

International Maritime Conference—Galle Dialogue 2014

“Toward a More Integrated Regional Response to a Global Strategic Threat”

Robert Boggs, Professor of South Asia Studies,

Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies, Washington, DC*

Regional Integration as a Strategic Imperative

The security challenges of the 21st century, more than ever before, call for collective responses. No nation can ensure its prosperity and security solely through its individual economic endeavor and military strength. Prosperity and security grow from mutually beneficial cooperation with one's neighbors and other nations around the world.

Unfortunately, South Asia, which encompasses more than a fifth of the global population, retains the distinction of being the least integrated region on earth. These eight countries rank last among all regions in terms of road density, rail lines, and mobile tele-density per capita. The value of intraregional trade is less than 2% of regional GDP, compared to more than 20% for East Asia. The cost of trading across borders in South Asia is one of the highest in the world. Various bilateral and some multilateral agreements covering trade among South Asian countries have been introduced, but these have not been fully implemented. This is probably a major reason why South Asia's share of world GDP has risen from 1.4% to only 2.4% since 1960, after more than half a century of growth. Similarly, South Asia accounts for only 1.1% of world trade.

The Afghan-Pakistan and Pakistan-India borders are two of the most dangerous and volatile borders on the planet. The India-Bangladesh border has been fortified with high fences and guards who shoot to kill. Regional governments accuse each other of permitting, if not encouraging, criminals and terrorists to cross their borders. Even the Indo-Nepal and Indo-Bhutan borders,

*The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the NESAC Center or the U.S. Government.

which had long been peaceful and open, have in recent years been subject to enhanced immigration and security controls.

What does all this have to do with maritime security? In this era of economic globalization and instant, constant communication, virtually all security threats have an international dimension. Countries that don't cooperate peacefully through trade and economic integration are handicapped in protecting themselves from internal and external threats. If proposals for land-based cooperation, such as transnational pipelines and highways, trade facilitation agreements and joint river management, cannot be implemented, the maritime domain becomes all the more important for nurturing intra-regional cooperation. Maritime cooperation, in other words, can serve as an exemplar and confidence-building exercise for cooperation in other, land-based activities.

Growing threats of Climate Change and Natural Disasters

All of South Asia is now facing a challenge that is potentially catastrophic. Climate change threatens to slow the region's economic growth, depress standards of living, increase devastation and death, and possibly even aggravate intraregional conflict. Some military analysts call climate change a "threat multiplier" or a "catalyst for conflict."

Every country on earth faces these threats, of course, but South Asia is particularly vulnerable because of prevailing standards of living, the continuing importance of agriculture for employment, and the enormous weather system created by the Himalayas and the warm waters of the Indian Ocean. Without the predictable monsoons, the civilizations of South Asia would not have emerged and the early trade in goods and ideas both east and west by sailboat would not have been possible. Global warming is affecting the monsoon cycle, changing its timing and rainfall distribution, and thereby reducing crop yields and increasing human mortality. Global warming and continuing deforestation are associated also with more floods, droughts and landslides. The recent deadly landslide at the Koslanda plantation is just one tragic example.

South Asia, like other regions, suffers from total greenhouse emissions into the atmosphere from everywhere around the planet. But the huge increase in air pollution across the Indian subcontinent over the last 60 years or so has created a huge brown cloud of particulate matter that has been detected as far north as the

Arctic icecap. India is already the world's third largest producer of greenhouse gases, and its carbon emissions are expected to more than triple within the next twenty years. Scientific research has found a causal link between South Asia's brown cloud and the increased intensity of cyclones in the Northern Indian Ocean region (IOR). Increased storm activity, combined with warmer seas, higher sea levels, and shallow coastal topography conspire to increase the destructiveness of storm surges. Countries like Maldives, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh are likely to be the most seriously affected, but India and Pakistan too have high population concentrations in low-lying coastal areas. It is not a question of whether more deadly natural disasters will occur in South Asia, but of when and where.

Another maritime threat is that of environmental disasters arising from increased hydrocarbon extraction from undersea fields in the Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal and the seaborne transport of petroleum from there and the Persian Gulf across the Indian Ocean. An explosion at a drilling platform or the sinking of an oil tanker could do serious damage to fishing grounds and seacoasts for thousands of square kilometers. The potential for accidents could be increased by attacks from pirates and terrorists operating across the IOR.

Strategic Threats and Strategic Responses

Clearly, climate change is the quintessential strategic threat. It is global and long-term and attacks the most fundamental interests of states everywhere. As such it demands long-term, international responses. At present, the most promising global strategy for addressing the threat of climate change is the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. As a result of negotiations under this convention in 2009 and 2010, industrialized nations committed to implementing quantified economy-wide emissions targets for 2020. Developing countries agreed to craft nationally appropriate mitigation plans. At the climate conference scheduled in Paris in 2015, the UN will try to forge a new agreement that will bring together the current patchwork of binding and non-binding arrangements under a single instrument with legal force.

Even if a more comprehensive, binding convention is enacted next year, the impact on South Asian security of climate change will not be reduced for the foreseeable future. The just-released fifth report by the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change concludes that "continued emission of greenhouse gases

will cause further warming and long-lasting changes in all components of the climate system, increasing the likelihood of severe, pervasive and irreversible impacts.” This conclusion is based on the research of thousands of scientists from around the world. Clearly, the nations of the IOR must take steps to adapt to inevitable climate change, mitigate the destructive consequences of violent weather events, and speed reconstruction and rehabilitation in affected areas.

Lessons from Recent Disasters

The catastrophic tsunami of 2004 was a turning point for most of the South Asian states on the Indian Ocean littoral in terms of their disaster preparedness. These governments strengthened the institutions that will enable them to react more effectively to disasters. These institutions were subsequently tested in Cyclone Sidr in 2007, Cyclone Nargis in 2008, and Cyclone Phailin in 2013. However well-organized and well-resourced civilian agencies for disaster management may be, however, most governments have little choice but to call on their navies and air forces to provide logistic and other support. A government often has to use military transport assets to provide assistance to its own coastal communities struck by extreme storms, especially where transportation infrastructure inland has suffered major damage. Eventually, of course, private merchant ships can be chartered to provide supplies, but that tends to occur in the latter relief and reconstruction phases of disaster response.

Where trans-national, mega disasters are concerned, it is clear that the affected nations cannot adequately rescue their citizens and cope with the massive damage by themselves alone. Regional and extra-regional governments that want to send material relief typically rely, at least in the early days of the response, on their military transport assets and personnel. In many cases, the efficient unloading of relief supplies from ships and the secure distribution or storage of the supplies ashore requires the involvement of foreign military personnel. This can pose problems. Some governments, like that in Myanmar in 2008, may resist or reject assistance provided on military platforms because they fear a loss of sovereignty or worse at the hands of foreign forces admitted onto their territory at a time of stress and weakness. Even when the governments of afflicted countries are willing to admit foreign naval vessels and military aircraft, anxieties may be aroused in the neighborhood about a disruption of regional

power relations. In such cases, the coordination of external relief efforts tends to be inhibited by last-minute, ad-hoc agreements that may change from one disaster to the next. Negotiating ad hoc arrangements is unnecessarily time-consuming in a crisis situation, and they do not contribute as much to regional cooperation as more stable architectures of multilateral understandings and procedures.

Existing Disaster Management Institutions in the IOR

The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), founded in 1997, is dedicated principally to regional economic cooperation, but also lists disaster risk management and maritime security as areas of priority concern. At their meeting Perth in October this year, IORA ministers signed a Memorandum of Understanding on Search and Rescue (SAR) that demarcates maritime regions where coastal states have lead responsibility for providing SAR services and vital navigational warnings, including weather data. This is an important initiative in fostering regional coordination on maritime security, and establishes useful precedents that might inform future agreements on disaster management. The MOU does not, however, address directly the manifold challenges of international responses to disasters.

The most significant step toward greater regional cooperation in disaster management was the creation in 2007 of the SAARC Disaster Management Centre (SDMC), located in New Delhi. The Centre's mandate calls for a wide range of activities, including research, publishing, training, policy advice, capacity-building and system development. Its goals are effective risk reduction and developing a rapid regional mechanism for responding to natural and manmade disasters. Its focus, however, is on civilian expertise and organizations rather than civil-military relations. It also focuses on capacity building rather than actual operational coordination.

Need for a New Regional Institution

Creating a shared foundation of training and planning skills is essential in the longer term for building regionally integrated disaster management mechanisms. This is only one step, however, and does not go far toward meeting the operational requirements of coordination among international responders, including extra-regional civilian agencies and naval and air force assets. To

develop an architecture of understandings and standard operating procedures for international coordination, what is needed is another institution, preferably SAARC-based, that would bring together representatives of the civilian and military organizations that would be involved in responding to future crises. Its personnel would include military officers and civilian officials, private maritime companies and NGOs that have expertise and resources to contribute to preparing for and dealing with the aftermath of various sorts of disasters. This institution would serve as a multilateral center where protocols could be developed jointly to preclude the coordination problems among governments that inevitably arise when calamities strike. Unlike the SDMC, this center would focus less on research and training than on strategic planning, promoting interoperability, and establishing communication linkages and international working relationships.

Because, as we have seen, even disasters on land frequently involve naval ships from a number of nations, this new institution might be called something like the SAARC Maritime Disaster Coordination Centre (SMDCC). The center could:

- Provide a unique meeting place where naval and air force liaison officers could get to know each other and their civilian counterparts and work together on disaster-response planning, including developing agreed conventions for combined operations.
- Bring experts together from around the world to do simulations and develop operational scenarios for various types of disasters. These scenarios would serve as training exercises as well as shape planning. I expect, for example, that the US Federal Emergency Management Agency and the US Forest Service would be interested in working with the SMDCC just as they have with India's National Institute of Disaster Management.
- Participate in planning and coordinating the humanitarian assistance/disaster response (HA/DR) dimension of combined naval exercises in the IOR. This would spread the advantages of combined exercises beyond navy-to-navy to civil-military coordination.
- Manage facilities for the storage of relief stockpiles for international operations. These could be contributed by member states, international organizations, and individual foreign donor states. Having a central repository

for this materiel would facilitate response planning and encourage extra-regional organizations to preposition supplies.

- Encourage the establishment of a communications center that could strengthen connectivity in times of crisis among nations needing assistance and those providing it. During the period of post-tsunami relief, for example, daily briefings shared by India, the US, Australia and Japan proved to be very useful in avoiding duplication and coordinating assets. An SDMCC could help to disseminate relevant up-dates to all contributing organizations.

Advantageous Venue in Sri Lanka

It would make good operational sense for a new center for coordinating regional HA/DA operations to be located in Sri Lanka. The island commands a central position in the IOR, alongside the principal east-west sea lanes, including those that connect the Suez Canal and Persian Gulf to the dynamic economies of the western Pacific. This is especially true of southern Sri Lanka, where we are today. The island offers ready access to the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal, both of which suffer periodically from super cyclonic storms. Sri Lanka would provide a welcome berth to military vessels and personnel from across the region, including both India and Pakistan. We all remember that ships from both the Pakistani and Indian navies were dispatched to provide relief to Sri Lanka and Maldives in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami. Another advantage of Sri Lanka is that it has signed an Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) with the United States that would facilitate the transfer and exchange of non-lethal supplies, support and re-fueling services in times of crisis.

The location of SAARC institutions, of course, is a matter only for SAARC to decide. I do have my own personal recommendation, however. As we all know, the Sri Lankan government is pursuing a major construction program at Hambantota to the east of us. That project, when completed, reportedly will give the port there berths for 33 vessels, along with bunkering and warehousing facilities, making it the biggest port in South Asia. Hambantota port, along with the new international airport at Matttala, might be an excellent location to build office, housing and communications facilities for a maritime coordination center. The southward orientation of this coast toward the Somalian tectonic plate might

make Hambantota a favorable location also for an earthquake monitoring station as part of the UN's Indian Ocean Tsunami Warning and Mitigation System.

-