

## BOOK REVIEW

Greg Mills, *South Africa and Security Building in the Indian Ocean Rim*, Johannesburg, South African Institute of International Affairs(SIIA), 1998

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*Let us not shrink from pitting a broad self-interest against the narrow self-interest to which some would restrict us. Let us start with the fundamental truth, warranted by history, that the control of the seas, and especially along the great lines drawn by national interest or national commerce, is the chief among the merely material elements in the power and prosperity of nations. It is so because the sea is the world's great medium of circulation.*

-Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan, in *The Army & Navy Journal* of London, January 1898

*It is only since the beginning of the 1970s that the Indian Ocean and its littoral states, which belong predominantly to the Third World, have begun to take on the characteristics of a major political region. The main factor contributing to this development was the assertive global strategy of the two super powers (the United States and the Soviet Union)...Conflicts with their origin outside the area (East-West and Sino-Soviet)...spread to the Indian ocean Area. These outside influences, together with a growing number of conflicts between states within the region, point clearly to a need to seek and implement guide-lines for limiting conflict and encouraging regional cooperation.*

Dieter Braun in Preface to *The Indian Ocean – Region of Conflict or 'Zone of Peace'?* 1983

*Security is a multi-faceted and multi-dimensional concept. It ranges from the physical, i.e. the military threat, through the political and economic to the ideological. The threat to a state can*

*come in many forms and must be met in all these forms. It is futile for a government to prepare and maintain a military force for physical defence only to find the state structure collapsing from within because of subversion or economic failure or an ideological explosion. Direct threats to security are easy to perceive and identify, while indirect threats are difficult to comprehend and counter.*

-Lt. General A.I. Akram, President Institute of Regional Studies, Islamabad in *The Security of Small States in the South Asian Context*, paper presented at Dhaka, 1987

When Admiral Mahan advocated that the United States should have a navy second to none, his advocacy of the cause emanated from two basic premises: a) it is sea-borne commerce which makes a nation great; b) preservation of (a) could only be secured by ensuring command of the seas, which guaranteed, whether in war or peace, the continuance of maritime commerce involving exchange of finished products for supplies and raw materials. As a naval historian and strategic philosopher, Mahan attributed Britain's status as a world power in the nineteenth century as primarily emanating from its having established a monopoly of the seas. From this basic premise, he advocated that "no foreign State should be allowed to acquire a coaling position within 3000 miles of San Francisco.... For fuel is the life of modern naval war.... In the Caribbean and the Atlantic we are confronted with many a foreign coal depot bidding us stand to arms..." While Mahan's strategic philosophy built itself primarily around the parameters of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans; the United States strategic policy towards the Indian Ocean in the latter half of the current century was a natural corollary to Mahan's original theorem, since in the 20<sup>th</sup> century oil replaced coal as the major source of fuel which would sustain and nourish not only military and naval power but also industrial development and the economic might of a nation.

The Indian Ocean, only half the size of the Pacific and slightly smaller than the Atlantic, may be only the third largest of the great Oceans of the World, but today, in terms of strategic importance it probably occupies a place of pre-eminence in the reckoning of political and military strategists. The northern part of the Indian Ocean, surrounded as it is by three great landmasses of Africa, Asia and Australia, was likened by Dieter Braun to 'a huge bay' to these three continents. Its strategic importance was considerably enhanced after the opening of the Suez Canal, when it offered a line of communication between the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, and the Pacific. Its command of the gateway to the Persian Gulf has catapulted it to centre stage during the last 30 years or so of this millennium.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and with it, the replacement by a fragile multi-polarity of the bipolar system which dominated post-Second World War global relations until the early 1990s, necessitated a fresh look at, and appraisal of, the Indian Ocean region, which hosts a greater mass of humanity than any other Oceanic region, contains very large reservoirs of mineral, forestry and other natural resources and, in trading terms, offers to the industrialised world the largest markets in terms of middle class purchasing power. With the emergence in 1994 of South Africa from behind the shadows of isolation imposed on it as a hitherto pariah state, it is also entirely appropriate that one of the first such serious studies (if not the first) in reappraisal should have been attempted by a scholar of the 'rainbow nation', that is the new South Africa.

Greg Mills' book on *South Africa and Security Building in the Indian Ocean Rim*<sup>1</sup> is very well researched, providing statistics ranging from projected growth of populations in the countries of the

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1 Greg Mills, *South Africa and Security Building in the Indian Ocean Rim* (Johannesburg : South African Institute of International Affairs) 1998

Indian Ocean Rim(IOR) region, political, economic and social indicators, and tables on the defence spending and comparative military strengths and naval capabilities of these countries. It also draws attention to some disturbing facts: that Africa has some six million refugees; that in South Asia there are over 8.5 million displaced persons; that 'civil wars, economic decline, political unrest, social upheaval, and environmental factors [may] have all played a role in hastening such movements, while, conversely, such flows in themselves may give rise to these conditions, and in doing so threaten domestic, inter-state and international security'. It draws attention to some unpalatable realities: that the southern African region is now a focal point for the world's AIDS crisis, with over 60% of the 30 million people worldwide infected with the HIV virus now residing in the sub-Saharan region; the serious problems posed for developing countries by the 'micro proliferation' of small arms, particularly automatic weapons, even as these countries are struggling to establish the basis for social stability which is a *sine qua non* for economic development and progress; the nexus between such small-arms proliferation and trans-national crimes, especially drug trafficking (with the IOR region being directly affected by the narcotics-producing 'Golden Triangle' of Myanmar, Thailand and Laos and 'Golden Crescent' of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan). It confronts one with some inescapable statistics: that of the over 1.2 billion people in the developing world living in absolute poverty, the vast majority are in Africa and Asia; that today sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia stand out as the poorest regions world-wide with over 800 million people who do not have regular or adequate access to food.

Despite the above, Greg Mills also draws attention to the tangible evidence projected by the World Bank's 1997 annual report, that the pendulum of global economic activity is swinging towards the developing economies. According to this projection, the developing countries are likely to double their share of global GDP and account for one-third of global output by 2020, with the global

share of the exports of the big five developing countries – China, India, Brazil, Indonesia and Russia -- rising from barely 9% in 1992 to 22% in 2020.

In assessing the impact of globalisation on the developing world, generally, Mills points out that while globalisation may be viewed as the 'rapid acceleration of economic activity across national borders', manifesting itself in increasing capital mobility, increasing trade, increasing importance of stock-markets world-wide, increasing use of English as a common language and of international media sources, and a growing consensus in economic policy in emerging markets. However, the flip side of the coin also tends to reveal that in the developing world, given their largely immature political systems of such countries, globalisation may also be viewed as posing a unique set of political and security challenges --- for example, the recent currency value fall in Southeast Asia, which raises the question as to whether globalisation is not also inherently unstable for developing economies. Citing the lessons from the crash of the Mexican *peso* in 1994, the Thai *Baht*, the Indonesian *Rupiah* and the Malaysian *Ringit* in 1997, he lists a number of danger signs for developing countries to look out for while entering the relatively uncharted waters of globalisation, cautioning them particularly about: mismatch between short-term debt and forex reserves; unsustainable current account deficit; increased consumption rather than productive investment; a high budget deficit; flighty, short-term portfolio capital inflows; an overvalued exchange rate; the volatility of removing fixed exchange rate regimes; and rapid monetary growth. He admits that in the face of these continuing challenges, political stability in some developing countries looks increasingly unlikely, with wider political and security implications. Mills advocates a reform of the existing predominantly one-party style of governance in Asia as one way of reinstilling investor confidence and policy pragmatism.

Mills then lists the traditional security concerns of the IOR as revolving primarily around the issues of : disarmament (particularly

nuclear disarmament); the unresolved Kashmir dispute (which looms larger than ever in recent months, since the publication of Mills' book); tensions over growing Chinese military power and the involvement of other external(non-IOR) powers; security of oil supplies; religious tensions; and border disputes. In the developing world, the potentials of conflict over scarce water resources (not only in water starved Africa as Mills cites, but also in my opinion, in Asia), and maritime security poses two immediate challenges for the IOR as a whole.

Tracing the developments of the two-track initiatives in the IOR-ARC so far, one more restrictive in immediate membership at the inter-governmental level, and the other more inclusive non-governmental approach initiated by Australia, it is seen that a clear idea of goals and objectives is still far from gelling. Mills' primary concern about security concerns are not addressed by either of these initiatives, as there are considerable difficulties and doubts about the wisdom of including these concerns by many of the participants.

Mills also lists the various regional and sub-regional organisations/initiatives which have so far been attempted by the wide-ranging diversity of the IOR countries, to address both security and non-security concerns. While essentially, each has been striving for positive fallouts within their own respective spheres or parameters, it becomes quite evident that these are still mostly fragmented building blocs which do not quite fit into a larger pattern with wider scale of beneficial fallouts. A tantalising question faces one when over-viewing all these : can the IOR-ARC ever hope to act as a viable intermediary stage between the evolution of small sub-regional and regional groupings, encompassing or perhaps integrating them into a pan-regional grouping comprising the entire IOR region, making the fuller transition to globalisation a less painful and less traumatising experience for the poorer countries with limited capacities for absorbing shocks?

Mills states that 'the main challenge for the IOR states in the future is to create and/or sustain conditions of good governance well into the next century',...underpinned by the economic growth and investment, sound and responsible management and political stability. No doubt, as a South African he is deeply worried by the specter of political instability in South Africa's immediate neighbourhood becoming unmanageable and making ingress into South Africa itself. He makes a strong case for maritime-naval cooperation on the grounds that the extent of regional interdependence, the need for good governance, and the potential for disputes and illegal activities all underscore the need for such cooperation. Reflecting more perhaps the South African position, Mills states that the potentials from the establishment of such maritime links have not fully been exploited. Once a certain volume of trade is reached, new routes could be established as the basis for expanded shipping, leading to enhancement within the region of harbour facilities, insurance companies, employment and training of sailors and ship-building and repairs. However, it remains a worrying factor that even these gains could be nullified by the continuing instability in some African countries not far away. Mills advocates a strong South African Navy with two dimensions: one, joint undertakings with Mozambique, Mauritius, Tanzania and other African IOR members to further stimulate the maritime capabilities of the sub-region; secondly, a linkage between the IOR-ARC and the South Atlantic 'could mean the establishment of totally new trade routes, extending from the east coast of South Africa right up to the Gulf and down to Australia'. In advocating this, Mills is doing for South Africa no more, or less, than what Admiral Mahan did for the United States. Mahan's doctrine is still largely valid today as it was when first propounded.

The prospects of a broad-based IOR-ARC interaction outlined by Mills are tantalising. If one were to find fault at all, it would be that Mills in the end has tended to focus more on the potentials of naval-maritime linkages, and with more emphasis on security in the conventional sense, which could spawn a lot of controversy. But then, as the title of his book suggests, his main preoccupation is

security building in the IOR and the new South Africa's role in it, which would presumably at the same time also establish a role of pre-eminence for South Africa in trading and strategic terms.

I agree with Mills that the IOR-ARC cannot be considered complete without the inclusion of some major Indian Ocean powers (Iran and Pakistan). Iran has historically been a major regional power (let us not forget that the first world empire was the Persian Empire of the Achaemenids, and that during the regime of Shah Reza Pahlavi, the parameters of Iranian defence had been publicly stated to extend to the Indian Ocean). Pakistan certainly qualifies as a middle ranking naval power with some blue waters capability. Nor would it be logical to exclude Bangladesh or Sri Lanka, both important countries of South Asia occupying positions of strategic importance as littoral states on the Indian Ocean. If anything, the post-May situation in the South Asian Sub-continent emphasises the need for the IOR to squarely face up to the realities on the ground, if it wishes to avoid being sucked into a counter-productive quagmire spawned by a fresh Indo-Pakistan conflict. The exclusion of Pakistan on grounds of Indian sensitivities would only serve to lend a bias to the IOR-ARC which I am sure it wishes to avoid. The inclusion of Iran and Bangladesh, both of whom happen to enjoy equally excellent relations with both India and Pakistan would in fact strengthen the capacities of the IOR-ARC, as a group, to quietly assist these two antagonists in engaging in a constructive bilateral dialogue. South Africa, by virtue of its new found position of pre-eminence in global affairs, and particularly because of the great respect in which President Mandela is held personally worldwide, cannot ignore or avoid playing a more proactive role (albeit more through unpublicised, behind the scenes proximity talks than through public pronouncements) in helping to defuse a potential flashpoint in South Asia which would have disastrous consequences, not only for the immediate vicinity of the South Asian region but for the IOR region as a whole, considering the complex ethnic and religious factors involved as well in the event of such a fresh conflagration.

I cannot fault Mills for suggesting that for South Africa to be able to sustain a position of positive and benign influence in its own



region and beyond, it must not neglect the maintenance of a strong naval and maritime fleet. Given its size, geographic location, resources, advanced infrastructure and strong industrial base, it cannot afford to aspire to be merely an economic giant with political clout but remaining a naval and military dwarf. True, given the gross abuse of military power of the previous apartheid regime in South Africa, those who wield political power in the new South Africa today may be chary, and even reluctant, to display too pronounced a military role in the region and beyond; but as recent events in its own backyard have demonstrated, it is a role thrust upon South Africa by history and geo-politics. Possession of power by itself cannot be denigrated: what is important is whether one is capable of using this power judiciously and with political maturity for the greater welfare of all.

Mills style is lucid and clear, and his thesis makes interesting reading. I would have liked him to have devoted some greater attention to security building in the IOR through the process of ensuring economic security for the vast majority of the poorer people who inhabit this region. For example, what sort of mechanism can the IOR-ARC devise that would enable it not only to meaningfully enhance South-South cooperation, but also provide viable indicators for entering into a pro-active resumption of the North-South dialogue? These are questions which have been brought up once again in the recent NAM Summit chaired by South Africa. As the Chairman of NAM for the next three years, South Africa bears the unenviable responsibility (or burden) of shepherding the NAM (of which most IOR countries are members) into the next millennium on a note of hope.

-Ahmed Tariq Karim<sup>2</sup>

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- 2 **Ahmed Tariq Karim** was until December 1998, Ambassador of Bangladesh in South Africa. Views expressed here are made purely in personal capacity and do not in any way reflect the Government position which he held until recently. The Book Review is reprinted with consent from the Editor, *South African Journal of International Affairs*, where it was first published in its Vol. 6, No. 1, Summer 1998, pp. 143-49.