

*Mohd Khurshed Alam*

## **REGIONAL MARITIME COOPERATION UNDER THE AUSPICES OF SOUTH ASIAN ASSOCIATION FOR REGIONAL COOPERATION (SAARC)**

"Whoever controls the Indian Ocean dominates Asia. This ocean is the key to the seven seas. In the twenty-first century the destiny of the world will be decided on its waters".

*-Alfred T. Mahan*

---

---

### **INTRODUCTION**

The strategic architecture in South Asia is in the process of transition as trends in economic development are producing new regional economic/military powers, providing the resources of extensive defense modernisation programmes and fundamentally changing the character of security concerns in the region. New areas of potential conflict are emerging, as disputes over competing sovereignty claims which had been repressed by the dynamics of super power rivalry and other Cold War mechanics, now demand consideration on a priority basis. The prospects for conflict and/or co-operation in the Indian Ocean are affected by multi-dimensional factors. These prospects, however, have a direct influence and relationship with the security environment of the Indian Ocean and its littoral states. Success has eluded attempts so far to improve the security environment through propagation of the ideology of non-

---

**Mohd Khurshed Alam**, (C), psc, BN, is a Commodore in the Bangladesh Navy.

alignment, regional co-operation, and adherence to the U.N. Charter. As time goes by, the security environment may be expected to deteriorate, transforming the area, not as expected, into a zone of peace and co-operation, but driving it instead into the position of a zone of conflict in the years ahead; a scenario hardly likely to leave any of the littoral countries unaffected.<sup>1</sup> A careful study of more than 175 armed conflicts after 1945 reveals that in spite of the enormous proliferation of armed conflicts in the modern world, Europe and North America have largely remained outside the continents experiencing war. Overwhelming majority of armed conflicts have taken place in the territories of Third World countries, mostly on the continents of Asia and Africa.<sup>2</sup> It is difficult to quantify indirect interventions, be they in the form of arms supplies or political moves, or even the use of force without active participation in the war. But since the developed countries still enjoy near-monopoly of armaments production, their participation in wars around the globe, however indirect, is not inconsiderable.

The demise of the bipolar world has paradoxically generated more factionalism and strife in Africa and Asia because of sub-nationalism, ethnic cleansing, religious extremism, famine and environmental degradation. The littorals of South Asia have been particularly vulnerable to these multifaceted pulls and pushes as most of them are brittle underdeveloped countries with little financial or industrial stamina to withstand the dictates of the developed nations. The need for regional maritime cooperation, therefore, merits serious attention, particularly in view of transnational threats encompassing narco-terrorism, sea piracy, protection of marine environment, immigration control, natural disasters, smuggling and illegal fishing. These peace-time operations also include monitoring non-military threats, delineation of maritime

- 
1. Jasjit Singh, *Indian Ocean in Global Strategies: Some Perspectives, India*, 1984, p.1.
  2. *Ibid.*, p.10.

boundaries, prevention of illegal migration and the need to keep a close watch on the scramble for resources such as oil, fish and non-renewable energy in order to diffuse conflicts among the littorals of South Asia. The littorals will, therefore, need to look more and more to regional maritime nations for cooperations in the marine affairs and also to ensure the integrity of Exclusive Economic Zones.

It is in this background that this paper intends to examine the security concerns and related maritime issues affecting littorals of South Asia. It is apparent that cooperation encompassing maritime issues are not yet high on the agenda of South Asia. The reasons for the viability and the necessity of cooperation among all the maritime nations of the South Asia are also discussed with recommendation for establishing a regional Centre for Maritime Cooperation under the SAARC.

## **I. PRESENT SCENARIO OF COOPERATION IN SOUTH ASIA**

### ***South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)***

SAARC was formed in December 1985 to improve the economies of the more than one-fifth of the world's population that live in South Asia. It groups Bangladesh, Bhutan, Indian, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The Charter of the SAARC specifically excludes bilateral and contentious issues from its agenda. Even then the SAARC has provided unique opportunity to heads of government, ministers and senior representative of member states regularly to meet and exchange views on subjects of common concern. In the past leaders used the opportunity bilaterally to discuss even such sensitive subjects as Kashmir, South Asian nuclear issue, Tamil question and water disputes. These discussions in many cases helped manage and contain some explosive situations and provided for constructive follow

up action and even agreements. Functionally and pragmatically motivated interaction spurred by membership in SAARC have worked to decrease the source of tension. The process is a gradual one, requiring the searching out of areas of mutuality and "binding together those interests which are common, where they are common, and to the extent to which they are common".<sup>3</sup>

There is no doubt that the organisation has served as a forum for mitigating conflict. There were occasions when interstate tensions reached such a pitch that bilateral process of reconciliation between nations were totally suspended, yet contacts initiated within the framework of SAARC continued to be effective thus facilitating the process of crisis management between the states of the region. Such cooperation increases interaction at different levels, helps confidence building and creates new priorities of peace among nations. That is why SAARC Preferential Trading Arrangement (SAPTA) could be incorporated into the SAARC framework in 1993 and came into force in December 1995. This is an effort to go into significant tariff cuts for imports within the region in order to make SAPTA an effective vehicle to increase intra-regional trade in South Asia. Meaningful cooperation at the regional and sub-regional levels can promote understanding and reconciliation among states leading to resolution of even long standing problems.

### ***Indian Ocean Rim (IOR)***

The Indian Ocean stretches for more than 10,000 km between the southern tips of Africa and Australia. It has an area of about 73,44,000 square km. A total of 47 countries border the Indian Ocean. Representatives of the Governments of Australia, India, Kenya, Mauritius, Oman, Singapore and South Africa, selected littorals of the Indian Ocean met in Mauritius in March 1995 with the main objective of holding discussion on the possibility of enhancing economic coope-

---

3. Zillur R. Khan, *SAARC and the Superpowers*, Dhaka, 1991, pp.153-154.

ration amongst countries of the IOR. This seven countries, which took part in the meeting, decided that IOR countries should co-operate in different international fora on global economic issues and that all decisions on all matters and issues at all levels should be taken on the basis of consensus.<sup>4</sup> The second meeting of the IOR was held in the Australian city of Perth. A total of 120 delegates from 23 countries, including Bangladesh and some sub-regional organisations took part in the meeting. The Perth meeting, later called the International Forum on the Indian Ocean Region (IFIOR), discussed free trade between the IOR countries and decided to accelerate economic cooperation. The IOR Initiative seeks to establish a regional forum, tripartite in nature, bringing together representatives of government, business and academia, for promoting economic cooperation. In the spirit of open regionalism it seeks to build and expand understanding and mutually beneficial cooperation through a consensus-based, evolutionary and non-intrusive approach. It was commonly agreed that the proposed IOR grouping should be open to all countries of the region as sovereign and equal partners irrespective of the size of their economy. During the next meeting, the members of the core group, India, Singapore, Australia, Oman, South Africa, Kenya and Mauritius elected seven other countries as new members, violating the consensus spirit of the organisation. They have elected Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Indonesia, Yemen, Tanzania and Madagascar as new members. Bangladesh has not yet been included as a member of IOR.

The importance of the exploitation of ocean resources is likely to increase as a result of growing demographic pressure. Rational exploitation of the resources of the Indian Ocean could contribute to the sustainable development of the region. Yet such a yearning for economic cooperation through IOR has called into question the spirit of blocking membership for all littoral countries by some quarters within the organisation. This region has seen the resulting rise in

---

4. *The Independent*, Dhaka, August, 1995

tribalism challenging the new spirit of internationalism. But in the maritime field the high seas have no international boundaries. The Law of the Sea Convention recognises the *sui generis* nature of the oceans. There are, of course, disputes over the access to sea based resources and about the legal status and extent of coastal waters. But in the words of an old Norwegian saying - "The land divides - the sea unites".<sup>5</sup> Even then South Asia remains much fertile ground for regional conflict. There are numerous issues of simmering and potential conflict involving insurgency and territorial disputes. Most of these issues are unlikely to lead to inter-state conflict. Some could well be resolved through negotiation possibly involving the process of dialogues. Nevertheless, all of them remain sources of suspicion and misunderstanding. However, the vulnerability of seaborne trade, the exploitation of sea based resources, the impact of technology on naval warfare, the future role and organisation of the SAARC and IOR all guide towards better prospects for regional maritime cooperation.

## II. ISSUES AFFECTING MARITIME NATIONS OF THE SAARC

### *Security Concerns of the Littoral States*

Maritime developments in South Asia occupy an important place in the emerging regional strategic architecture. The security environment of IOR is essentially maritime. Security in this region is very much concerned with maritime issues and capabilities. The waterways through the region are strategically important for both merchant and naval vessels. Coastal and offshore resources provide a principal means of livelihood in many of the countries in the region. For some countries, military threats can come only over or under the sea. Some of the territorial and sovereignty disputes in the region involve disputes over islands and maritime boundaries. The realities of geopolitical and geo-strategic imperatives inspire little confidence in

5. Admiral Sir James Eberle (Retd), "Naval Cooperation in the Indian Ocean", *Naval Forces*, 1992, p. 10.

South Asia remaining a zone of peace and everything, in fact, points towards a possibility of being instead a zone of conflict. This in itself points towards the options for the littoral states individually as well as for collective steps to work for building confidence in the region. Security considerations and self-reliance for any littoral state in this scenario can only come about by internal strength and stability, economic development and a naval strategy to provide effective and credible sea power to defend and safeguard national interests. Throughout the SAARC region, security concerns are broadening to include economic and environmental issues. Economic security involves not only the protection of critical Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) but also increasingly the protection of fish stocks and other marine resources.<sup>6</sup> The 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS III) has introduced new uncertainties into the region, particularly in connection with the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), disputes over islands, continental shelf claims, and other offshore issues. Many emerging regional security concerns, such as oil, illegal fishing and exploitation of other offshore resources, and other important elements of economic security are essentially maritime.<sup>7</sup> Fisheries are an important source of nutrition and protein in the region. However, many countries lack sufficient information and infrastructures about sea fish resources, their exploitation and sustenance. Information about marine mineral resources in the region is limited as most of the ocean resources have not been adequately surveyed. In addition, the promulgation of 200-mile EEZ under the Law of the Sea has generated requirements for surveillance and naval capabilities over resource-rich areas which, for some states in the region, are almost equal to or greater than their land areas. There are important maritime dimensions of each of the military, economic and

6. Desmond Ball and Capt Russ Swinnerton, "A Regional Regime for Maritime Surveillance, Safety and Information Exchange," papers presented at the conference on 'Maritime Bridge into Asia', Sydney, 17-19 November 1993, p. 3.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

environmental aspects of regional security. In particular, the requirements of greater defence self-reliance, of monitoring SLOCs and EEZs, of coordinating weather predictions and of monitoring oil spills and other pollution, all demand greater maritime surveillance capabilities. Drug trafficking, disaster management, other economic and environmental problems are likely to also require escort ships, offshore vessels and maritime surveillance capabilities. For some countries within the SAARC, the maritime demands of increasing self-reliance are requiring a radical reorientation of planning and capabilities away from internal operations to the maritime theatre. In the case of India and Pakistan, the maritime build-ups are more part of a relatively long-established strategy. Nepal and Bhutan are the two land-locked countries. Bangladesh and Sri Lanka except the Maldives are, of course, having very limited maritime forces under their disposal. These concerns, together with the requirements for defence self-reliance and force modernisation, are reflected in the significant maritime dimension of the current arms acquisition programmes in the region e.g. the maritime surveillance and intelligence collection systems, multi-role fighter aircraft with maritime attack capabilities, modern surface combatants, submarines, anti-ship missiles, ballistic missiles, naval electronic warfare systems, and mine warfare capabilities. Unfortunately, some of these new capabilities tend to be more offensive and potentially prone to the possibilities of inadvertent arms race.

***Regional Naval Developments*** : The rapid pace of expansion of the Indian Navy in the mid- and late 1980s became the subject of considerable international comment and some concerns as regional powers questioned the rationale for purchase of a second aircraft carrier and the lease of a nuclear submarine.<sup>8</sup> The latter came at a time when no less than eight conventional submarines, two guided missile

---

8. Cdr James Goldrick, Ran, "Developements in Regional Maritime Forces," paper presented at the conference on 'Maritime Bridge into Asia', Sydney, 17-19 November 1993, p. 7.



destroyers and two large frigates were commissioned and the Indian Navy had a leading role in the Indian government's policies in the Indian Ocean. It appeared that India was creating not only the capability to deploy small carrier task groups throughout the Indian Ocean but a modern long ranged (i.e. nuclear powered) submarine fleet. India has a healthy shipbuilding programme for light craft and corvettes. The production rate for larger escorts is likely to be at least two ships every three years for the foreseeable future. The present force of frigates and destroyers will be expanded and its capabilities will be progressively improved with the arrival of new construction. The other element is Pakistan. The two navies continue to regard each other as the primary source of threat. Pakistan largely driven by its perceptions of the Indian threat and working from a limited budget has concentrated upon submarines and a mix of maritime patrol aircraft, missile armed escorts and shipborne helicopters to create a relatively high technology trade defence and sea denial force.<sup>9</sup> As the Pakistanis formerly enjoyed relatively privileged access to American systems, the Indian Navy felt impelled to match Pakistan acquisition such as HARPOON with purchases of British SEA EAGLE missiles. It will be a fair observation that the best case each navy has for new purchase is that made in relation to the capability of its perceived opponent. The recent Pakistani purchase of six ex-British Type 21 frigates at a very low price reflects this tendency, since the buy was forced by the requirement to return frigates leased from the United States to their owner. Indeed both navies will continue with opportunity purchases to reinforce or replace force elements which they could not otherwise afford.

Sri Lanka continues to focus on the Tamil insurgency problem and its requirements for inshore operations in the north of the island. The expenditure on assets for this requirement has been at the expense of any seagoing capability for EEZ protection.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, the

---

9. *Ibid*, p.8.

10. *Ibid*, p.8.

priority which must go to internal security combine to make unlikely acquisitions of patrol vessels or high technology weaponry in the immediate future. Sri Lanka will continue to have a constabulary navy. Working from limited resources, Bangladesh has long attempted to maintain a capability not only for constabulary and coastal operations but offshore defence with old British built frigates, missile boats and other offshore fast attack craft.<sup>11</sup> The Bangladesh Navy certainly nurses plans for shipborne helicopters, maritime patrol aircraft and even submarines. Furthermore, the present strength of the Navy, however limited, does ensure that any opponent would require a large scale commitment of well equipped forces to back any incursion. In view of this, it is likely that the frigate force will continue to be maintained, supplemented by the present mix of fast attack craft and patrol vessels. The Maldives has so far raised coast guard only. India has an agreement with the Republic of Maldives under which Indian Coast Guard assists the Maldivian National Security Forces in training at sea through regular annual visits.

### ***Sea Lines of Communication and Related Issues***

Shipping in our region is increasing in importance reflecting the economic growth of countries in South Asia and the increasing interdependence of the economies. In terms of safeguarding sea lanes, the principal problems to shipping today are the same as they have always been fire, stranding, collision, and adverse weather. The intentional actions of men, through piracy, or other violence simply add to that list of threats they do not replace them.<sup>12</sup>

***Shipping density and collisions*** : In general, shipping densities and the value and volumes of cargoes are all increasing. Collisions and grounding continue to be a very real threat to ships here and in other areas of high traffic density. It has been estimated that 80 per cent of all marine accidents are caused by human error. Even in the

---

11. *Ibid*, p.9.

12. Desmond Ball and Capt Russ Swinnerton, *op. cit.*, p.16.

most user-friendly marine environment, lack of training and experience will eventually cause problems. Increased traffic densities in confined water provide a greater frequency of collision opportunities, and poorly-trained bridge personnel will be less able to deal with them.

**Piracy** : The problem of piracy is an excellent example of the kind of threat to shipping that can arise with little warning and can focus disproportionate media attention on coastal states and shipping companies.<sup>13</sup> Piracy remains a concern in areas of the South Asia and the problem needs to be tackled effectively. Piracy, however, can vary substantially in the degree of threat it offers to merchant ships. At the lowest level, piracy is the preserve of local entrepreneurs, lightly armed and using small craft to attack ships for the cash and easily convertible personal valuables carried by the crew. More complex attacks have involved flotillas of craft with large numbers of armed pirates using sophisticated equipment/arms. At a higher level, piracy is the work of organised groups of criminals hijacking ships and cargoes for the much greater value that can be realised in the commercial maritime markets world wide. There have been reported cases of bulk carriers being taken by pirates and the ships and cargoes later sold separately. The profits from even a single such enterprise can clearly run into many millions of dollars with only a well-based fear of detection and punishment being any sort of useful deterrent. What is evident is that regional piracy is likely to take on a transnational, criminal character. It will be well-financed and, in some cases, well-armed and equipped. Its suppression will increasingly be beyond the capability of lightly armed marine police or coastguard units operating more or less in territorial waters.

**Safeguarding the marine environment** : While merchant shipping is being increasingly recognised as essential for economic development, the ships themselves, particularly tankers, are causes for pollution problems. Accidental oil spills from tankers are estimated to

---

13. *Ibid*, p.18

account for only about 12 per cent of the petroleum pollution of the seas,<sup>14</sup> and all maritime transport operations account only for about a quarter of the total pollution problem. Shipping was a major cause in the past and continues to possess, disastrous potential but increasing action by governments and the industry to offer alternatives to dumping at sea have not yet reduced the problem, specially in the waters of Third World countries and thereby not diminished the need for continuing vigilance.

### *Delimitation of Maritime Boundary*

Some maritime boundaries in South Asia are still undelineated. It has been found comparatively easier to define the boundaries between States on opposite sides of the sea. India has concluded maritime boundary agreements with Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia. Unfortunately, the maritime boundaries with Pakistan and Bangladesh are yet to be defined.<sup>15</sup> In the case of Bangladesh, the problem is not with the maritime boundary which can be defined so easily, but the starting point for drawing the boundary which is in dispute as a result of sovereignty claims over the island of South Talpatti. With Bangladesh, the boundary talks have not yet got off to a start as it is suspected that this will be a difficult case since Bangladesh has a concave coast and maritime boundaries with countries with concave coasts require unconventional solutions and are extremely difficult to resolve. The boundary issue becomes important in the context of sharing of both fish resources and the exploiting of hydro-carbons. For instance, a seismic survey of the Peninsula indicates that there are many more areas which are conducive to off-

- 
14. Cited in the report from the Australian House of Representatives, Standing Committee on Transport, Communications and Infrastructure, *Ships of Shame*, p.45.
  15. Rear Admiral K. R. Menon, IN, 'Maritime Developments and Opportunities-South Asia', paper presented at the Conference on Maritime Bridge into Asia held in Sydney, 17-19 Nov 1993, p.5.

shore drilling than are presently being exploited. With the liberalization of both the Indian and Bangladesh economies, there is a tremendous amount of activity in exploring new oil reserves. In many areas where geological surveys have already been completed and there seems to be greater prospects for more gas and oil finds in the sea. Moreover, Laws of the Seas ushered in a New Ocean Order in exploiting the hydrocarbons of the seabed. Some developed countries are well ahead in their preparations to cost-effectively mine the seabed for polymetallic nodules containing manganese, copper, cobalt and nickel from the seabed by 2015 AD. It will be in the interests of South Asian littorals to cooperate in such activities for increasing their GNP in the 21st century. The 'swords of yesterday' could well become the ploughshare of the seabed tomorrow<sup>16</sup> provided areas are demarcated in an acceptable manner. It is, therefore, high time that maritime boundary issues are also placed for discussion either formally or informally so that appropriate initiatives can be taken to resolve the long-standing problems of the region and thus create a congenial atmosphere of cooperation in all fields.

### III. MECHANISM FOR REGIONAL COOPERATION

#### *Measures for Confidence Building*

It is, therefore, necessary that the processes of regional confidence building measures (CBM) and security enhancement be heavily weighted towards maritime mechanisms of various sorts. In fact, the salience of maritime concerns may be reflected in the myriad of CBM proposals which should be the subject of serious discussion in the region.<sup>17</sup> For example, ballistic missile capabilities not only comprise a large proportion of the budget but these capabilities are also the ones that are more likely to generate offsetting acquisitions elsewhere and hence to trigger unanticipated and undesired arms race.

16. Vice Admiral M.K. Roy (Retd), 'South Africa: Euro-centric or Drifting Eastwards', *Indian Defence Review*, October-December 1994, pp. 22-23.

17. Desmond Ball and Capt Russ Swinnerton, *op. cit.*, pp.10-11.

It is, therefore, particularly necessary that these acquisitions may be accompanied by transparency and dialogue. Many of the new maritime weapons systems, such as submarine warfare systems and long-range anti-ship missiles requiring over-the-horizon targeting, may be a potential source for accidents, hence the question of instituting measures to avoid such incidents at sea comes into play. Other concerns, such as piracy and illegal activities throughout many of the EEZ in the region, can best be addressed through cooperative surveillance and/or information sharing arrangements. The CBM process in the South Asian region will be slow and painstaking. The extraordinary diversity of the region in terms of security interests, perceptions and military capabilities, the presence of territorial disputes, insurgency, cultural/religious predispositions and the experience with the development of cooperative mechanisms and processes in other fields, such as economic relations, permits no other assessment.

### ***Information Exchange Network***

Information exchange network could be a unique forum and a significant step towards better understanding between the regional navies and other maritime forces. The focus of such cooperative activities should be on operational matters, directed to very particular concerns perhaps mostly non-military in nature and beginning with basic modes and procedures for information exchange rather than the erection of new structures for multilateral maritime surveillance efforts. A list of activities like maritime pollution/environmental concerns, weather prediction, high seas robbery/piracy, fisheries infringements, search and rescue, suspicious activity indicating possible narcotics trafficking may be placed on the agenda. The development of common procedures for communication between regional navies and merchant vessels may provide a capability, the significance of which for regional confidence-building obviously far transcends the particular purposes of any consulate. Similarly, the processes of reaching agreement among the naval authorities on the

priority areas for information reporting will enhance regional appreciation of particular national concerns and interests as well as increase the understanding of navies.<sup>18</sup> The operation of such network could be assisted by the use of the region's navies. National Naval Headquarters are already more or less competent managers of information, and are able to analyse information and propose action. Such institutional centre under SAARC may offer a useful starting point for an international network for surveillance, safety and information exchange. For the community of navies in the region, it would also provide the framework to deal with emergent situations of the sea should it ever arise. For the wider marine community, the proposed navy-to-navy links could act as a convenient path to reach equivalent agencies in other countries.

### *Port State Control*

Cooperation on marine safety may cover safety of life at sea, navigational services and prevention of shipping accidents. Marine safety is implemented through a system of Port State Control (PSC) which includes efficient inspections when ships are at port, maintenance of data on sub-standard ships and exchange of information among participating countries. Although PSC system is prevalent in the other regions no efforts have been made to introduce such a system in the region. Maritime safety and anti-pollution measures have also not been effective in the area. Search and Rescue (SAR) systems for rescue of survivors, ship reporting, safety communications and satellite aided tracking system are also required to be developed in the region. Regional cooperation may also include marine environmental protection, marine science and technology and oceanography.

### *Surveillance/Sea Patrol*

Navies traditionally assume a role in the protection of SLOC alongwith the other maritime forces. A case can also generally be

---

18. *Ibid*, p.13.

made for navy-to-navy cooperation in areas such as information exchange, high-seas patrol in the suppression of violence at sea, from criminal/terrorist activity illegal cross border flow of drug and economical/political refugees.<sup>19</sup> But navies have always had an independent role in policing the high seas, beyond the jurisdiction of coastal states, in pursuit of pirates, slavers and mutineers. With the increasing interdependence of trade and the diminished responsibility of countries of registry, the navy's role of high seas patrol and surveillance and subsequent information management should be extended to other examples of criminal activity, including negligence and incompetence. All navies share a number of duties of surveillance and enforcement on the high seas. These duties could be carried out with much closer cooperation in terms of information sharing. In practical terms for ships at sea, this extension of a navy's charter could be achieved in a number of unthreatening ways in all sea regimes, including during innocent passage, as extensions of the mariner's customary duties and obligations. These could include a policy of regular environmental sampling, periodically surveying areas in dispute and the development of expertise in pollution countermeasures/ weather prediction enabling ships to provide 'first-aid' in environmental disasters in the same way they respond in Search and Rescue, and reporting of sub-standard bridgemanhip, particularly where flagrant breaches of the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea are concerned; assistance to shore authorities in identifying rogue shipping in areas of cooperation and a willingness to share information of significance by all sea users. In that case, general understanding on the entry into the territorial sea of the other party unintentionally or through force majeure, a uniform interpretation of the rules of innocent passage, restriction of maritime areas to particular operations, minimum distances of approach between naval ships, and communications provided to avoid or resolve peacefully any activity, should be arrived at by the regional navies operating in the area.

---

19. Cdre W. S. G. Bateman, "Sea Surveillance, Marine Safety and Information Exchange," paper presented at the SLOC Conference, Bali, 24-27 Jan 1993.



#### IV. FORMATION OF A CENTRE FOR MARITIME COOPERATION

Formation of a structure for regional Centre for Maritime Cooperation, encompassing the full spectrum of maritime affairs, is the need of the hour. Such a structure would provide opportunity for establishing common interests, for proposing solutions and for concerting actions in the field of interests. In an even narrower sense, the maritime community tends to be more internationalist, less concerned with issues of national prestige than their land-based colleagues, partly because they share a common enemy, the sea itself, and partly because so much of their operating area is international by nature. We should beware of the understandable inclination towards Hillaire Bellocs incantation to 'always keep a hold of nurse for fear of meeting something worse'. The next century has been identified as the 'Century of the Sea'<sup>20</sup> opening the international markets to provide a large boost to international trade and thus to seaborne trade of all countries. There is, therefore, an increasing need for peace and security in South Asia and for the region to be insulated against external pressure. Nevertheless, the time to beat our swords into ploughshares has not yet arrived. Arms transfers from the North to the South are in danger of destabilising the international system. In this position of great uncertainty in which the world now finds itself, navies represent a force for stability, a necessary evil. But economic factors would force majors naval players of the area to measures of increasing cooperation and interdependence. Considering the need of the time and the urgency to deal with maritime issues and to initiate the process of confidence building among the military players in the region, Bangladesh under the umbrella of SAARC can propose for setting up a Centre for Regional Maritime Co-operation for full range of issues dealing with maritime affairs. Most progress is likely to be made with such proposals which are relatively modest rather than those which depend upon new structures, which are relatively informal, and which

---

20. Admiral Sir James Eberle (Retd) *op. cit.* p.11.

do not impinge on core national interests and defence capabilities but which, while still important, address lower profile security issues such as piracy, SAR, drug trafficking, terrorism, offshore pollution control, SLOC management, weather prediction etc. This proposal may provide for a more structured regional confidence building and enhancing regional security. The most fundamental building block for regional security cooperation and confidence-building is the institutionalisation of regional dialogue on maritime issues. Such dialogue should lead to better appreciation of the concerns, interests and perceptions of the participating countries, enhancing mutual understanding, trust, and preventing misinterpretations, misunderstandings and suspicions likely to cause tensions, even conflict.<sup>21</sup> The suggested objectives of such a Centre for Maritime Cooperation may be as follows :

- a. To foster maritime cooperation and dialogue among the states of the SAARC and to promote maritime confidence and security building measures.
- b. To promote adherence to the principles of the 1982 UN Convention of the Law of the Sea and to commence dialogue on areas of UNCLOS III which are either indefinite or not fully accepted by regional nations and to promote joint hydrographic survey efforts to assist in the observance and enforcement of UNCLOS III.
- c. To help safeguard the peaceful merchant shipping of the region and to examine the means for developing procedures which will assist in the protection of shipping within the region with increased joint activity in naval control of shipping.
- d. To create a secure atmosphere for the sustained exploitation of the resources of the sea and to identify regional hydrographic survey and oceanographic priorities and examine ways to conduct joint surveys in those waters with greatest priority.

---

21. Desmond Ball and Capt Russ Swinnerton, *op. cit.*, p.12.

- e. To contribute to the preservation of the marine environment and to provide a framework of cooperation for sharing cooperation on weather prediction.
- f. To undertake policy-oriented studies on specific regional maritime security problems and to provide training in relevant aspects of maritime operations to those lacking in some capability or expertise.

## V. COOPERATION AMONG THE REGIONAL NAVIES

There is no denying the fact that the fraternity of the sea transcends the barriers of race, religion, language and nationality. Navies of this region could be considered as the messenger of friendship and goodwill and are often used as the hand maidens of peaceful diplomacy. Regional cooperation must necessarily take over the centre stage in the emerging maritime order. Navies will need to diffuse the existing psychology of preparing for the war in order to ensure peace which in a way was the colonial and cold war chorus. The new ethos could instead be if "you want peace, prepare to cooperate".<sup>22</sup> As we look towards the dawn of the new century and the emergence of new world order, it is incumbent upon us that Bangladesh make a determined effort to shed adversarial postures in the SAARC region and come closure to each other for mutual benefit. The growth of naval interaction in the region appears to be favoured by all parties as no one sees any security implications arising therefrom. At the same time, regional navies have more or less accepted the fact that some of the exercises will be with extra-territorial navies as the countries they represent have large financial and economic interests in the Indian Ocean area. It is known that both India and Pakistan are providing training facilities to the naval personnel to other countries of the region and all the navies of the region are also engaged in joint exercises at sea with the navies of the region. India of

22. Vice Admiral M. K. Roy (Retd), *op. cit.*, p. 22.

course invited some of the regional navies for exercises/meeting in 1993 as well as in 1995. The meeting of the regional navies held at Port Blair in February 1995 was called as MELAN (Meeting of the Eastern Littoral Navies) by India.

It is felt that the regional navies should look beyond the pressures and politics of today to envision the requirements of a better tomorrow. Authorities should understand the need for increasing naval cooperation as a means of the better use of scarce and increasingly expensive naval resources at a time of great budgetary constraint in all the countries. Naval officers are aware about the expense of setting up naval training facilities for basic and advanced engineering skills, electrical and electronics skills, submarine training tactical workup and the various other infrastructure facilities that a navy needs. It is assumed that there is large scope for regional cooperation and cost cutting where a service which does not wish to set up all infrastructure facilities for small numbers, could perhaps rely on the training facilities of another country. A very wide range of opportunities for navy to navy cooperation both on bilateral and multilateral basis could be placed on the agenda for discussion at the Centre for Maritime Cooperation. This may include joint scheme for ocean surveillance, transparency in procurement plans, combined operational exercises, joint procedure for the relief of natural disasters and weather prediction, pooling expertise in marine salvage, search and rescue, the exchange of military personnel and joint action in the enforcement of international law and order at sea. In order to costs effectively utilise the infrastructure of navies for national development as opposed to coercion and military functions, it will be beneficial for countries to have common ship plots and communication facilities, say, for quick response at sea and rescue coordination. Further, authority could be vested to the navy to implement the safety of life at sea (SOLAS) as promulgated by the International Maritime Organisation (IMO). Navies could also monitor dumping of nuclear wastes, prevention of poaching or overfishing as also deter unauthorised population movements. The

Coast Guard, where available, will be a vital adjunct of maritime centre.

## CONCLUSION

The setting up of any kind of regional maritime centre may be the ultimate step but there is no wishing away the political tensions that is existing in the area and preventing progress in that direction. As it happens these tensions have their origin quite far from the sea. Within the parameters of this situation, the immediate aim could well be to work out a strong framework for confidence-building measures. These could include agreements on non-interference in naval manoeuvres, prevention of incidents at sea, modalities for dealing with fishermen who stray into someone else's EEZ. A centre for maritime issues would satisfy many important requirements in the region. It would address some very real issues; and it would serve as a building block for proceeding to a more comprehensive maritime organisations. But the process should begin modestly. Structured maritime surveillance systems may also be possible in some particular circumstances, where commonality of interests is high or situations where issues can best be addressed multilaterally. In other cases, multilateral maritime surveillance systems may be considered for dealing with particular problems and issues, such as piracy, weather prediction and oil spills in international waterways. The navies, coast guard and police forces of the countries may begin to compile and share information on the areas where piracy is most rampant, to establish communications links between them, to coordinate patrols against pirates, to organise joint sweeps against pirate strongholds. The establishment of specific-purpose multilateral surveillance systems in areas of particular concern, and the strengthening of the myriad of bilateral maritime surveillance arrangements in the region will go far to address the requirements of a 'Maritime Cooperation Centre'. After common reporting formats and operating procedure have been developed, further initiatives with coordinated patrol and real-time information exchange may follow. Such a network, and the operational advantages

it would confer, would be of great use in responding to other contingencies apart from the problems of piracy or pollution. Such a network would provide the necessary framework to provide guidance and possibly protection for the peaceful shipping if the region was subject to a conflict/terrorism across the sea lines of communication. This would not be the purpose of the arrangement, but it would be well within its capabilities. The establishment of comprehensive system of communication between navies would serve as a confidence-building measure, and contribute to the protection and restoration of peaceful shipping, the sustainable development of the exploitation of the sea resources, and the maintenance of the marine environment. In addition, it would provide a strong basis for cooperation in the navies' more traditional roles in higher order conflicts. There should be no reason why some initiatives to improve safety and security at sea for all the maritime forces including coastal areas likely to be hit by occasional cyclones could not be regionalised to the economic benefit of all countries. Ultimately, of course, trade, in particular, seaborne trade in large volumes is the engine that will drive countries towards peace. There is, therefore, an increasing need for peace and security in this region for providing a large boost to international trade and thus to sea borne trade and thereby, directly contributing to economic well-being of a country.

## References

### Books

1. BHASIN, V. K. *Super Power Rivalry in the Indian Ocean*, India, 1981.
2. GORSHKOV, S. G. *The Sea Power of the State*, UK, 1976.
3. KHAN, ZILLUR, R. *SAARC and the Super powers*, Dhaka, 1991.
4. KOHLI, S.N. *Sea Power and the Indian Ocean*, India, 1979.
5. KRISHNAN, N, *No way but surrender*, New Delhi 1980.
6. MAHAN, A. T. *The Influence of Sea power upon History*, London, 1890
7. ROSKILL, S. W, RN, *The Strategy of Sea Power*, UK, 1986.

8. SHARPE, R. *Janes Fighting Ships*, 1995-96.
9. SINGH, J, *Indian Ocean in Global Strategies: some perspectives*, Institute for Defence studies and Analysis, New Delhi, India, 1984.

### Articles

1. BATEMAN, W. S. G, "Sea Surveillance, Marine safety and Information Exchange", Bali, January 1993.
2. DESMOND BALL & Capt Russ Swinnerton, "A Regional Regime for Maritime Surveillance, Safety and Information Exchange"-Australia, 1993.
3. EBERLE, J, "Naval Cooperation in the Indian Ocean, Naval Forces", 1992.
4. GOIDRICK, J - "Developements in Regional Maritime Forces", November 1993.
5. HAMZAH, B. A - "The Security of Sealanes, The Search for an Equitable Straits regime", *Asian Defence Journal*, January 1993.
6. International Maritime Bureau Regional piracy centre, Kuala Lumpur, I M B piracy update May 1993.
7. MENON, K. P, "Maritime Developments and Opportunities - South Asia", Australia, 1993.
8. ROY, M. K - "South Africa: Eurocentric or Drifting Eastwards".
9. *The Independent* (daily) Dhaka - 1995.