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THE INDIAN OCEAN IN UNITED STATES STRATEGY

Norman E. Ward, Jr.

Army War College
Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania

18 October 1971

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STUDENT ESSAY

18 OCTOBER 1971

THE INDIAN OCEAN IN U.S. STRATEGY

BY

LIEUTENANT COLONEL NORMAN E. WARD, JR.

TRANSPORTATION CORPS

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USAWC RESEARCH ELEMENT
(Essay)

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Lieutenant Colonel Norman E. Ward, Jr.
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ABSTRACT

AUTHOR: Norman E. Ward, Jr., LTC, TC
TITLE: The Indian Ocean In U.S. Strategy
FORMAT: Essay

This essay makes a quick survey of the Indian Ocean and its littoral countries. It examines the interests of outside major world powers, several of which have had colonial interests in various parts of the area. The threat of the USSR's filling the power vacuum created by Great Britain's withdrawal of its military forces from the area is examined. The United States' future role as the major free world power is assessed. Guidelines for future United States foreign policy are recommended.

INTRODUCTION

In the early days of the republic the orientation of the American people was toward Europe--the mother countries. In those early years our young nation spent its energies on domestic development. Gradually our sphere of interest expanded to include Central and South America. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries we engaged in several military actions to assert our influences in these areas. During this same period we acquired an interest in the Pacific area and influenced Japan to join the modern family of nations.

Even our participation in World War I did not develop in our citizens a widespread awareness of this country's destiny as a great power. It took the catastropic events of World War II and other major events of the 1940's and 1950's to make this nation aware of its new role among the world's nation-states. Such major events as the Marshall Plan, the Truman Doctrine, the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance, and the Korean Conflict all served to illustrate the nation's awareness of its responsibility as a world leader.

This paper addresses an area of the world where the United States has, with the exception of economic aid, shown little initative--the Indian Ocean. In the past we have depended on the United Kingdom to maintain a "balance of power" favorable to the West in this area. However, World War II spelled the end of

Great Britain's role as a major world power and forced her retreat to a lesser role in world events. In doing so she withdrew most of her power from the Indian Ocean.[1]

It is necessary, therefore, for the United States to re-evaluate its policies toward the Indian Ocean. We must insure that policies are developed and executed which will insure that the United States' and the free world's vital interest in the area are protected.

THE ARENA

The Indian Ocean area forms a hugh triangle. With the southern tip of Africa and the west coast of Australia forming the base of the triangle, the Indo-Pakastani subcontinent caps this vast area. Bound on the west by Africa and on the east by Southeast Asia and Australia, the area includes the world's third largest ocean--28,830,000 square miles or 20.3 percent of the world's water area and several large bays and gulfs.[2] See map at Annex A.

The littoral countries of this vast area have a long history, but they are, for the most part, still under-developed

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[1]L. W. Martin and Hedly Bull, "The Strategic Consequences of Britain's Revised Naval Role," in Uses of the Seas (1966), ed. by Edmund A. Gullian, pp. 113, 128-29.

[2]National Geographic Society, Atlas of the World (2d ed., 1966), p. 7.

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[2]National Geographic Society, Atlas of the World (2d ed., 1966), p. 7.

in the modern sense. Approximately one-third of the world's population lives in these countries.[3] This population includes all the major races. Also all the major religions are represented to some degree. The politics of the area are mostly "third world" or "non-aligned." The climate ranges from hot, arid desert to tropical rain forest with only the extreme northern and southern areas and the higher elevations experiencing any degree of cold weather.

For the purpose of making a quick survey, the Indian Ocean can be divided into seven sub-areas: the ocean, East Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, Southeast Asia, Australia, and the Islands.

The Ocean

The Indian Ocean is large and relatively land-locked and isolated from the developed areas of the world. Most ocean commerce traverses rather narrow waters to gain access from the more developed areas of the world. These gateways are the Suez Canal (until it was closed by the Arab-Israeli dispute) in the Northwest and the Straits of Malacca and Sunda in the East. It is over 5,000 miles between ports in the east and those in the west.[4]

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[3]Indian Council of World Affairs, Reference and Security in the Indian Ocean Area (1958), p. 5.

[4]Reader's Digest Association, Inc., 1971 Reader's Digest Almanac and Yearbook (1971) p. 204-05.

East Africa

Newly independent East African countries have yet to make their mark in the world. In fact these countries contribute many problems to the world community of nations. We should not, however, condemn these countries prematurely. Each must find itself politically and economically. It is encourging to note that three (Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda), after gaining independence from British colonial rule less than ten years ago, have survived the uncertainties of independence and are showing signs of real progress.[5]

Despite the encourging prospects of Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, the countries of East Africa face a difficult situation. Except for the Republic of South Africa the area is underdeveloped, population density is low, and subsistance agriculture is the economic mainstay. Political activity tends to orient on strong personalities and tribal differences.[6] Governments lack experience and the entire area is short of trained administrators, technical and professional personnel. They are also hampered by a lack of capital and inadequate transportation facilities.

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[5]William P. Lineberry, "The Setting," in East Africa (1968), ed. by William P. Lineberry, p. 9.

[6]Ibid., "The Politics of Independence," p. 55.

In the Republic of South Africa an industrial base is well on the way to development; however, it relies heavily on the extractive industries--mainly gold and diamonds. Agriculture continues to play an important role in the economic life of the country. A major problem in South Africa is its racial policy of apartheid. This policy will continue to be an irritant in African continental affairs. Problems stemming from this policy also extend into other international relations.[7]

The Middle East

The Middle East has, since the dawn of time, been a strategically important area. It is the only place in the world where three continents join. Four ancient civilizations (Egyptian, Sumerican, Babylonian and Assgrian) flourished there. Attesting to its strategic importance, the area has been a part of the Persian, Greek, Roman, Arab, Mongol, Tatar and Turkish empires. And three of the world's great religions--Judaism, Christianity and Islam--took form there.[8]

While only Iran and the Arabian peninsula with its collection of kingdoms, sheikdoms, principalities, protectorates border on the Indian Ocean, all of the Middle East is of direct

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[7]Auguste Toussaint, History of the Indian Ocean (1966), p. 243.

[8]Don Peretz, The Middle East Today (1963), p. 1.

interest to any student of the Indian Ocean area. Unstable political conditions and the complicated interaction of forces and trends in the area make separation of any portion almost impossible.

The Middle East is often thought of as a desert inhabited by nomadic arabs and camels. This is far from a true picture. Less than ten percent of the people are nomadic while approximately 75 percent tend the soil.[9] Natural resources, other than petroleum, are limited. Gold, silver, copper, and iron are the most important.[10] By far the most important resource in the area is oil. The extent of the oil reserves is not known but they are extensive--far outstripping those of any other oil-producing region.[11] The presence of this vital resource adds yet another factor to the area's strategic importance.

The Middle East is peopled by a great number of ethnic groups. These groups are generally placed into five categories--Semites (largest), Arabs, Jews, Turks and Iranians. The area has had a civilizing effect on its conquerors,[12] yet it remains politically unstable. This can be attributed to two factors: (1) The political divisions of the area today date only from the end of World War II; and (2) the nature of the people. The

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[9]Ibid., p. 15.
[10]Sydney N. Fisher, The Middle East (1969), pp. 4-5.
[11]Ibid., p. 7.
[12]William Yale, The Near East (1968), p. 11.

mentality of the citizens appears to be incapable of accepting and practicing the basic premises of democracy.[13]

South Asia

The Indo-Pakistani subcontinent forms the "capstone" of the triangular Indian Ocean area and occupies a commanding position over the sea routes between Suez and the Far East. This area includes two countries--India and Pakistan. Pakistan is split by India with West Pakistan lying between India and Iran/Afganistan and East Pakistan forming an enclave into India at the northern tip of the Bay of Bengal with about 100 miles of common border with Burma. They are the second and fifth largest nations in the world[14] and a most significant force in the Indian Ocean area.

India, until 1947, included the areas now known as Pakistan. The area has a long, colorful history dating back to the third millennium BC.[15] Split by religion, caste, language, and many other factors, India was first united, at least to some degree, by British colonial rule in the eighteenth century. British rule gave India political unity, an efficient administrative apparatus, domestic economic cohesion, an education system,

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[13]George Lenczowski, The Political Awakening in the Middle East (1970), p. 100.

[14]Reader's Digest Association, Inc., pp. 204-05.

[15]W. Norman Brown, The United States and India and Pakistan (1953), p. 18.

public health service, and many other institutions which form the foundation of a modern nation.[16]

Of the many problems faced by India and Pakistan the most serious is religious differences. Hostility between Hindu and Muslim was a major source of internal problems prior to partition and continues as a major source of international issues between India and Pakistan.[17]

Of at least equal and possibly of greater importance than Russian/United States competition for influence in India and Pakistan is Indian-Chinese relationships. In the remote regions of the Himalayan mountains the Sino-Indian border stretches for 2,640 miles and has many disputed areas. Since the latest major clash in 1962, China has added nuclear weapons to its arsenal and India has the capability to build nuclear weapons.[18] A future major dispute could lead to World War III.

Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia lies along the eastern rim of the Indian Ocean. The principle nations of this area within the Indian Ocean littoral are Burma, Indonesia, and Malaysia. A short stretch of the coast between Burma and Malaysia is a part of

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[16] Ibid., p. 36.
[17] Ibid., p. 55.
[18] Patwant Singh, India and the Future of Asia (1966), p. 226.

Thailand.

The people native to Southeast Asia trace their history into antiquity.[19] There is evidence of large migrations from the interior of Asia about 1,500 to 2,000 years ago, and even today there are large Chinese populations in Southeast Asian countries.[20] These "Overseas Chinese" exert a considerable influence on the economic life of the area and constitute a political factor to be considered in any assesment of the area.

European influence in the area over the past two hundred years has been from Great Britain, France, and the Netherlands. After a long period of domination by these colonial powers, each Southeast Asian country won its independence within a few years after the end of World War II Japanese occupation. Each country is now striving to overcome the common problems of former colonies. While the living standard is generally higher than in many countries on the Indian Ocean littoral, none of the countries of Southeast Asia are considered "developed."

Malaysia has overcome a major guerrilla subversive movement and may soon achieve self-sustaining economic growth.[21] The country appears to be well on the way toward overcoming the

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[19]Bruce Grant, Indonesia (1964), p. 2.
[20]Tillman Durdin, Southeast Asia (1965), p. 13.
[21]Robert E. Ward and Roy C. Macridis, Modern Political Systems: Asia (1963), p. 361.

unsettling effect of Singapore's withdrawal from the Federation.

Singapore occupies a key stragegic and economic position at the southeast entrance to the Malaccu Straits. Often called "Crossroads of the Far East," Singapore is the trade center for Malaya and much of the East Indies. Great Britain continues to maintain a military base in Singapore.

Indonesia, which commands both the Malaccu and Sunda Straits, holds a key strategic position shared to some degree with Malaysia and Singapore. Indonesia is an island nation with great resources and a large and growing population. After a short period of close association with Communist China, a military coup overthrew the government of Sukarno and is now striving to overcome the country's very real and very large economic problems.

Australia

The southeast anchor of the Indian Ocean littoral is Australia--the world's smallest continent with only about twelve million people. The majority of the population lives on the eastern coastal fringe of the country--over half in six cities.[22] This makes the west coast on the Indian Ocean the "back door" of the country.

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[22]Reader's Digest Association, Inc., pp. 63, 336-37.

Australia, with large quantities of natural resources, has developed into an industrial nation. To support its growing economy the government has encourged immigration, and since 1945 over three million people have immigrated to the country increasing its population by over forty percent. Since World War II, Japan has gained a significant position in the country's economy.

Australia is a part of the British Empire. She acheived commonwealth status in 1901. Since World War II, as Britain's status as a world power declined, Australia has become more closely allied with the United States. A member of several regional defense pacts including the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization and the Australia-New Zealand-United States Treaty, Australia has actively supported the United States' effort in Vietnam to include sending approximately 8,000 men.[23]

As a "semi-Asian" nation Australia faces a variety of problems. Among these are Japan's growing economic power and the unsettled political conditions in Southeast Asia. To counter these problems Australia puts great dependence on the United States, particularly in the area of security. The security

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[23]Ibid., p. 337.

tie with the United States contributes to the stability and confidence which are major elements in Australia's internal political affairs and her economic progress.[24]

The Islands

Hundreds of islands are fairly well distributed over the Indian Ocean. Most are small and uninhabited. Ceylon, an independent member of the British Commonwealth located southeast of the tip of India, is ruled by a leftist coalition which includes the Trotskyite Communist Party. The Malagasy Republic on Madagascar near the east coast of Africa, is a conservative republic with close ties to France. The Maldive Islands are located about 400 miles southwest of Ceylon. After a period of rule by constitutional monarchy after World War II, the Maldive Islands are now a republic. Mauritius, about 500 miles east of Madagascar, is a member of the British Commonwealth. Zanzibar and Pemba, along with Tanganyika on the mainland of Africa, form the Republic of Tanzania. The government of Tanzania claims to be a strong advocate of non-alignment. It has accepted foreign aid from China and the Soviet Union as well as Britain and the United States.[25]

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[24]H. G. Gelber, The Australian American Alliance (1968), p. 25.

[25]Reader's Digest Association, Inc., pp. 354-55, 430-31, 434-35, 437, 479-80.

THE CONTESTANTS

The Indian Ocean area is of obvious interest to those nations on its littoral. However, these countries' interests are, for the most part, limited to their own internal affairs, their relations with their immediate neighbors, and their continuing ties with the colonial powers of Europe. In most cases these nations have no capability to project their influence to distant areas. India and Australia are two exceptions to these general statements. India has participated in several peace-keeping and truce-supervision missions. Australia provided armed forces in both Korea and South Vietnam. These international efforts on the part of India and Australia have had no significant impact on the Indian Ocean area.

USSR

Since the days of the first Czar, Peter the Great, Russia has shown an interest in the area to her south.[26] There is no reason to believe that, with the advent of the Communist government in Russia, these interests have deminished. In 1917 the new Soviet Government annulled all annexations by the Great Russians. However, by 1920 Communist intentions became clear:

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[26]Ian Grey, Peter the Great - Emperor of All Russia (1960), pp. 419-20.

> "The Second Comintern World Congress in its Theses on the National and Colonial Questions declared that unifying the proletariat for the common revolutionary struggle against the landowners and the bourgeoise was the basic objective of Comintern policy toward the countries of the East."[27]

There is no indication that Soviet interest in the area has decreased in recent years. Like the United States, the Soviet Union's vital security interests, as well as her economic and political interests, are served by building up a "cushion" of "buffer" states on the periphery of the Russian "heartland." Her domination of the countries of Eastern Europe and her attempts to take over Greece, Turkey, and Iran all indicate such a policy. Two areas are of more direct interest to the Indian Ocean area. Her massive aid programs to Indonesia prior to 1965 and her attempts to reestablish the Communist Party in that country are one. The second is her current involvement in the Arab-Israeli dispute with large military aid programs and extensive economic assistance programs to the United Arab Republic. Activity in these two areas indicates the Soviet's interest in the Indian Ocean countries continues. She appears to be employing, on a grand scale, her favorite tactic, the double envelopment, to gain control of the entire area by controlling the major access routes.

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[27]Gunther Nollau and Hans Jurgen Wiehe, Russia's South Flank (1963), pp. 4-5.

China

China's interests in the Indian Ocean go back into the roots of history. In more recent times China's internal problems have precluded extensive programs to project China's influence to the distance lands of the Indian Ocean littoral; however, her long term desire to wield influence in the area is evident.

The large numbers of "Overseas Chinese" in Southeast Asia are deeply engaged in the economic life of the countries in which they reside and would be a source of political power should China decide to exert more influence in the area. Concern over the "legitimate rights and interests" of Chinese residing abroad has been expressed by both official and non-official organs of the Chinese Government.[28]

China's interest in South Asia is well documented in recent history. The most outstanding examples are her take over of Tibet in the early fifties and the border war with India in 1962.

There is evidence that China's interest in Africa goes back as far as the second ceatury before Christ. In more recent times this interest has been evidenced by Premier Chou En-lai's visits to Africa in 1963-'64 and her activities in Zanzibar where she is laying the foundations for gaining a foothold on the East Coast of Africa.[29]

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[28]Indian Council of World Affairs, pp. 171-72.
[29]Anthony Harrigan, Red Star Over Africa (1964), p. 93.

Great Britain

The Indian Ocean was once known as "Britain's Vital Lake."[30] Much of the area was a part of the British Empire. Security of the area was based on an extensive British physical presence which included an extensive network of bases and troops in strategic locations. The mainstay of British power was a portion of the British fleet.

After the end of World War II Britian's influence in the Indian Ocean declined. In response to pressure of world opinion and local political pressure, Britain granted independence to most of the colonies. Britain's influence in the area, however, remains a significant force. Nine of her former colonies in the area are members of the British Commonwealth of Nations. They, along with the two remaining dependencies in the Indian Ocean, are closely tied to British economic and security interests.[31] Britain retains a few bases in the area.

United States

During World War II a limited number of Americans served in India, Burma, the Middle East, and other areas on the Indian Ocean littoral. However, in relation to Europe and the Pacific, the number of Americans involved in these areas was small;

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[30] Indian Council of World Affairs, p. VII.
[31] Reader's Digest Association, Inc., pp. 311, 495.

however, the war did bring the Indian Ocean to the attention of the United States. Since that time, in its role as a major world power and leader of the free world, United States' interest in the area has expanded. This interest has taken the form of military and economic aid to the developing countries and expansion of commercial relations.

The United States strategic effort in the Indian Ocean (other than military and economic aid) has been limited to participation in the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization. This organization is oriented on SEA and the Southwest Pacific, but includes Pakistan as a member. The United States also participates as an observer in the Central Treaty Organization which is oriented toward the Middle East but includes Iran, Pakistan, and the United Kingdom as members.[32] The United States' permanent military effort in the area consists of two ancient destoyers and a converted seaplane tender stationed at Bakrain Island in the Persian Gulf. This force has been referred to as "near-comical."[33]

Others

In addition to the foregoing there are several other nations which have interests in the Indian Ocean. France and the

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[32]Ibid., p. 312

[33]Alvin J. Cottrell, "Indian Ocean of Tomorrow," Navy, (March 1971), pp. 13, 14.

Netherlands still have ties with their former colonies--France along the East coast of Africa and the Netherlands in Indonesia. To a lesser extent Portugal also has an interest in the area.

Both Japan and Nationlist China have economic interest in the area and, of course, all of Western Europe has a vital interest in the oil of the Middle East.

THE THREAT

Great Britain's withdrawal from the Indian Ocean area leaves a power vacuum.[34] Only the Soviet Union and the United States have the power to fill this void now. China would like to, but her internal problems are so great that she offers no competition through the mid-range period.

The Soviet Union is already making in-roads into the Indian Ocean area. Her influence in the Arab world may give her control of the Suez when it is reopened. In recent years she has maintained naval forces in the Indian Ocean which, in mid-December 1968, reached 25-30 ships.[35] She may be establishing a navy command center on the island of Socotra at the mouth of the Gulf of Aden.[36] Pakistan is on most friendly terms with the Soviets; Ceylon has denied Britain the use of base facilities

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[34]Ibid., p. 11.
[35]Ibid.
[36]Ibid., p. 13.

and remains friendly with the Soviets.[37] No doubt the communist are working toward a come-back in Indonesia after their defeat there in 1965.

The Soviet Union has strong incentives to fill the power vacuum in the Indian Ocean. In addition to "capturing" a series of "buffer states" she would improve her strategic defense by reducing the effectiveness of the United States' missle launching submarines and outflank her communist rival--China.

There is little doubt that the Soviets have the naval power to dominate the Indian Ocean in peacetime. Her submarine fleet is twice that of the United States,[38] and her merchant fleet, built mostly after the Cuban crisis in 1962, is the world's sixth largest and growing.[39]

UNITED STATES' FUTURE ROLE

In view of the United States' limited interest in the Indian Ocean prior to World War II and our limited activity in the area since that time (compared with Europe, the Mediterrean and the Western Pacific), one might ask "What is the future role of the United States in the Indian Ocean?" There is no reason to believe that the United States will abdicate its role as a so-called "super power" and leader of the free world. Short

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[37] Ibid., p. 15.

[38] Norman Palmar, "Soviet Submarine Threat," Navy, (July/August 1971), p. 9.

[39] Albert E. May, "Soviet Merchant Fleet," Navy (March 1971), p. 25.

range national objectives and programs will change from time to time and the methods used to attain long range goals may change, but the long range responsibilities of the nation--the containment of communism, assistance to developing nations, and improvement of the world's living standards--will remain.

President Nixon has set the trend for the nation's policy with the "Nixon Doctrine."

> " 'First, the United States will keep all its treaty commitments. ...
>
> 'Second, we shall provide a shield if a nuclear power threatens the freedom of a nation allied with us or of a nation whose survival we consider vital to our security. ...
>
> 'Third, in cases involving other types of aggression we shall furnish military and economic assistance when requested in accordance with our treaty commitments. But we shall look to the nation directly threatened to assume the primary responsibility of providing the manpower for its defense.' ...
>
> We will continue to provide elements of military strength and economic resources appropriate to our size and our interests. But it is no longer natural or possible in this age to argue that security or development around the globe is primarily America's concern. The defense and progress of other countries must be first their responsibility and second, a regional responsibility. Without the foundations of self-help and regional help, American help will not succeed.
>
> The United States can and will participate, where our interests dictate, but as a weight--not the weight--in the scale."[40]

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[40] Richard M. Nixon, US Foreign Policy for the 1970's (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 25 February 1971), pp. 13-14.

CONCLUSIONS

The countries of the Indian Ocean littoral (with limited exceptions) are newly independent, under-developed, and "non-aligned." These three conditions exist in each country to varying degrees. As a result of this situation the area is unstable. Both the East and the West vie for influence and economic advantage.

Having recently attained independence the governments of the area are hard pressed to solve their internal problems. Since the colonial powers of Europe managed their foreign affairs and much of their internal administration, their political and diplomatic experience has been limited.

There are no effective regional security organizations in the area. Those that do exist are limited in scope and generally oriented toward other areas. The lack of political and diplomatic experience and under-developed economies make development of effective regional security organizations unlikely without outside assistance.

Land communications in the area are limited by geography and lack of development. The key to security is the Indian Ocean; therefore, naval forces are the most suitable military forces for the regional security mission.

The Soviet Union has the capability and probably the intention of becoming the dominate power in the Indian Ocean. With the departure of the British, the United States, as the leader of the free world, must provide the leadership and, if necessary, the military force required to keep the area free of communist domination.

The United States' domestic political situation precludes the stationing of substantial military forces in the area.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the United States foreign policy in the Indian Ocean be guided by the following:

a. Expansion of Soviet and other communist influence into the Indian Ocean must be resisted.

b. The Suez Canal must be reopened under some type of international control.

c. Economic and, if necessary, military assistance to the countries of the area should continue.

d. Regionalism in the area should be encouraged. This should be accomplished within the framework of the United Nations. The more developed countries (Australia, India, and South Africa) should be encouraged as regional leaders.

e. A credible United States military presence must be maintained in the Indian Ocean until security responsibility can be assumed by regional forces. The United States force should be a naval task force. Where politically feasible military base rights should be obtained and the necessary base(s) developed.

NORMAN E. WARD JR.
LTC, TC

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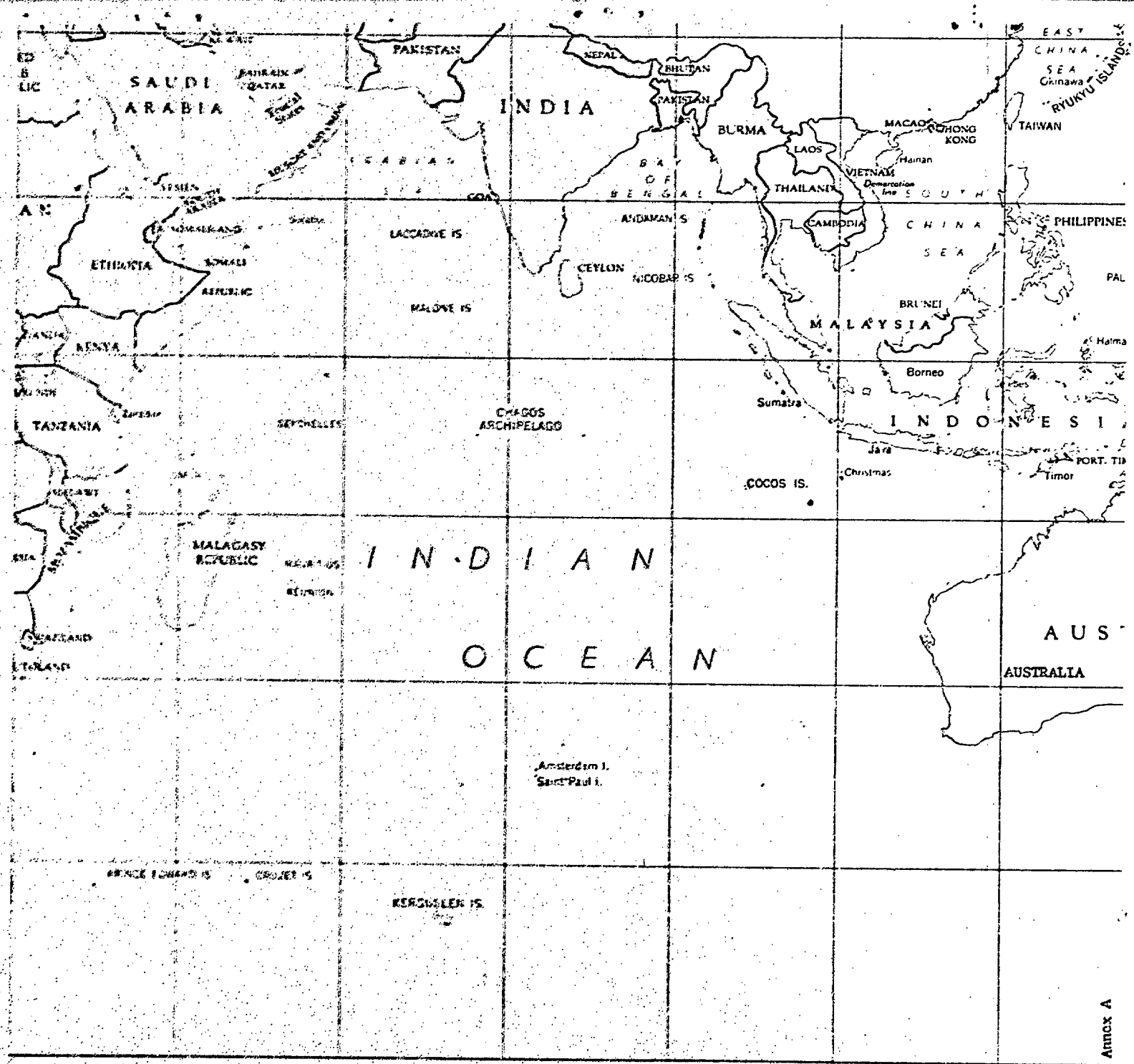
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Annex A