



FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Published by the Council on Foreign Relations

Published on *Foreign Affairs* (<http://www.foreignaffairs.com>)

Center Stage for the 21st Century

Power Plays in the Indian Ocean

March/April 2009

Robert D. Kaplan

ROBERT D. KAPLAN, a National Correspondent for The Atlantic and a Senior Fellow at the Center for a New American Security, in Washington, D.C., is writing a book on the Indian Ocean. He recently was the Class of 1960 Distinguished Visiting Professor in National Security at the U.S. Naval Academy.

For better or worse, phrases such "the Cold War" and "the clash of civilizations" matter. In a similar way, so do maps. The right map can stimulate foresight by providing a spatial view of critical trends in world politics. Understanding the map of Europe was essential to understanding the twentieth century. Although recent technological advances and economic integration have encouraged global thinking, some places continue to count more than others. And in some of those, such as Iraq and Pakistan, two countries with inherently artificial contours, politics is still at the mercy of geography.

So in what quarter of the earth today can one best glimpse the future? Because of their own geographic circumstances, Americans, in particular, continue to concentrate on the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. World War II and the Cold War shaped this outlook: Nazi Germany, imperial Japan, the Soviet Union, and communist China were all oriented toward one of these two oceans. The bias is even embedded in mapping conventions: Mercator projections tend to place the Western Hemisphere in the middle of the map, splitting the Indian Ocean at its far edges. And yet, as the pirate activity off the coast of Somalia and the terrorist carnage in Mumbai last fall suggest, the Indian Ocean -- the world's third-largest body of water -- already forms center stage for the challenges of the twenty-first century.

The greater Indian Ocean region encompasses the entire arc of Islam, from the Sahara Desert to the Indonesian archipelago. Although the Arabs and the Persians are known to Westerners primarily as desert peoples, they have also been great seafarers. In the Middle Ages, they sailed from Arabia to China; proselytizing along the way, they spread their faith through sea-based commerce. Today, the western reaches of the Indian Ocean include the tinderboxes of Somalia, Yemen, Iran, and Pakistan -- constituting a network of dynamic trade as well as a network of global terrorism, piracy, and drug smuggling. Hundreds of millions of Muslims -- the legacy of those medieval conversions -- live along the Indian Ocean's eastern edges, in India and Bangladesh, Malaysia and Indonesia.



The Indian Ocean is dominated by two immense bays, the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal, near the top of which are two of the least stable countries in the world: Pakistan and Myanmar (also known as Burma). State collapse or regime change in Pakistan would affect its neighbors by empowering Baluchi and Sindhi separatists seeking closer links to India and Iran. Likewise, the collapse of the junta in Myanmar -- where competition over energy and natural resources between China and India looms -- would threaten economies nearby and require a massive seaborne humanitarian intervention. On the other hand, the advent of a more liberal regime in Myanmar would undermine China's dominant position there, boost Indian influence, and quicken regional economic integration.

In other words, more than just a geographic feature, the Indian Ocean is also an idea. It combines the centrality of Islam with global energy politics and the rise of India and China to reveal a multilayered, multipolar world. The dramatic economic growth of India and China has been duly noted, but the equally dramatic military ramifications of this development have not. India's and China's great-power aspirations, as well as their quests for energy security, have compelled the two countries "to redirect their gazes from land to the seas," according to James Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, associate professors of strategy at the U.S. Naval War College. And the very fact that they are focusing on their sea power indicates how much more self-confident they feel on land. And so a map of the Indian Ocean exposes the contours of power politics in the twenty-first century.

Yet this is still an environment in which the United States will have to keep the peace and help guard the global commons -- interdicting terrorists, pirates, and smugglers; providing humanitarian assistance; managing the competition between India and China. It will have to do so not, as in Afghanistan and Iraq, as a land-based, in-your-face meddler, leaning on far-flung army divisions at risk of getting caught up in sectarian conflict, but as a sea-based balancer lurking just over the horizon. Sea power has always been less threatening than land power: as the cliché goes, navies make port visits, and armies invade. Ships take a long time to get to a war zone, allowing diplomacy to work its magic. And as the U.S. response to the 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean showed, with most sailors and marines returning to their ships each night, navies can exert great influence on shore while leaving a small footprint. The more the United

States becomes a maritime hegemon, as opposed to a land-based one, the less threatening it will seem to others.

Moreover, precisely because India and China are emphasizing their sea power, the job of managing their peaceful rise will fall on the U.S. Navy to a significant extent. There will surely be tensions between the three navies, especially as the gaps in their relative strength begin to close. But even if the comparative size of the U.S. Navy decreases in the decades ahead, the United States will remain the one great power from outside the Indian Ocean region with a major presence there -- a unique position that will give it the leverage to act as a broker between India and China in their own backyard. To understand this dynamic, one must look at the region from a maritime perspective.

SEA CHANGES

Thanks to the predictability of the monsoon winds, the countries on the Indian Ocean were connected well before the age of steam power. Trade in frankincense, spices, precious stones, and textiles brought together the peoples flung along its long shoreline during the Middle Ages. Throughout history, sea routes have mattered more than land routes, writes the historian Felipe Fernández-Armesto, because they carry more goods more economically. "Whoever is lord of Malacca has his hand on the throat of Venice," went one saying during the late fifteenth century, alluding to the city's extensive commerce with Asia; if the world were an egg, Hormuz would be its yolk, went another. Even today, in the jet and information age, 90 percent of global commerce and about 65 percent of all oil travel by sea. Globalization has been made possible by the cheap and easy shipping of containers on tankers, and the Indian Ocean accounts for fully half the world's container traffic. Moreover, 70 percent of the total traffic of petroleum products passes through the Indian Ocean, on its way from the Middle East to the Pacific. As these goods travel that route, they pass through the world's principal oil shipping lanes, including the Gulfs of Aden and Oman -- as well as some of world commerce's main chokepoints: Bab el Mandeb and the Straits of Hormuz and Malacca. Forty percent of world trade passes through the Strait of Malacca; 40 percent of all traded crude oil passes through the Strait of Hormuz.

Already the world's preeminent energy and trade interstate seaway, the Indian Ocean will matter even more in the future. Global energy needs are expected to rise by 45 percent between 2006 and 2030, and almost half of the growth in demand will come from India and China. China's demand for crude oil doubled between 1995 and 2005 and will double again in the coming 15 years or so; by 2020, China is expected to import 7.3 million barrels of crude per day -- half of Saudi Arabia's planned output. More than 85 percent of the oil and oil products bound for China cross the Indian Ocean and pass through the Strait of Malacca.

India -- soon to become the world's fourth-largest energy consumer, after the United States, China, and Japan -- is dependent on oil for roughly 33 percent of its energy needs, 65 percent of which it imports. And 90 percent of its oil imports could soon come from the Persian Gulf. India must satisfy a population that will, by 2030, be the largest of any country in the world. Its coal imports from far-off Mozambique are set to increase substantially, adding to the coal that India already imports from other Indian Ocean countries, such as South Africa, Indonesia, and Australia. In the future, India-bound ships will also be carrying increasingly large quantities of liquefied natural gas (LNG) across the seas from southern Africa, even as it continues importing LNG from Qatar, Malaysia, and Indonesia.

As the whole Indian Ocean seaboard, including Africa's eastern shores, becomes a vast web of energy trade, India is seeking to increase its influence from the Plateau of Iran to the Gulf of Thailand -- an expansion west and east meant to span the zone of influence of the Raj's viceroys. India's trade with the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf and Iran, with which India has long enjoyed close economic and

cultural ties, is booming. Approximately 3.5 million Indians work in the six Arab states of the Gulf Cooperation Council and send home \$4 billion in remittances annually. As India's economy continues to grow, so will its trade with Iran and, once the country recovers, Iraq. Iran, like Afghanistan, has become a strategic rear base for India against Pakistan, and it is poised to become an important energy partner. In 2005, India and Iran signed a multibillion-dollar deal under which Iran will supply India with 7.5 million tons of LNG annually for 25 years, beginning in 2009. There has been talk of building a gas pipeline from Iran to India through Pakistan, a project that would join the Middle East and South Asia at the hip (and in the process could go a long way toward stabilizing Indian-Pakistani relations). In another sign that Indian-Iranian relations are growing more intimate, India has been helping Iran develop the port of Chah Bahar, on the Gulf of Oman, which will also serve as a forward base for the Iranian navy.

India has also been expanding its military and economic ties with Myanmar, to the east. Democratic India does not have the luxury of spurning Myanmar's junta because Myanmar is rich in natural resources -- oil, natural gas, coal, zinc, copper, uranium, timber, and hydropower -- resources in which the Chinese are also heavily invested. India hopes that a network of east-west roads and energy pipelines will eventually allow it to be connected to Iran, Pakistan, and Myanmar.

India is enlarging its navy in the same spirit. With its 155 warships, the Indian navy is already one of the world's largest, and it expects to add three nuclear-powered submarines and three aircraft carriers to its arsenal by 2015. One major impetus for the buildup was the humiliating inability of its navy to evacuate Indian citizens from Iraq and Kuwait during the 1990-91 Persian Gulf War. Another is what Mohan Malik, a scholar at the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, in Hawaii, has called India's "Hormuz dilemma," its dependence on imports passing through the strait, close to the shores of Pakistan's Makran coast, where the Chinese are helping the Pakistanis develop deep-water ports.

Indeed, as India extends its influence east and west, on land and at sea, it is bumping into China, which, also concerned about protecting its interests throughout the region, is expanding its reach southward. Chinese President Hu Jintao has bemoaned China's "Malacca dilemma." The Chinese government hopes to eventually be able to partly bypass that strait by transporting oil and other energy products via roads and pipelines from ports on the Indian Ocean into the heart of China. One reason that Beijing wants desperately to integrate Taiwan into its dominion is so that it can redirect its naval energies away from the Taiwan Strait and toward the Indian Ocean.

The Chinese government has already adopted a "string of pearls" strategy for the Indian Ocean, which consists of setting up a series of ports in friendly countries along the ocean's northern seaboard. It is building a large naval base and listening post in Gwadar, Pakistan, (from which it may already be monitoring ship traffic through the Strait of Hormuz); a port in Pasni, Pakistan, 75 miles east of Gwadar, which is to be joined to the Gwadar facility by a new highway; a fueling station on the southern coast of Sri Lanka; and a container facility with extensive naval and commercial access in Chittagong, Bangladesh. Beijing operates surveillance facilities on islands deep in the Bay of Bengal. In Myanmar, whose junta gets billions of dollars in military assistance from Beijing, the Chinese are constructing (or upgrading) commercial and naval bases and building roads, waterways, and pipelines in order to link the Bay of Bengal to the southern Chinese province of Yunnan. Some of these facilities are closer to cities in central and western China than those cities are to Beijing and Shanghai, and so building road and rail links from these facilities into China will help spur the economies of China's landlocked provinces. The Chinese government is also envisioning a canal across the Isthmus of Kra, in Thailand, to link the Indian Ocean to China's Pacific coast -- a project on the scale of the Panama Canal and one that could further tip Asia's balance of power in China's favor by giving China's burgeoning navy and commercial maritime fleet easy access to a vast oceanic continuum stretching all the way from East Africa to Japan and the Korean Peninsula.

All of these activities are unnerving the Indian government. With China building deep-water ports to its west and east and a preponderance of Chinese arms sales going to Indian Ocean states, India fears being encircled by China unless it expands its own sphere of influence. The two countries' overlapping commercial and political interests are fostering competition, and even more so in the naval realm than on land. Zhao Nanqi, former director of the General Logistics Department of the People's Liberation Army, proclaimed in 1993, "We can no longer accept the Indian Ocean as an ocean only of the Indians." India has responded to China's building of a naval base in Gwadar by further developing one of its own, that in Karwar, India, south of Goa. Meanwhile, Zhang Ming, a Chinese naval analyst, has warned that the 244 islands that form India's Andaman and Nicobar archipelago could be used like a "metal chain" to block the western entrance to the Strait of Malacca, on which China so desperately depends. "India is perhaps China's most realistic strategic adversary," Zhang has written. "Once India commands the Indian Ocean, it will not be satisfied with its position and will continuously seek to extend its influence, and its eastward strategy will have a particular impact on China." These may sound like the words of a professional worrier from China's own theory class, but these worries are revealing: Beijing already considers New Delhi to be a major sea power.

As the competition between India and China suggests, the Indian Ocean is where global struggles will play out in the twenty-first century. The old borders of the Cold War map are crumbling fast, and Asia is becoming a more integrated unit, from the Middle East to the Pacific. South Asia has been an indivisible part of the greater Islamic Middle East since the Middle Ages: it was the Muslim Ghaznavids of eastern Afghanistan who launched raids on India's northwestern coast in the early eleventh century; Indian civilization itself is a fusion of the indigenous Hindu culture and the cultural imprint left by these invasions. Although it took the seaborne terrorist attacks in Mumbai last November for most Westerners to locate India inside the greater Middle East, the Indian Ocean's entire coast has always constituted one vast interconnected expanse.

What is different now is the extent of these connections. On a maritime-centric map of southern Eurasia, artificial land divisions disappear; even landlocked Central Asia is related to the Indian Ocean. Natural gas from Turkmenistan may one day flow through Afghanistan, for example, en route to Pakistani and Indian cities and ports, one of several possible energy links between Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent. Both the Chinese port in Gwadar, Pakistan, and the Indian port in Chah Bahar, Iran, may eventually be connected to oil- and natural-gas-rich Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and other former Soviet republics. S. Frederick Starr, a Central Asia expert at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, said at a conference in Washington last year that access to the Indian Ocean "will help define Central Asian politics in the future." Others have called ports in India and Pakistan "evacuation points" for Caspian Sea oil. The destinies of countries even 1,200 miles from the Indian Ocean are connected with it.

ELEGANT DECLINE

The United States faces three related geopolitical challenges in Asia: the strategic nightmare of the greater Middle East, the struggle for influence over the southern tier of the former Soviet Union, and the growing presence of India and China in the Indian Ocean. The last seems to be the most benign of the three. China is not an enemy of the United States, like Iran, but a legitimate peer competitor, and India is a budding ally. And the rise of the Indian navy, soon to be the third largest in the world after those of the United States and China, will function as an antidote to Chinese military expansion.

The task of the U.S. Navy will therefore be to quietly leverage the sea power of its closest allies -- India in the Indian Ocean and Japan in the western Pacific -- to set limits on China's expansion. But it will have to do so at the same time as it seizes every opportunity to incorporate China's navy into international

alliances; a U.S.-Chinese understanding at sea is crucial for the stabilization of world politics in the twenty-first century. After all, the Indian Ocean is a seaway for both energy and hashish and is in drastic need of policing. To manage it effectively, U.S. military planners will have to invoke challenges such as terrorism, piracy, and smuggling to bring together India, China, and other states in joint sea patrols. The goal of the United States must be to forge a global maritime system that can minimize the risks of interstate conflict while lessening the burden of policing for the U.S. Navy.

Keeping the peace in the Indian Ocean will be even more crucial once the seas and the coasts from the Gulf of Aden to the Sea of Japan are connected. Shipping options between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean will increase substantially in the future. The port operator Dubai Ports World is conducting a feasibility study on constructing a land bridge near the canal that the Chinese hope will be dug across the Isthmus of Kra, with ports on either side of the isthmus connected by rails and highways. The Malaysian government is interested in a pipeline network that would link up ports in the Bay of Bengal with those in the South China Sea. To be sure, as sea power grows in importance, the crowded hub around Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia will form the maritime heart of Asia: in the coming decades, it will be as strategically significant as the Fulda Gap, a possible invasion route for Soviet tanks into West Germany during the Cold War. The protective oversight of the U.S. Navy there will be especially important. As the only truly substantial blue-water force without territorial ambitions on the Asian mainland, the U.S. Navy may in the future be able to work with individual Asian countries, such as India and China, better than they can with one another. Rather than ensure its dominance, the U.S. Navy simply needs to make itself continually useful.

It has already begun to make the necessary shifts. Owing to the debilitating U.S.-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, headlines in recent years have been dominated by discussions about land forces and counterinsurgency. But with 75 percent of the earth's population living within 200 miles of the sea, the world's military future may well be dominated by naval (and air) forces operating over vast regions. And to a greater extent than the other armed services, navies exist to protect economic interests and the system in which these interests operate. Aware of how much the international economy depends on sea traffic, U.S. admirals are thinking beyond the fighting and winning of wars to responsibilities such as policing a global trading arrangement. They are also attuned to the effects that a U.S. military strike against Iran would have on maritime commerce and the price of oil. With such concerns in mind, the U.S. Navy has for decades been helping to secure vital chokepoints in the Indian Ocean, often operating from a base on the British atoll of Diego Garcia, a thousand miles south of India and close to major sea-lanes. And in October 2007, it implied that it was seeking a sustained forward presence in the Indian Ocean and the western Pacific but no longer in the Atlantic -- a momentous shift in overall U.S. maritime strategy. The document *Marine Corps Vision and Strategy 2025* also concluded that the Indian Ocean and its adjacent waters will be a central theater of global conflict and competition this century.

Yet as the challenges for the United States on the high seas multiply, it is unclear how much longer U.S. naval dominance will last. At the end of the Cold War, the U.S. Navy boasted about 600 warships; it is now down to 279. That number might rise to 313 in the coming years with the addition of the new "littoral combat ships," but it could also drop to the low 200s given cost overruns of 34 percent and the slow pace of shipbuilding. Although the revolution in precision-guided weapons means that existing ships pack better firepower than those of the Cold War fleet did, since a ship cannot be in two places at once, the fewer the vessels, the riskier every decision to deploy them. There comes a point at which insufficient quantity hurts quality.

Meanwhile, by sometime in the next decade, China's navy will have more warships than the United States'. China is producing and acquiring submarines five times as fast as is the United States. In addition to submarines, the Chinese have wisely focused on buying naval mines, ballistic missiles that can hit

moving targets at sea, and technology that blocks signals from GPS satellites, on which the U.S. Navy depends. (They also have plans to acquire at least one aircraft carrier; not having one hindered their attempts to help with the tsunami relief effort in 2004–5.) The goal of the Chinese is "sea denial," or dissuading U.S. carrier strike groups from closing in on the Asian mainland wherever and whenever Washington would like. The Chinese are also more aggressive than U.S. military planners. Whereas the prospect of ethnic warfare has scared away U.S. admirals from considering a base in Sri Lanka, which is strategically located at the confluence of the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal, the Chinese are constructing a refueling station for their warships there.

There is nothing illegitimate about the rise of China's navy. As the country's economic interests expand dramatically, so must China expand its military, and particularly its navy, to guard these interests. The United Kingdom did just that in the nineteenth century, and so did the United States when it emerged as a great power between the American Civil War and World War I. In 1890, the American military theorist Alfred Thayer Mahan published *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660–1783*, which argued that the power to protect merchant fleets had been the determining factor in world history. Both Chinese and Indian naval strategists read him avidly nowadays. China's quest for a major presence in the Indian Ocean was also evinced in 2005 by the beginning of an extensive commemoration of Zheng He, the Ming dynasty explorer and admiral who plied the seas between China and Indonesia, Sri Lanka, the Persian Gulf, and the Horn of Africa in the early decades of the fifteenth century -- a celebration that signals China's belief that these seas have always been part of its zone of influence.

Just as at the end of the nineteenth century the British Royal Navy began to reduce its presence worldwide by leveraging the growing sea power of its naval allies (Japan and the United States), at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the United States is beginning an elegant decline by leveraging the growing sea power of allies such as India and Japan to balance against China. What better way to scale back than to give more responsibilities to like-minded states, especially allies that, unlike those in Europe, still cherish military power?

India, for one, is more than willing to help. "India has never waited for American permission to balance [against] China," the Indian strategist C. Raja Mohan wrote in 2006, adding that India has been balancing against China since the day the Chinese invaded Tibet. Threatened by China's rise, India has expanded its naval presence from as far west as the Mozambique Channel to as far east as the South China Sea. It has been establishing naval staging posts and listening stations on the island nations of Madagascar, Mauritius, and the Seychelles, as well as military relationships with them, precisely in order to counter China's own very active military cooperation with these states. With a Chinese-Pakistani alliance taking shape, most visibly in the construction of the Gwadar port, near the Strait of Hormuz, and an Indian naval buildup on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, near the Strait of Malacca, the Indian-Chinese rivalry is taking on the dimensions of a maritime Great Game. This is a reason for the United States to quietly encourage India to balance against China, even as the United States seeks greater cooperation with China. During the Cold War, the Pacific and Indian oceans were veritable U.S. lakes. But such hegemony will not last, and the United States must seek to replace it with a subtle balance-of-power arrangement.

COALITION BUILDER SUPREME

So how exactly does the United States play the role of a constructive, distant, and slowly declining hegemon and keep peace on the high seas in what Fareed Zakaria, the editor of *Newsweek International*, has called "the post-American world"? Several years ago, Admiral Michael Mullen, then the chief of naval operations (and now chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff), said the answer was a "thousand-ship navy . . . comprised of all freedom-loving nations -- standing watch over the seas, standing watch with each other." The term "thousand-ship navy" has since been dropped for sounding too domineering, but the

idea behind it remains: rather than going it alone, the U.S. Navy should be a coalition builder supreme, working with any navy that agrees to patrol the seas and share information with it.

Already, Combined Task Force 150 (CTF-150), a naval force based in Djibouti and comprising roughly 15 vessels from the United States, four European countries, Canada, and Pakistan, conducts antipiracy patrols around the troubled Gulf of Aden. In 2008, about a hundred ships were attacked by pirates in the region, and over 35 vessels, with billions of dollars worth of cargo, were seized. (As of the end of 2008, more than a dozen, including oil tankers, cargo vessels, and other ships, along with over 300 crew members, were still being held.) Ransom demands routinely exceed \$1 million per ship, and in the recent case of one Saudi oil tanker, pirates demanded \$25 million. Last fall, after the capture of a Ukrainian vessel carrying tanks and other military equipment, warships from the United States, Kenya, and Malaysia steamed toward the Gulf of Aden to assist CTF-150, followed by two Chinese warships a few weeks later. The force, which is to be beefed up and rechristened CTF-151, is likely to become a permanent fixture: piracy is the maritime ripple effect of land-based anarchy, and for as long as Somalia is in the throes of chaos, pirates operating at the behest of warlords will infest the waters far down Africa's eastern coast.

The task-force model could also be applied to the Strait of Malacca and other waters surrounding the Indonesian archipelago. With help from the U.S. Navy, the navies and coast guards of Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia have already combined forces to reduce piracy in that area in recent years. And with the U.S. Navy functioning as both a mediator and an enforcer of standard procedures, coalitions of this kind could bring together rival countries, such as India and Pakistan or India and China, under a single umbrella: these states' governments would have no difficulty justifying to their publics participating in task forces aimed at transnational threats over which they have no disagreements. Piracy has the potential to unite rival states along the Indian Ocean coastline.

Packed with states with weak governments and tottering infrastructure, the shores of the Indian Ocean make it necessary for the United States and other countries to transform their militaries. This area represents an unconventional world, a world in which the U.S. military, for one, will have to respond, expeditionary style, to a range of crises: not just piracy but also terrorist attacks, ethnic conflicts, cyclones, and floods. For even as the United States' armed forces, and particularly its navy, are in relative decline, they remain the most powerful conventional military on earth, and they will be expected to lead such emergency responses. With population growth in climatically and seismically fragile zones today placing more human beings in danger's way than at almost any other time in history, one deployment will quickly follow another.

It is the variety and recurrence of these challenges that make the map of the Indian Ocean in the twenty-first century vastly different from the map of the North Atlantic in the twentieth century. The latter illustrated both a singular threat and a singular concept: the Soviet Union. And it gave the United States a simple focus: to defend Western Europe against the Red Army and keep the Soviet navy bottled up near the polar icecap. Because the threat was straightforward, and the United States' power was paramount, the U.S.-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization arguably became history's most successful alliance.

One might envision a "NATO of the seas" for the Indian Ocean, composed of South Africa, Oman, Pakistan, India, Singapore, and Australia, with Pakistan and India bickering inside the alliance much as Greece and Turkey have inside NATO. But that idea fails to capture what the Indian Ocean is all about. Owing to the peripatetic movements of medieval Arab and Persian sailors and the legacies of Portuguese, Dutch, and British imperialists, the Indian Ocean forms a historical and cultural unit. Yet in strategic terms, it, like the world at large today, has no single focal point. The Gulf of Aden, the Persian Gulf, the Bay of Bengal -- all these areas are burdened by different threats with different players. Just as today

NATO is a looser alliance, less singularly focused than it was during the Cold War, any coalition centered on the Indian Ocean should be adapted to the times. Given the ocean's size -- it stretches across seven time zones and almost half of the world's latitudes -- and the comparative slowness at which ships move, it would be a challenge for any one multinational navy to get to a crisis zone in time. The United States was able to lead the relief effort off the coast of Indonesia after the 2004 tsunami only because the carrier strike group the *USS Abraham Lincoln* happened to be in the vicinity and not in the Korean Peninsula, where it was headed.

A better approach would be to rely on multiple regional and ideological alliances in different parts of the Indian Ocean. Some such efforts have already begun. The navies of Thailand, Singapore, and Indonesia have banded together to deter piracy in the Strait of Malacca; those of the United States, India, Singapore, and Australia have exercised together off India's southwestern coast -- an implicit rebuke to China's designs in the region. According to Vice Admiral John Morgan, former deputy chief of U.S. naval operations, the Indian Ocean strategic system should be like the New York City taxi system: driven by market forces and with no central dispatcher. Coalitions will naturally form in areas where shipping lanes need to be protected, much as taxis gather in the theater district before and after performances. For one Australian commodore, the model should be a network of artificial sea bases supplied by the U.S. Navy, which would allow for different permutations of alliances: frigates and destroyers from various states could "plug and play" into these sea bases as necessary and spread out from East Africa to the Indonesian archipelago.

Like a microcosm of the world at large, the greater Indian Ocean region is developing into an area of both ferociously guarded sovereignty (with fast-growing economies and militaries) and astonishing interdependence (with its pipelines and land and sea routes). And for the first time since the Portuguese onslaught in the region in the early sixteenth century, the West's power there is in decline, however subtly and relatively. The Indians and the Chinese will enter into a dynamic great-power rivalry in these waters, with their shared economic interests as major trading partners locking them in an uncomfortable embrace. The United States, meanwhile, will serve as a stabilizing power in this newly complex area. Indispensability, rather than dominance, must be its goal.

Copyright © 2002-2009 by the Council on Foreign Relations, Inc.
All rights reserved.

Source URL: <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/64832/robert-d-kaplan/center-stage-for-the-21st-century>

The Center for 21st Century Security and Intelligence (21CSI) was created to address the key issues shaping security policy over the coming decades. The Center seeks to answer the critical questions emerging in defense, cybersecurity, arms control, and intelligence in an all-encompassing manner, seeking not just to explore important new policy challenges but also how they cross traditional fields and domains. The Center focuses on delivering cutting-edge research, analysis, and outreach that shapes public understanding and official decision-making across a broad range of security issues. The C...