of India and China, the growing concerns over energy supplies, and the continuation of post-9/11 asymmetric conflicts.⁴

But what has all this meant for Singapore, a ‘global’ maritime city-state located at the eastern periphery of that ‘globalizing’ arena? To what extent are the fortunes of *Singapura* (‘Lion City’) bound up with the security and destiny of the wider Indian Ocean? From a geo-economic viewpoint, the stability of the Indian Ocean arena remains vital to Singapore, which, astride a key choke point and sea-lanes between two oceans, has long relied upon seaborne commerce for its viability. From a geo-strategic viewpoint, Singapore continues to espouse a multiplicity of policies and partnerships that it perceives would better guarantee its survival and success in the region. This paper attempts to explore, as others have not, the evolutionary dynamics of Singapore’s strategic involvement in the Indian Ocean—a ‘Merlion’ at the edge of an ‘Afrasian Sea’.⁵

Singapore’s Interests in the Indian Ocean

Amid the long-term cycles and cadences of Indian Ocean history, Singapore’s significance has derived chiefly from its key geographical location on the India-China maritime trade route. Poised at the crossroads between the Indian and Pacific oceans, Singapore may be viewed as a Janus-faced portal, looking simultaneously westward

‘post-modern’—to the era starting to emerge after 2000. I have preferred to use the terms ‘colonial’ and ‘post-colonial’ when writing about ‘modern’ Singapore from the nineteenth century to the present.

⁴See my earlier historical overview, E. M. Chew, ‘Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon: The Indian Ocean and the Maritime Balance of Power in Historical Perspective’, *RSIS Working Paper Series No. 144* (October 2007). Also see K. McPherson, *The Indian Ocean: A History of People and The Sea* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 4-75; and Pearson, *The Indian Ocean*, pp. 3-4, 281-88.

⁵For more on ‘Merlion’, see T. Koh (ed.), *Singapore: The Encyclopedia* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet and National Heritage Board, 2006), p. 349. The Merlion is a mythical creature with the body of a fish and the head of a lion. Merlions feature in various cultural traditions, but the most ancient are to be found on Indian murals at Ajanta and Mathura, and on Etruscan coins of the Hellenistic period. The original idea of adapting the Merlion to represent Singapore dates back to 1964—the year before national independence—when the newly established Singapore Tourist Promotion Board (precursor of the Singapore Tourism Board) unveiled a logo depicting a Merlion floating above stylized waves, over a motto with the words ‘Lion City’. Singapore’s Merlion sculpture is a famous local landmark, situated at the mouth of the Singapore River.

as well as eastward. Such strategic geography had been crucial to the existence of the ancient island-emporium that was Temasek-Singapura. It would prove just as crucial to the progress of modern Singapore as a ‘global’ port-city throughout the colonial and post-colonial eras.⁶

An examination of eclectic sources will, first of all, enable us to pinpoint Singapore’s origins within the framework of pre-modern Indian Ocean history. Early Greek references to the eastern periphery of the Indian Ocean arena had hinted dimly at the commercial significance of various places in maritime Southeast Asia. Based on those topographical sketches, thirteenth-century European cartographers drew a map of the Indian Ocean depicting the southern end of the Malay Peninsula as an *emporion*, a node in a network of international commerce.⁷ But the earliest surviving eyewitness account has a distinctly oriental perspective; the fourteenth-century Chinese traveller Wang Dayuan composed a fairly detailed narrative about two oceans—a western ocean and an eastern ocean—with their division at the Malacca-Singapore Straits.⁸

Even more compelling is fourteenth-century archaeological evidence that confirms the existence of an ancient emporium on Singapore Island itself. In the analysis of archaeologist-historian John Miksic, this Indo-Islamic *negara* had served

⁶Looking at the wider historical canvas, the geography of the Indian Ocean arena certainly did support the evolution of large continental polities, such as the great land empires in Turkey and Iran (to the west), India (to the north), and China (to the east). Up until the early modern period, such geopolitical evolution stemmed from a more complex symbiotic relationship between land caravans and transoceanic shipping, involving the agrarian economies of the hinterland, which controlled the centres of production, and the nodes and networks of long-distance seaborne commerce, which encompassed the circuits of exchange and redistribution. Uniquely characteristic was the manner in which the seasonal monsoon cycle sustained over many centuries the growth of seaborne commerce and ‘bazaar culture’ in port-cities around the Indian Ocean. All such port-cities would serve as bridgeheads or hinges, connecting different maritime zones. But those drawing goods from the hinterland have been tied more intimately to the affairs of the interior (e.g. Sofala, Kilwa, Zanzibar, Mombasa, Bombay, Surat, Colombo, Jakarta, Bangkok). Others would draw little or nothing from the interior, functioning rather as redistribution centres dependent upon the ebb and flow of commercial traffic (e.g. Aden, Hormuz, Malacca, Singapore). These emporia or ‘entrepôt’ ports would typically be situated near the ocean’s strategic choke points: the Bab-el-Mandeb and the Strait of Hormuz in the western Indian Ocean, the gateways to the Mediterranean-Atlantic; and the Straits of Malacca and Singapore at the edge of the eastern Indian Ocean, the conduits opening out to the South China Sea and the Pacific Ocean. See Pearson, *The Indian Ocean*, pp. 30-45.

⁷P. Wheatley, *The Golden Khersonese: Studies in the Historical Geography of the Malay Peninsula before A.D. 1500* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1961), pp. 151-52. This thirteenth-century map incorporated data collected by an Alexandrian Greek named Claudius Ptolemaeus around A.D. 100 and compiled by a Byzantine monk around A.D. 1000.

⁸R. Ptak, ‘Images of Maritime Asia in Two Yuan Texts: *Daoyi zhilue* and *Yiyu zhi*’, in R. Ptak, *China and the Asian Seas: Trade, Travel and Visions of the Other (1400-1750)* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1998), especially p. 55; 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. 20-22.

‘as a major node of the long-distance maritime communication network on the routes between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea’.⁹ Indeed, the two names accorded to the archaic island-polity reflect its maritime orientation as much as the cultural influence of Indianization, which had rippled over much of the eastern Indian Ocean in previous centuries: *Temasek* (‘Sea Town’ in Javanese) and *Singapura* (‘Lion City’ in Sanskrit). However, like so many other small Indian Ocean polities that came before or after it, Temasek-Singapura appeared to rise and flourish for a time, only to fall and crumble into obscurity as waves of political upheaval and foreign invasion swept over it.¹⁰

How then was it possible for a modern ‘global’ city-state to emerge out of those ancient ruins, where so many of the Indian Ocean’s maritime emporia were destined never to experience anything more than a mercantile renaissance? And how has a ‘reinvented’ Singapore been able to either endure or engage more contemporary cycles of global crisis and transformation sweeping across the Indian Ocean arena?

There was at once something old and something new about colonial Singapore, combining geo-economic factors which had defined its pre-colonial past with ‘global’ features that would shape its post-colonial future. When the British founded their new trading outpost on Singapore Island in 1819, Sir Stamford Raffles had been among the first to acknowledge the prior existence of ‘the ruins of the ancient capital of Singapura’ that both the European and Indian Ocean worlds had become ‘ignorant of’.¹¹ Yet the British colonial regime in Singapore did not simply

⁹J. N. Miksic, *Archaeological Research on the ‘Forbidden Hill’ of Singapore: Excavations at Fort Canning, 1984* (Singapore: National Museum, 1985), p. 17. The word *negara* originally derives from Sanskrit and refers to a polity—city, state or nation—within the Indo-Islamic or Malay world. The Ming Admiral Zheng He, a Chinese Muslim, is credited with sailing his fleet through Singapore’s Keppel Harbour while homeward bound from the Indian Ocean on his seventh voyage in 1433.

¹⁰E. C. T. Chew and E. Lee (eds), *A History of Singapore* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 4-6, 10-14. Also see the chapters by C. G. Kwa, ‘Sailing Past Singapore’ and ‘From Temasek to Singapore: Locating a Global City-State in the Cycles of Melaka Straits History’, in J. N. Miksic and C. M. G. Low (eds), *Early Singapore 1300s-1819: Evidence in Maps, Text and Artefacts* (Singapore: Singapore History Museum, 2004), pp. 95-105 and 124-46, respectively. Although the polity had disintegrated, the waterway itself remained a well-defined route in the sixteenth century when Portuguese mariners, in their caravels and carracks, traversed the Malacca-Singapore Straits and the South China Sea on voyages between Cochin (in India) and Macau. In the *Commentaries* of Portuguese conqueror Afonso de Albuquerque, it was significantly referred to as the ‘gate to Singapura’. This term recurred as ‘Strait of Sincapura’ when described by Dutchman Jan Huyghen van Linschoten in 1595, and also as ‘gate of *Tan-ma-hsi*’ (or Temasek) in a Chinese pilots’ directory of the seventeenth century. The route through Singapore’s Keppel channel would pass out of use, however, and had to be rediscovered by the British in the early nineteenth century.

¹¹T. S. Raffles, ‘The Founding of Singapore’, in *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 2, pp. 175-82; reprinted in M. Sheppard (ed.), *Singapore 150 years* (Singapore: Times Books International, 1982), pp. 87-93; T. S. Raffles, ‘British Commercial Policy in the East Indies,

reconstruct the traditional Indian Ocean maritime emporium with its typically cosmopolitan bazaar culture. Neither would they simply reproduce the Regency-period fabric or Victorian architecture of a British coastal municipality transformed by the engines of industry. Colonial Singapore was a hybrid port-city that incorporated indigenous, imperial and industrial features; a ‘free port’ that presented a more attractive alternative to the monopolistic Dutch colonial ports; a regional transshipment centre that served maritime Southeast Asia in addition to the oceans on either side; and, increasingly, an international entrepôt that operated to maximize profits within the larger Capitalist World System. Singapore’s diasporic migrant communities formed a ‘plural society’ that was not merely cosmopolitan in character but internationalist in outlook—in the long term better able to adapt to the socio-economic and cultural demands of modern globalization.¹²

The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 would significantly enhance Singapore’s prospects as a global port-city. The Suez Canal not only accelerated the passage of steamships from Europe to the Far East, but also augmented the volume of seaborne commerce transiting the Malacca-Singapore Straits. Wong Lin Ken, formerly Raffles Professor of History at the National University of Singapore, has observed: “Singapore’s trade showed a greater rate of growth between 1869 and 1914 than in the first fifty years of its modern existence, for it became an essential link between the industrial world of the West and the developing export economies of colonial Southeast Asia.”¹³ Even when the Panama Canal was opened in 1914, shortly before the outbreak of the First World War, it was still cheaper to convey goods from

1819’, in V. Harlow and F. Madden (eds), *British Colonial Developments 1774-1834* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1953), p. 73.

¹²See L. K. Wong, ‘The Trade of Singapore, 1819-69’, *Journal of the Malayan Branch, Royal Asiatic Society*, 33:4 (1960), pp. 11-204; T. R. Metcalf, ‘Imperial Towns and Cities’, in P. J. Marshall (ed.), *The Cambridge Illustrated History of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 224-53; T. Harper, ‘Empire, Diaspora and the Languages of Globalism, 1850-1914’, in Hopkins (ed.), *Globalization in World History*, pp. 141-66. Also see S. Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 13, 274. The emergence of Singapore’s ‘plural society’ was part of wider diasporic movements and demographic shifts across the Indian Ocean. While the Indian Ocean was being turned into a primarily ‘British Lake’, the historian Sugata Bose has noted that 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 combined Indian and Chinese networks of trade and finance would provide a crucial intermediate ‘bazaar nexus’ that linked Western capital to diverse indigenous communities.

¹³L. K. Wong, ‘Commercial Growth before the Second World War’, in Chew and Lee (eds), *A History of Singapore*, p. 52.

East Asia to the Atlantic seaboard ports of the United States via Singapore, the Indian Ocean and the Suez Canal.¹⁴

Meanwhile, Singapore continued to attract regional traders in an assortment of indigenous (not to mention, ingenious) sailing vessels:

[I]t is not so much from the fine character of its foreign merchantment that the harbour of Singapore is chiefly remarkable; it is rather from the extraordinary variety of nondescript native craft that swarm in its shoaler waters. ... There are the prahus, pukats and tongkangs, besides some completely illegitimate ships in the shape of old European hulls, which their Chinese owners, with a strange persistency in their national distinctions, have had cut down, patched and rigged to look as near the junk genus as possible.¹⁵

Another contemporary account, narrated by an English aristocratic lady on a voyage across the Indian Ocean, is particularly evocative:

Towards the end of the south-west monsoon, little native open boats arrive from the islands 1,500 to 3,000 miles to the southward of Singapore. Each has one little tripod mast. The whole family live on board. The sides of the boat cannot be seen for the multitudes of cockatoos, parrots, parakeets, and birds of all sorts, fastened on little perches, with very short strings attached to them. The decks are covered in sandalwood. The holds are full of spice, shells, feathers, and South Sea pearl shells. With this cargo they creep from island to island, and from creek to creek, before the monsoon, till they reach their destination. They stay a month or six weeks, change their goods for iron, nails, a certain amount of pale green or red thread for weaving, and some pieces of Manchester cotton. They then go back with the north-east monsoon, selling their goods at the various islands on their homeward route. There are many Dutch ports nearer than Singapore, but they are over-regulated, and preference is given to the free English port, where the simple natives can do as they like so long as they do not transgress the laws.¹⁶

The poet Rudyard Kipling would go on to memorialize Singapore's pivotal role in the expansion of a cross-cultural commerce that could now be described as transnational,

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵J. Cameron, *Our Tropical Possessions in Malayan India, being a Descriptive Account of Singapore, Penang, Province Wellesley, and Malacca: Their People, Products, and Government* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1865), pp. 39, 44.

¹⁶A. Brassey, *A Voyage in the Sunbeam: Our Home on the Ocean for Eleven Months* (London: Longmans, Green, 1878), p. 412.

if not global. In Kipling's 'The Song of the Cities', we hear the voice of Singapore personified:

... *East and West must seek my aid*
Ere the spent hull may dare the ports afar.
The second doorway of the wide world's trade
*Is mine to loose or bar.*¹⁷

Travel literature and poetic licence aside, modern Singapore did indeed become the greatest port in the eastern Indian Ocean region before the Second World War.

But how significant during the colonial period were Singapore's commercial interests within the Indian Ocean arena itself? Annual trade returns from between 1824 and 1937 indicate that the proportion of Singapore's trade with countries along the Indian Ocean littoral—including India, mainland and maritime Southeast Asia, Australasia, Arabia, the Persian Gulf and East Africa—experienced a fairly consistent downward trend. It was at its highest around 1825, when trade with India and Southeast Asia alone amounted to 68 percent of Singapore's total trade, and at its lowest in 1937, when trade with India, Southeast Asia and Australasia amounted to 44 percent of Singapore's total trade.¹⁸ Such 'decline' was, of course, only proportional: it reflected Singapore's progressive integration into the emerging global economy; and it was relative to the expansion of a worldwide trade that also encompassed East Asia (mainly China) and, increasingly, the West (Britain, Europe and the United States).

On the other hand, these evolving patterns of regional integration and global interdependence could lead to more pronounced vulnerabilities. The Great Depression of the 1930s would have a decidedly dampening effect. There would be another hiatus during the Japanese invasion and occupation of Singapore (1942-45) as attempts were made to forcibly integrate Singapore—renamed *Syonan* ('Light of the South')—into

¹⁷R. Kipling, *Selected Poems* (London: The Folio Society, 2004), p. 50.

¹⁸Trade figures derived from C. P. Holloway, *The Tabular Statements of the Commerce of Singapore during the Years 1823-1823 to 1839-1840 Inclusive, Showing the Nature and Extent of the Trade Carried on with Each Country and State* (Singapore: Mission Press, 1842); and *Annual Trade Returns, Singapore*, cited by L. K. Wong in Chew and Lee (eds), *A History of Singapore*, pp. 42-54. Also see Wong, 'The Trade of Singapore, 1819-69', pp. 205-301. 'Southeast Asia' here referring to Burma, Malaya and Northern Borneo (progressively integrated into the British colonial sphere); Indo-China (progressively annexed by France); the Philippines (at first a Spanish colony, then 'liberated' by the United States after 1898); and the Dutch East Indies. Only Siam remained independent.

an exclusive ‘Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere’ focused on the Pacific. Fortunately, modern Singapore did not go the way of ancient Temasek-Singapura. The long years of peaceful growth under the aegis of *Pax Britannica* had generated sufficient economic infrastructure and global trade connections to enable Singapore to survive the trauma of wartime occupation as well as the long winter of the Cold War (1945-89) when it descended upon the Indian Ocean.

Nevertheless, changes in the political climate after 1945 would bring about shifts in both the balance of Singapore’s interests between two oceans and the direction of Singapore’s economic development. Post-1945, the geopolitics of bipolar superpower rivalry, regional non-alignment, and British decolonization ‘east of Suez’ would draw Singapore increasingly into the orbit of a new Asia-Pacific system under the wings of America.¹⁹ Protracted nationalist struggles and protectionist economic nationalism across the Indian Ocean arena further raised doubts over Singapore’s long-term reliance on entrepôt trade to generate increased employment and economic growth. Securing its independence in 1965, post-colonial Singapore embarked on a new phase of economic restructuring oriented towards the Asia-Pacific, which emphasized the additional development of manufacturing and service industries—and their diversification—based on the free-enterprise capitalist model.²⁰

Such a transition would ultimately lead to Singapore’s reinvention as a ‘Global City’, linked to other cities and continents not simply by the waves of an historic ocean, but also the waves of modern technology. In the words of S. Rajaratnam, Singapore’s first Foreign Minister, speaking in 1972:

Singapore is transforming itself into a new kind of city—a Global City. ... It is the city that electronic communications, supersonic planes, giant tankers and modern economic and industrial organization have made inevitable.

If we view Singapore’s future not as a regional city but as a Global City, then the smallness of Singapore, the absence of a hinterland, or raw materials and a large domestic market are not fatal or insurmountable handicaps. It would explain why, since independence, we have been successful economically and, consequently, have ensured political and social stability.

¹⁹J. Baker, *The Eagle in the Lion City: America, Americans and Singapore* (Singapore: Landmark Books, 2005), pp. 229-49.

²⁰Chew and Lee (eds), *A History of Singapore*, pp. 182-215.

[O]nce you see Singapore as a Global City, the problem of hinterland becomes unimportant because for a Global City, the world is its hinterland.²¹

Rajaratnam's words in no way undermine Singapore's place within the earlier cycles of global interconnection that shaped Indian Ocean history as a whole. His speech at the time was prophetic, however, because it pierced through an uncertain horizon and pointed ahead to a type of globalization that had not fully dawned.

It was to be a form of globalization that could simultaneously engage the arenas of the Indian Ocean, the Euro-Atlantic and the Asia-Pacific, eventually linking all of them through networks in maritime space, air space, outer space and cyberspace. Global cities like Singapore would experience new levels of interdependence as nodes in multi-dimensional transoceanic networks. Already the demands of modern industry and technology were enlarging Singapore's dependence on oil from the western Indian Ocean region: Saudi Arabia's share of Singapore's import trade rose from around 1 percent (in the early 1960s) to 13 percent (in 1975-77) owing to a massive increase in the volume and value of petroleum imports.²² Yet the worldwide revolution in information technology and web-based internet communication lay in the future, as did Singapore's post-Cold War regionalization strategy of investment in emerging economies.

From the early 1990s, the radically altered geopolitical scenario following the end of the Cold War led to a revival of Singapore's interests in the Indian Ocean arena. Faced with growing competition from a rising China 'looking west', Singapore as part of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) soon pushed for greater economic integration in the eastern Indian Ocean region.²³ Since 1992, there have been increased flows of trade and investment involving Singapore and its neighbours within an ASEAN Free Trade Area. There is scope for further integration through the concept of e-ASEAN (via information and communications technology),

²¹S. Rajaratnam, 'Singapore: Global City', in H. C. Chan and O. ul Haq (eds), *The Prophetic and the Political* (Singapore: G. Brash; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), pp. 225-27. This speech was originally delivered to the Singapore Press Club on 6 February 1972, which was incidentally the 153rd anniversary of the founding of colonial Singapore.

²²*Yearbook of Statistics, Singapore*, cited by S. H. Cheng in Chew and Lee (eds), *A History of Singapore*, pp. 200-1.

²³For a discussion of the rationale behind Singapore's regionalization strategy of investment abroad and the concerns of Singaporeans at home, see K. M. Campbell, D. J. Campbell and A. Chia, 'Regionalisation: Policy Issues for Singapore', in L. Low and D. M. Johnston (eds), *Singapore Inc.: Public Policy Options in the Third Millennium* (Singapore: Asia Pacific Press, 2001), pp. 113-30.

as well as the ASEAN Economic Community proposed in 2003 by Singapore's then Prime Minister (and current Senior Minister) Goh Chok Tong.²⁴

Beyond Southeast Asia, Singapore has also engaged a rising India 'looking east'. Goh Chok Tong summed up the moment: "Just as India has looked east, Singapore has looked west towards India. Our ties are intertwined through history, language and culture."²⁵ India's economic liberalization efforts have dovetailed nicely with Singapore's regionalization strategy of investing in emerging economies. By 2003, Singapore-India trade was worth US\$4.6 billion and India had become Singapore's 14th largest trading partner; Singapore had become the 11th largest foreign investor in India, with cumulative investments worth US\$1.6 billion.²⁶ Further growth was achieved when Singapore and India signed a Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) in 2005, which included agreements on the trade in goods and services, investment, e-commerce, intellectual property, technology, educational exchanges and dispute settlement.²⁷ The CECA has effectively linked India to ASEAN through its presence in Singapore, which Singapore's current Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has characterized as 'India's natural gateway to engage our region'.²⁸ In 2005, Singapore-India trade (worth US\$7 billion) was nearly half of the total ASEAN-India trade (worth US\$15 billion).²⁹

At the same time, Singapore has further developed links with states along the western Indian Ocean littoral. With states such as Kenya or Kuwait, mutual trade and investment opportunities have been sealed by agreements and encouraged through the expansion of airline services, banking facilities and professional training programmes.³⁰ Singapore has even provided assistance in the management and

²⁴Koh (ed.), *Singapore: The Encyclopedia*, p. 50. Also see text of 'Declaration of ASEAN Concord II (Bali Concord II)', 7 October 2003, retrieved on 3 May 2008 from <http://www.aseansec.org/15159.htm>.

²⁵Speech by Goh Chok Tong, then Prime Minister of Singapore, delivered at an official dinner hosted by Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, 9 July 2004.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Koh (ed.), *Singapore: The Encyclopedia*, p. 246. Also see text of speech by George Yeo, then Singapore's Minister for Trade and Industry, at the launch of 'Network India', *Singapore Government Press Release*, 18 October 2002.

²⁸Speech by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, 'Linking up to a Rising Asia', *Singapore Government Press Release*, 30 June 2005.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰T. Koh and L. L. Chang (eds), *The Little Red Dot: Reflections by Singapore's Diplomats* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2005), pp. 363-65. Through the Singapore Cooperation Programme (SCP), Singapore continues to share its experience of development with developing countries and emerging economies. Its training programmes reflect Singapore's areas of expertise, which include public administration,

upgrading of regional port facilities. While the Port of Singapore Authority (PSA) has acquired a stake in the management of several Indian ports, what must have surely raised eyebrows in New Delhi was PSA's takeover of multi-billion dollar operations at the Pakistani port of Gwadar in 2007.³¹ But again, this development needs to be viewed against Singapore's wider business outreach in the western Indian Ocean; as the late Michael Leifer, Emeritus Professor of International Relations at the London School of Economics, once commented: "Singapore is primarily about the business of business."³² In 1998, PSA upgraded the Yemeni port of Aden, with hopes of transforming it into a regional transshipment centre. Although PSA would pull out after the 2002 terrorist attack on French-registered tanker *Limburg* raised insurance premiums in regional waters, driving away shipping lines, this has not deterred Singapore's Overseas Port Management (OPM)—a private company run by several former PSA veterans—from taking over. True to Singapore's profit-maximizing entrepreneurial roots, OPM is currently spearheading a group of global investors in a US\$450 million project to upgrade and expand Aden.³³

In 2004, Singapore's Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong also made a series of high-level official visits to the Middle East. The following year, Singapore hosted the inaugural Asia-Middle East Dialogue (AMED), which has paved the way for several bilateral agreements. In 2007, the Singapore Business Federation launched the Middle East Business Group to synergize links between business chambers and companies from both sides and to provide consultations for local companies with business interests in Middle Eastern economies. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states—Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain and Oman—have been of particular interest to Singapore because the revenues generated by the energy

civil service reform, urban development, civil aviation, port and customs management, information technology, and tourism.

³¹'Singapore takes over Pakistani port', *Asia Times Online*, 8 February 2007, retrieved on 5 May 2008 at http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/IB08Df03.html. Gwadar port, which will be complemented by an air defence unit, a garrison and an international airport, has been largely developed with Chinese aid and has the potential to become a Chinese submarine base safeguarding China's energy supply lines across the Indian Ocean.

³²M. Leifer, *Singapore's Foreign Policy: Coping with Vulnerability* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 14. In saying this, Leifer was echoing US President Calvin Coolidge's 'The business of America is business'.

³³'Shipping: Arabian Fights', *The Economist (US)*, 10 April 1999, vol. 351; and Portworld news report, 'Singapore firm spearheads Yemeni port expansion', 21 May 2007, retrieved on 3 May 2008 from <http://www.portworld.com/news/2007/05/67882?gsid=7834da94a45e0d3908e2501d44978ba2&asi=1>.

industry have opened up avenues for investment in new economic sectors such as tourism, bio-industry and real estate.³⁴

Singapore at the other end of the Indian Ocean presents an ideal partner. Its port has evolved into the busiest container port in the world, handling nearly one-fifth of the world's total container transshipment throughput, linking shippers to 200 shipping lines with connections to 600 ports in 123 countries.³⁵ In addition to being one of the world's busiest cargo airports, its international airport at Changi is linked by more than 80 passenger airlines to over 180 cities in over 50 countries.³⁶ With its proven track record of stable public administration, sound finance, sophisticated infrastructures and strong industries—including oil refining, ship-repairing, electronics and, more recently, bio-chemicals—Singapore has become more than just the 'Global City' of Rajaratnam's vision.

Singapore's Strategy toward the Indian Ocean

While Singapore has benefited immensely from its strategic geographical position on the India-China maritime route, the island city-state does not have an overarching 'Indian Ocean strategy'. In the colonial period, the fortunes of Singapore were largely bound up with the commercial and strategic calculations of the Western great powers—and especially the British—with their policies of blue-water expansion across the Indian Ocean.³⁷ In the post-colonial era, Singapore has also featured in

³⁴B. Silm, 'Reviving the Silk Road and the Role of Singapore', *Biblioasia*, 4:1 (April 2008). For an official summary of Singapore's revived interest and growing involvement in the Indian Ocean, including highlights of recent bilateral agreements and ministerial visits, refer to the sections on South Asia, the Middle East and Africa in the 'International Relations' chapter of *Singapore Yearbook, 2004, 2005 and 2006* (Singapore: Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, 2004, 2005 and 2006).

³⁵J. Tongzon, 'The Future of the Port of Singapore as a Transshipment Hub', in Low and Johnston (eds), *Singapore Inc.*, pp. 85-112; and the homepage of 'PSA: The World's Port of Call', retrieved on 3 May 2008 from <http://www.singaporepsa.com/index.html>.

³⁶See Singapore Changi Airport website, these figures retrieved on 6 May 2008 from http://www.changiairport.com/changi/en/about_us/introduction.html.

³⁷Murfett, Miksic, Farrell and Chiang, *Between Two Oceans*, especially pp. 87-117, 145-247; 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); and J. L. Neidpath, *The Singapore Naval Base and the Defence of Britain's Eastern Empire, 1918-1941* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981). In a speech delivered on 8 April 2002, Singapore's then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong made the observation that 'during the British Raj, when India was the jewel in the Crown, Singapore was a small, semi-precious stone on the side'.

intra-regional strategies of blue-water expansion, most notably those of India.³⁸ There is a sense in which Kipling's earlier verse about Singapore's ability to 'loose or bar' the 'second gateway of the wide world's trade' applies in that strategic context; if any great power were to control Singapore, its capacity to influence navigation along economically and strategically important straits—only some 40 miles wide—would be considerable.³⁹ As an independent yet vulnerable island-state, Singapore has had to evolve a host of balancing and developmental strategies to ensure its survival and safeguard its success in the region: first, in relation to its immediate Southeast Asian neighbours, and then in the wider context of Indo-Pacific geopolitics.

Singapore's lack of a cohesive 'Indian Ocean strategy' has much to do with the ebb and flow of post-1945 international history. From the end of the Pacific War in 1945 to Britain's final withdrawal from Singapore in 1971, Singapore was caught up in the politics of survival in a period of geopolitical flux and geo-strategic uncertainty. Bi-polar superpower rivalry and Britain's progressive decolonization 'east of Suez' paved the way for significant ideological and geo-strategic realignments around the world. These realignments would come to include indigenous nationalist attempts at some form of neutral 'Afrasian' unity revolving around the Indian Ocean, as well as American-led efforts to interweave strands of capitalist-economic and military-strategic partnership between the United States and its Pacific allies under the 'San Francisco System'. Post-1945 Singapore, having to survive politically and strategically torn between two divergent ocean-based systems, would be drawn increasingly to the Pacific.

³⁸The British Viceroy Lord Curzon regarded the Indian Ocean as India's natural strategic space. But India, too, has had its nationalist 'prophets'. See K. M. Panikkar, *India and the Indian Ocean: An Essay on the Influence of Sea Power on Indian History* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1951), pp. 8, 14-16; K. Vaidya, *The Naval Defence of India* (Bombay: Thacker, 1949), pp. 1, 91, 101. "Even if we do not rule the waves of all the five oceans of the world," noted K. Vaidya, "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." 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 K. M. 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 Madagascar (to the south)—which might stand India in good stead to face China as a potential future challenger and rival in the region. For excellent analysis of the historical challenges confronted by the British imperial defence system and independent India's growing naval involvement in the Indian Ocean, see P. J. Brobst, *The Future of the Great Game: Sir Olaf Caroe, India's Independence, and the Defense of Asia* (Akron, Ohio: University of Akron Press, 2004).

³⁹L. K. Wong, 'The Strategic Significance of Singapore in Modern History', in Chew and Lee (eds), *A History of Singapore*, p. 18.

In the decades after 1945, the cosmopolitan Indian Ocean of time and memory was gradually reduced to a ‘non-aligned’ sea of forgetfulness. At an Asian Relations Conference in 1947, held shortly before he became Prime Minister of independent India, Jawaharlal Nehru had been among the first to raise the possibility of a non-aligned Indian Ocean region. But as autarkic India was increasingly sidetracked by its Cold War connection with the Soviet Union as part of a broader strategic alignment against China-US-Pakistan alliances, this idea got frozen until the Non-Aligned Meeting at Lusaka in 1970, when proposals for an Indian Ocean ‘Zone of Peace’ were at last adopted.⁴⁰ The following year, the United Nations General Assembly declared the Indian Ocean a Zone of Peace, and it created an Ad Hoc Committee on the Indian Ocean to find ways to implement the declaration. Yet the Zone of Peace never really materialized, in spite of over 450 meetings of the Committee. India, perhaps hoping to become the dominant regional power, had succeeded in amending the initial proposal so that it circumscribed the activities of extra-regional powers. While support was generally forthcoming from all the littoral states, including Singapore, neither the United States nor the Soviet Union was interested. Then, in 1989, key Western members of the Committee pulled out, arguing that superpower rivalry in the Indian Ocean had diminished with the end of the Cold War, rendering a Zone of Peace purposeless.⁴¹

Still, some littoral states were convinced of the need to band together for the purpose of regional economic cooperation, seeing the apparent triumph of the Capitalist World System—including the re-entry of both India and China—plus the advent of a new age of globalization. The Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC) was founded in Mauritius in March 1997, with Singapore as one of its founding members. Its aim has been to facilitate trade and investment between member states, which also include Australia, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Madagascar, Malaysia, Mauritius, Mozambique, Oman, South Africa, Sri Lanka,

⁴⁰For more background on shifting Cold War alignments on the Indian subcontinent, see my earlier piece, E. M. Chew, ‘Globalization and Military-Industrial Transformation in South Asia: An Historical Perspective’, *RSIS Working Paper Series No. 110* (April 2006), pp. 4-5.

⁴¹Pearson, *The Indian Ocean*, p. 286; D. L. Berlin, ‘Neglected No Longer: Strategic Rivalry in the Indian Ocean’, *Harvard International Review* (June 2002). Also 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); and M. N. Pearson, ‘Indian Ocean: Regional Navies’, in J. B. Hattendorf (ed.), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Maritime History*, vol. 2 (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press), pp. 211-15.

Tanzania and Yemen, and Bangladesh, Iran, Thailand and the United Arab Emirates. Dialogue partners include Britain, France, Egypt, Japan and China. For its part, Singapore has been sending delegations to IOR-ARC meetings on a regular basis; Zainul Abidin Rasheed, Singapore's Senior Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, was in Tehran to attend the most recent Council of Ministers Meeting in May 2008.⁴² As a result of Singapore's regionalization strategy of investing in emerging economies over the past decade or so, Singapore is perhaps more keen than it has been in decades to support multilateral approaches that could advance economic and strategic cooperation in this arena.

All in all, however, IOR-ARC seems to have stagnated. Member states have widely divergent national interests and political economies, and it has been difficult to make progress towards regional cooperation or integration. Three leading member states—Australia, India and South Africa—appear to have lost interest. Most member states already belong to other regional groupings, with possibly competing or conflicting interests, such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and ASEAN. Much economic activity in the Indian Ocean arena is also oriented externally. In contrast with the close economic ties of states around the North Atlantic, intra-Indian Ocean trade comprises less than one-quarter of its total trade. In the case of the Indian Ocean, the global dimension seems to have actually detracted from the idea of establishing effective multilateralism around the ocean.⁴³

On the other hand, it is clear that the seaborne cycles of trade and politics after 1945 had the countervailing effect of shifting the balance of Singapore's economic and strategic interests towards the Asia-Pacific. By enmeshing defeated Japan in a network of US-centred relationships that protected Japan from the Soviet Union and China, and protected the smaller states that had been victims of Japan's wartime aggression from the consequences of Japan's post-war economic rise, the San Francisco Peace Treaty process of 1950-51 contributed to the formation of an Asia-

⁴²'Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation', *Indian Ocean Review*, 13:1 (March 2000), pp. 3-7; 'SMS Zainul's visit to Iran from 30 Apr to 4 May 08', *MFA Press Statement*, 5 May 2008, retrieved on 5 May 2008 at http://app.mfa.gov.sg/2006/press/view_press.asp?post_id=3950.

⁴³S. Bateman, 'The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium—Will the Navies of the Indian Ocean Region Unite?', *RSIS Commentaries*, 35/2008 (17 March 2008); Pearson, *The Indian Ocean*, p. 286.

Pacific order from which Singapore could benefit.⁴⁴ For Singapore, this new order would soon become essential rather than merely beneficial, as Britain began to draw down its military forces ‘east of Suez’, withdrawing protection that had only been previously interrupted during the Japanese occupation.⁴⁵ Turning aside from the Indian Ocean, Singapore’s balancing and developmental strategies would be initially geared toward survival in the immediate Southeast Asian and Asia-Pacific contexts.

As an island-state transitioning from colonial dependence to post-colonial independence, Singapore was often caught up in a tricky balancing act on a choppy sea of competing local nationalisms betwixt the Indian and Pacific oceans. Modern Singapore was no longer the archaic Indo-Islamic polity of Temasek-Singapura; it had become an ethnically Chinese-majority island-state in a predominantly Muslim sea. Post-colonial Singapore was buffeted from the start by full-blown Confrontation with Indonesia (1963-66) and security challenges have arisen ever since, to a greater or lesser extent, in moments of contention with its Islamic neighbours. From the early 1960s through to the late 1970s, the communist insurgency in South Vietnam, Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia and the Sino-Vietnamese War generated further waves of ideological complexity and insecurity. Singapore’s political leadership and ‘plural’ society would have to cope with the pressures of transition by evolving a raft of equally ‘pluralistic’ foreign and defence policies.⁴⁶ S. Rajaratnam declared that because Singapore was perceived by the world and by its neighbours as a ‘strategic key’ in the region, ‘we shall ensure that our foreign policy and our defence policy do not increase tensions and fears among our neighbours’.⁴⁷

In terms of its foreign policy, Singapore’s strategy has been to always cultivate ‘a maximum of friends’ and ensure ‘a minimum of enemies’, as Rajaratnam

⁴⁴A. I. Latif, *Between Rising Powers: China, Singapore and India* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2007), pp. 19-20; K. E. Calder, ‘Securing Security through Prosperity: The San Francisco System in Comparative Perspective’, *Pacific Review*, 17:1 (March 2004), p. 136.

⁴⁵Murfett, Miksic, Farrell and Chiang, *Between Two Oceans*, pp. 280-305.

⁴⁶Leifer, *Singapore’s Foreign Policy*, provides a superb contemporary overview with incisive analysis. Areas of tension between Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore have ranged from religio-cultural affiliations and race relations through to creeping maritime jurisdiction and negotiations over the continuation of Singapore’s water supply from Malaysia.

⁴⁷S. Rajaratnam, ‘Framing Singapore’s Foreign Policy’, 16 December 1965, in C. G. Kwa (ed.), *S Rajaratnam on Singapore: From Ideas to Reality* (Singapore: World Scientific and Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, 2006), p. 28. Also see speech by Lee Hsien Loong, *Straits Times*, 6 November 1984. Two decades after Rajaratnam spoke, Singapore’s current Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, then Political Secretary (Defence), articulated four classes of strategy that could be applied to ensure the survival of small states like Singapore—development, diplomacy, deterrence and defence.

once put it.⁴⁸ From among those friends, Singapore would need to always have ‘overwhelming power on our side’, in the words of Singapore’s founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew.⁴⁹ Such a strategic approach would mean avoiding entanglement in the conflicts of major states while also securing access to ‘benign external countervailing power’ in the national interest; Michael Leifer has characterized this approach as ‘a paradoxical combination of non-alignment and balance of power, with an emphasis on the latter’.⁵⁰ With the disintegration of the British Empire and the rise of the United States as a global power, Singapore would come to rely on the latter’s ‘overwhelming power’ as the principal guarantor of its survival in the larger Asia-Pacific system. Post-colonial Singapore has sought to reconcile its friendship with America to the lasting development of intra-regional partnerships within ASEAN (founded in 1967) and a long-term strategy of encouraging the presence of all great powers, to ‘find it—if not in their interests to help us—at least in their interests not to have us go worse’.⁵¹

In terms of its defence policy, Singapore has embraced the concept of deterrence with an equally pluralistic approach. While the United States has played a far more significant role than any other power in those strategic calculations, Britain’s military-strategic retreat from ‘east of Suez’ would encourage Singapore’s involvement with a host of other defence partners. For example, Singapore has participated since 1971 in alternative Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) with Malaysia, Australia, New Zealand and Britain. In addition, Singapore would develop an indigenous defence establishment, initially with some assistance from Israeli military advisers who, it has to be said, shared the experience of being encircled by Islamic neighbours.⁵²

Singapore’s strategies in diplomacy and deterrence have evolved in tandem with Singapore’s development as a ‘Global City’. In the gradual transition from

⁴⁸S. Rajaratnam, quoted in Kwa (ed.), *S Rajaratnam on Singapore*, p. xii.

⁴⁹Speech by Singapore’s first Prime Minister (and current Minister Mentor) Lee Kuan Yew, ‘We Want to be Ourselves’, 9 October 1966.

⁵⁰Leifer, *Singapore’s Foreign Policy*, pp. 5-6.

⁵¹Speech by Lee Kuan Yew, ‘We Want to be Ourselves’, 9 October 1966. Also see O. ul Haq, ‘Foreign Policy’, in J. Quah, H. C. Chan and C. M. Seah (eds), *Government and Politics of Singapore* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 667. Even during the Cold War, as ul Haq has observed, this included the development of some economic links with China and the Soviet Union, with the aim of giving these states as well as the Western powers and Japan a ‘tangible stake in the prosperity, security and integrity of Singapore’.

⁵²T. Huxley, *Defending the Lion City: The Armed Forces of Singapore* (St Leonards, New South Wales: Allen and Unwin, 2000), pp. 36-40.

‘survival’ to ‘success’, Singapore’s traditionally defensive strategic posture has progressed to one that is more proactive and expeditionary. Some earlier commentators likened Singapore to a ‘poisonous shrimp’: a small creature, with bright warning colours, ultimately indigestible to predators. A fundamental problem with the ‘poisonous shrimp’ concept, however, was its implication that Singapore would first have to be eaten alive: the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) would have to wage a finally unwinnable war on home territory.⁵³ Such a defensive strategic posture would prove eventually incompatible with Singapore’s evolution from post-colonial independence to global interdependence. Over the years, Singapore’s greater emphasis on technological sophistication, as well as mobility and firepower, has propelled its defence establishment to a position of comparative primacy within Southeast Asia.⁵⁴ The island-state even inaugurated new naval bases at Tuas in 1994 and Changi in 2000. This ‘global’ transition has entailed a broadening of maritime security partnerships that could protect Singapore’s economic lifelines across the ‘globalizing’ arena some have called the Indo-Pacific.

Singapore’s Maritime Partnerships in the Indian Ocean

The flows of ‘globalized’ seaborne commerce and the fuelling of global supply chains across the Indo-Pacific are perhaps more vital than ever. Oil from the Middle East continues to be transported by a host of multinational companies operating through the Indian Ocean and Malacca-Singapore Straits, to be refined in Singapore before being moved onward to fuel economic development in Northeast Asia. The Malacca-Singapore Straits alone carry over 30 percent of the world’s commerce and 50 percent of the world’s oil.⁵⁵ Equally vital, as such, is the need for maritime partnerships capable of safeguarding the products of globalization, particularly against more insidious forms of asymmetric conflict.

⁵³Huxley, *Defending the Lion City*, pp. 56-57.

⁵⁴See A. Tan, ‘Force Modernization Trends in Southeast Asia’, *RSIS Working Paper Series No. 59* (January 2004).

⁵⁵Remarks by Teo Chee Hean, Singapore’s Minister for Defence, ‘Setting National Security Priorities’, delivered at the 5th Shangri-La Dialogue, 4 June 2006, retrieved on 6 May 2008 from iMINDEF: http://www.mindef.gov.sg/imindef/news_and_events/nr/2006/jun/04jun06_nr.html.

How has the security of globalization led to the globalization of security in the Indian Ocean arena? What are Singapore's perceptions of America's 'Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower', with its suggestion of a US-led 'Global Maritime Partnership' that could enhance Indian Ocean security? What are Singapore's perceptions of the growing strategic presence of India and China across the Indo-Pacific? And finally, what is the extent of Singapore's own participation, given its lack of an overarching Indian Ocean strategy?

This study has shown how basic patterns of global interconnection and interdependence were already present in the long-term cycles and cosmopolitanism of life around the Indian Ocean. However, the sheer reach and rapidity of modern sea-based globalization have made the transoceanic milieu increasingly responsive as well as vulnerable to disruption. In 1902, it was the American naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan who observed how

This, with the vast increase in rapidity of communication, has multiplied and strengthened the bonds knitting together the bonds of nations to one another, till the whole now forms an articulated system not only of prodigious size and activity, but of excessive sensitiveness, unequalled in former ages.⁵⁶

Over a century later, following two World Wars, one Cold War and the commencement of an international 'war on terror', America's latest maritime strategy—'A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower'—seems to have come full circle in echoing the concerns of Mahan. As of 2007, this strategy acknowledges the importance of applying seapower to 'protect and sustain the global, interconnected system through which we prosper'; it appreciates that American interests are best served by 'fostering a peaceful global system comprised of interdependent networks of trade, finance, information, law, people and governance'.⁵⁷ Advocating integrated action by the 'maritime services'—defined as the US Marine Corps, Navy and Coastguard—the strategy is geared especially to dealing with transnational threats against the global system in a new age of asymmetric operations. It recognizes the

⁵⁶A. T. Mahan, *Retrospect and Prospect: Studies in International Relations, Naval and Political* (London: Sampson, Low, Marston, 1902), p. 144.

⁵⁷J. T. Conway, G. Roughead and T. W. Allen, 'A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower', October 2007, pp. 1-2. At the time of publication, the authors were Commandant of the US Marine Corps, Chief of Naval Operations (US Navy), and Commandant of the US Coast Guard, respectively.

nature of modern sea-based globalization as much as the need to defend it against specific contemporary challenges.

The 'Cooperative Strategy' encompasses, of course, more than simply a multi-pronged approach involving the maritime forces of one nation. It seeks to bring together many nations on a multilateral platform by way of its 'Global Maritime Partnership' initiative.⁵⁸ In view of the sheer reach of globalization across many nations and oceans, the global system is not one that can be secured or defended successfully by any single nation, even a nation that is a global power. The finite pool of that nation's military-fiscal resources, drawn down by escalating international commitments, would end in a classic case of global overstretch. The defence of the global system must therefore derive from collaboration between local, regional and global powers, involving a multiplicity of defence partners and a host of cooperative security mechanisms. In essence, the security of globalization requires the globalization of security, in what should hopefully be a virtuous rather than vicious cycle.

Within the Indian Ocean arena itself, India has come up with a similar strategy, recognizing the need for at least a regional form of maritime security partnership, whose purpose would be to safeguard economic prosperity deriving from sea-based globalization. Modelled upon the US-led Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS), of which Singapore is also an active member, the first meeting of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) in February 2008 announced its intention of promoting strategic cooperation between the navies and coastguards of the Indian Ocean region. In so doing, the IONS would aim to 'deal with threats at or from the sea, including maritime natural hazards such as tsunamis and cyclones' and 'foster a better understanding of the ocean through the application of marine science and technology'.⁵⁹

Both the American-led 'global' approach and the Indian-sponsored 'regional' approach have particular merits as well as vulnerabilities. The US 'Cooperative Strategy' and its 'Global Maritime Partnership' initiative have been critiqued

⁵⁸Ibid., pp. 10-17.

⁵⁹Bateman, 'The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium'. The emphasis on maritime natural hazards is timely, not only on account of the Boxing Day Tsunami of 2004 but also Cyclone Nargis, which struck coastal Burma in May 2008.

elsewhere in some detail.⁶⁰ But at least from an indigenous perspective within the Indian Ocean, the chief difficulties may lie in the area of technological interoperability and cross-cultural interaction. Echoing anti-colonial sentiment from the days of European naval dominance, there may be underlying suspicion that extra-regional powers would use the threat posed by trafficking in weapons (conventional or nuclear), drugs and humans, as well as piracy and terrorism, to justify their longer-term naval presence in the region. Even in an age of acute global interdependence, many post-colonial Indian Ocean states retain cultural memories of an era when Western technologies served as ‘tools of empire’.⁶¹ The Indian-sponsored IONS, though largely intra-regional in membership, may suffer from a similar problem. As a consequence of supplying most of the leadership and financial backing, India will probably seek to exercise firm control over IONS activities. This might resurrect fears of an Indian bid for regional hegemony, a latter-day attempt to transform the Indian Ocean into an ‘Indian Lake’.⁶²

Singapore, for its part, recognizes the value of maritime security partnerships at the global as well as regional level. If made to operate in complementary fashion, they could give extra-regional and intra-regional powers alike a greater stake in the stability of the region. Singapore has far fewer difficulties with both the American and Indian maritime strategies than perhaps many other Indian Ocean states.

Given its long history of collaboration with Western global powers such as Britain and the United States, Singapore is likely to remain an autonomous but willing partner of America when it comes to ‘globalizing’ defence and security arrangements in the Indian Ocean. Singapore is strategically positioned to support America in engaging Islamic radicalism linked to terror, given that the regions of the Indian Ocean—including much of Singapore’s neighbourhood in Southeast Asia—are home to the majority of the world’s Muslims. Singapore’s Tuas and Changi bases have a geo-strategic reach transcending Southeast Asia; the base at Changi has a pier designed specially to accommodate US aircraft carriers and the countries signed an

⁶⁰See, for instance, G. Till, ‘A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower: A View from Outside’, *Naval War College Review* (April 2008).

⁶¹See the companion volumes by D. R. Headrick, *The Tools of Empire: Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1981); and *The Tentacles of Progress: Technology Transfer in the Age of Imperialism* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

⁶²Bateman, ‘The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium’; D. Scott, ‘India’s “Grand Strategy” for the Indian Ocean: Mahanian Visions’, *Asia-Pacific Review*, 13:2 (2006).

agreement in 2000 allowing America to use this base.⁶³ Singapore is already an active member of the US-led Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) aimed at apprehending shipments of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) and their delivery systems; in 2005, Singapore hosted the first PSI multilateral exercise in Southeast Asia, 'Exercise Deep Sabre'.⁶⁴ Singapore has further deployed naval and air support in the Persian Gulf, joining US-led coalition forces in the reconstruction of Iraq.⁶⁵

Singapore is also broadly supportive of India's regional maritime engagement. India's expansive view of maritime zones from East Africa to Southeast Asia as its natural strategic space has not deterred Singapore from strategic cooperation with India.⁶⁶ The 'Lion King' series of annual bilateral exercises has been held since 1993; Republic of Singapore Navy (RSN) missile corvettes and anti-submarine warfare vessels have engaged in open ocean training with Indian Navy frigates and submarines across the Andaman Sea and Bay of Bengal.⁶⁷ In 2004, India granted Singapore's air force and army training facilities on Indian soil, raising speculation that India might 'seek access to naval logistics / access facilities in Singapore as a *quid pro quo*'.⁶⁸ Perhaps a sign of things to come, 'Exercise Malabar', a naval exercise held annually by the Indian Navy and the US Navy, was expanded in 2007 to deepen multilateral naval cooperation with Australia, Japan and Singapore.⁶⁹

Singapore's participation in the five-nation 'Malabar 07-02' naval exercise organized by India and America in September 2007 did raise concerns in Beijing. But what should be emphasized is that Singapore's strategic cooperation with America

⁶³D. L. Berlin, 'The "Great Base Race" in the Indian Ocean Littoral: Conflict Prevention or Stimulation?', *Contemporary South Asia*, 13:3 (September 2004), p. 248. The Indian Ocean strategic analyst Donald Berlin has pointed out that a key logistics hub for the US 7th Fleet, the Logistics Group Western Pacific, is located in Singapore. "Of course," writes Berlin, "it was precisely these US military links with Singapore that led terrorists linked to Osama bin Laden to try to target Singapore and Changi."

⁶⁴'Singapore hosts Proliferation Security Initiative Exercise', 15 August 2005, retrieved on 6 May 2008 from iMINDEF: http://www.mindef.gov.sg/imindef/news_and_events/nr/2005/aug/15aug05_nr2.html.

⁶⁵'SAF Landing Ship Tank Deployment to the Gulf', 1 September 2007, retrieved on 6 May 2008 from iMINDEF: http://www.mindef.gov.sg/imindef/news_and_events/nr/2007/sep/01sep07_nr2.html.

⁶⁶See A. Vines and B. Oruitemeka, 'India's Engagement with the African Indian Ocean Rim States', *Chatham House Papers*, AFP P1/08 (9 April 2008).

⁶⁷Huxley, *Defending the Lion City*, pp. 220-21. According to British defence analyst Tim Huxley: "Cooperation with India also allowed RSN personnel to train on board Indian Navy Foxtrot-Class submarines, providing valuable 'hands-on' experience before Singapore acquired its own submarines from Sweden in the late 1990s."

⁶⁸M. S. Pardesi, 'Deepening Singapore-India Strategic Ties', *RSIS Commentaries*, 13/2005 (22 March 2005).

⁶⁹'Reply to Media Queries on Ex Malabar 07-02', 29 July 2007, retrieved on 21 May 2008 from iMINDEF: http://www.mindef.gov.sg/imindef/news_and_events/nr/2007/jul/29jul07_nr.html.

and India need not necessarily clash with Singapore's 'China Policy', not even with the evolution of China's 'string of pearls' strategy. The 'string of pearls'—a current euphemism for China's Indian Ocean bases—forms the centrepiece of an interim maritime strategy to guarantee unimpeded access to trade as well as energy supplies in the Middle East and East Africa.⁷⁰ Recalling Leifer's statement that 'Singapore is primarily about the business of business', Singapore would not be averse to seeing China safeguard its own economic lifelines, given that Singapore's trade and investments with China are growing steadily. Indeed, such a view of China's 'peaceful rise' toward the Indian Ocean is consonant with Singapore's long-term strategy to engage and facilitate the presence of all great powers in the region. Singapore's current management of the Pakistani port of Gwadar, previously established through heavy foreign assistance from the Chinese, is indicative of the role that Singapore could play in facilitating China's entry as a responsible member of the greater Indian Ocean community.⁷¹

Faced with new transoceanic opportunities at this crossroads in time, Singapore's strategic calculations must surely have supported the following conclusions: first, that the stabilizing benefits of America's global presence in the Indo-Pacific significantly outweigh any potential Islamic extremist backlash against Singapore for its support of America; second, that the presence of all great (or rising) powers, such as India and China, must be encouraged to increase their stake in the prosperity and security of this 'globalizing' arena; and, third, that Singapore has its own immediate responsibility, along with the littoral states of Indonesia and Malaysia, to help safeguard the passage of shipping through the Malacca-Singapore Straits.⁷²

⁷⁰See L. W. Prabhakar, J. H. Ho, and S. Bateman (eds), *The Evolving Maritime Balance of Power in the Asia-Pacific* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2006), 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', *IDSIA Strategic Comments* (24 November 2006).

⁷¹Latif, *Between Rising Powers*, pp. 34-43, 83-101, 261-89. Also see C. Kuik, 'Rising Dragon, Crouching Tigers? Comparing the Foreign Policy Responses of Malaysia and Singapore Toward a Re-emerging China, 1990-2005', *Biblioasia*, 3:4 (January 2008).

⁷²For more information on coordinated naval patrols as a means of promoting maritime security along the Straits, see 'Singapore and Indonesia Participate in Indo-Sin Coordinated Patrols (ISCP) and Joint Socio-Civic Activities', 19 April 2006, retrieved on 6 May 2008 from iMINDEF: http://www.mindef.gov.sg/imindef/news_and_events/nr/2001/oct/09oct01_nr2.html; and remarks by Teo Chee Hean, Singapore's Minister for Defence, 'Setting National Security Priorities', delivered at the 5th Shangri-La Dialogue, 4 June 2006, retrieved on 6 May 2008 from iMINDEF: http://www.mindef.gov.sg/imindef/news_and_events/nr/2006/jun/04jun06_nr.html. For details of the new 'cooperative mechanism' to enhance navigational safety, see keynote address by S. Jayakumar,

The major challenges to Singapore's strategy of engaging all powers and stabilizing the regional balance would be a deepening security dilemma between China and India; the uncertainty in Sino-American relations; the enthusiasm in the West to promote democracy in Asia; Japan's quest for a larger maritime role; and the difficulties of building a security community in the Indian Ocean. Singapore's current strategic approach is sustainable if great power relations remain comparatively benign or their competition is muted. The key question is how it might adjust to any significant deterioration in great power relations. To thrive in a highly fluid geo-strategic environment, the 'Merlion' must be ever mindful of ways in which it could if necessary reinvent its historically conditioned role—that of portal and pivot between East and West.

Singapore's Deputy Prime Minister, Coordinating Minister for National Security and Minister for Law, 'Charting a New Framework for International Cooperation in the Straits of Malacca and Singapore', 4 September 2007, retrieved on 10 May 2008 at http://app.mfa.gov.sg/pr/read_content.asp?View,8100,. Also see S. Ramesh, 'Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore set up co-operative mechanism', 4 September 2007, retrieved on 10 May 2008 at <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/singaporelocalnews/view/297801/1/.html>; and 'Milestone agreement reached over co-operation in the Straits of Malacca and Singapore', *International Maritime Organization (IMO) Press Briefing*, 18 September 2007, retrieved on 10 May 2008 at http://www.imo.org/about/mainframe.asp?topic_id=1472&doc_id=8471.

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