Paper Title: The Fractured Geopolitics of the United States in the Indian Ocean Region

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Abstract: In this article, I argue that the United States does not have a coherent geopolitical vision of the Indian Ocean Region. The result is an allocation of political and military resources that, with regard to the Indian Ocean Region as a whole, is fractured, at times incoherent, and makes it difficult for the US to make a credible commitment to the security of the Indian Ocean Region as a whole. First, to the extent that the US has an alliance structure in the Indian Ocean Region, it is composed of the residual relationships from other strategically important regions, thus decreasing their ability to be turned to the security of the Indian Ocean Region. Second, while the US Department of Defence rhetorically recognizes the geopolitical importance of the Indian Ocean Region, there is no single US military command structure dedicated to the Indian Ocean Region. Third, the military forces that are prepositioned in the region are not insignificant, but are ill suited for making the commitments to the region as a whole. This spatial distribution of resources has implications of the United States’ ability to make a credible claim that the Indian Ocean Region as a whole is at the core of its interests.

Keywords: United States, geopolitics, security

How do American geopolitical perceptions of the Indian Ocean Region affect how the United States is involved politically and militarily in the region? In this article, I argue that the US strategic vision for the Indian Ocean Region is unique relative to other regions of the world: the US has very clearly stated the strategic significance of many of the littoral states of the Indian Ocean, and has devoted significant military and political resources to those littoral states, but
views the Indian Ocean itself as being on the periphery of other, strategically important regions. The US, to put it bluntly, does not have a coherent geopolitical vision of the Indian Ocean Region. The result is an allocation of political and military resources that, with regard to the Indian Ocean Region as a whole, is fractured, at times incoherent, and makes it difficult for the US to make a credible commitment to the security of the Indian Ocean Region as a whole.

We can measure US geopolitical perceptions using three related metrics. First, the structure of the formal and informal alliance network that the US maintains in a region indicates its perception of its strategic role in regional security. Second, the geography of the US military’s command and command structure shows how the US Department of Defense conceives of the spatial distribution of US core interests. Third, the military resources the US devotes to a region show how the US is attempting to make a credible commitment to engagement with the region.

This article is thus divided into four sections. In the first three sections, I measure US strategic perception against the above metrics. The US strategic perception of the Indian Ocean Region is fragmented, leading to a continuing difficulty in establishing credible commitments to the region. First, to the extent that the US has an alliance structure in the Indian Ocean Region, it is composed of the residual relationships from other strategically important regions, thus decreasing their ability to be turned to the security of the Indian Ocean Region. The primary US strategic partnership in the Region is its relationship with India. The relationship holds many benefits for both countries, but the US will not be able to manage India as it has many other allies and partners, leading to a fundamentally different US strategic presence in the Indian Ocean Region than in other parts of the world. Second, while the US Department of Defense rhetorically recognizes the geopolitical importance of the Indian Ocean Region, unlike with many other continents and regions, there is no single US military command structure dedicated
to the Indian Ocean Region. Third, the military forces that are prepositioned in the region are not insignificant, but ill suited for making the commitments to the region that the US has made to western Europe and East Asia. In the final section, I discuss the implications of the United States’ fractured geopolitical vision for the Indian Ocean Region.

The US Alliance Structure in the Indian Ocean Region

International relations theorists traditionally think about the perceptions that states hold of each other (and the threat they may or may not pose), through the lens of states’ intentions and capabilities, real or imagined. Particularly with regard to security issues, at issue is whether intentions are determinative of how states interact with each other, or whether, as offensive realists argue, military and economic capabilities are the entirety of the threat that states pose to each other (Mearsheimer 2001), although both intentions and capabilities are subject to uncertainty (Fearon 1995). When distance and terrain are taken into account, it is a truism that the military capabilities of great powers, even those, such as the United States, with technologies and resources that allow them to project military power far from the homeland, are not evenly distributed across the globe. Great powers must make decisions about where to base military units, which technology to procure, and how they structure the alliances and partnerships in the areas of the world they deem most strategic. Great powers’ perceptions of where the relevant core strategic regions, and their boundaries, are located influence how they distribute their military resources, and how they structure their alliances within and across regions. One of the primary metrics by which we can measure a great power’s geopolitical perceptions of a region as a region, then, are whether the great power has engineered a coherent regional security architecture that can accommodate its verbal and military commitments. In the past decade, the
United States has awoken rhetorically to the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean Region, as when US Defense Secretary Robert Gates referred to it as “a region of growing international importance” in his speech at the 2011 Shangri-la Dialogues in Singapore (Gates 2011), but the US alliance structure, such as it is, in the Indian Ocean Region, is far less coherent than what it has engineered in either Europe and East Asia.

The shape of the alliance structure maintained by the US varies dramatically across the world, depending on political and economic conditions when the structure was created (and path dependency since then), US military and economic power relative to regional countries, and the desire of regional countries for flexibility in their foreign policies. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the formal alliance structure the US created after the end of World War II, united the defense fortunes of North America and western Europe. Each member of NATO is theoretically equal in policy decision-making (hence the general requirement for consensus on the North Atlantic Council), although the US provides the bulk of the military assets as well as the Supreme Allied Commander (who is simultaneously commander of US European Command). Although initially only covering western Europe (and later some Mediterranean countries), after the end of the Cold War, the alliance stretched into central and eastern Europe as former satellites of the Soviet Union moved to identify themselves with western Europe and gain some assurance of security from predation by Russia. The US-led alliance structure in Europe was thus one of intermeshing alliances, one that simultaneously limited US freedom of action and kept the US engaged in Europe because it was one voice among many (albeit the strongest single voice) in a (politically defined) region of which the US viewed itself as a part (Hemmer and Katzenstein 2002).
This stood in contrast to the US alliance structure in the other strategic Cold War region – East Asia. In East Asia, the US set up a series of bilateral treaty alliances with Japan, South Korea, Australia (and, initially, New Zealand), the Philippines, Thailand, and (until 1979) the Republic of China, described by US Secretary of State James Baker at the end of the Cold War as a ‘fan’ with spokes spreading out into the western rim of the Pacific (Baker 1991-1992). While they were directed to similar strategic ends as in western Europe – namely, containing the threat posed by the Soviet Union and more generally, of Communism, and promoting the stability of the region – the bilateral alliances gave the US disproportionate military, economic, and political power relative to each ally (Cha 2009/2010). The US did not eschew multilateralism in East Asia, but it was fraught with problems. The ANZUS Treaty ceased to be multilateral with the suspension of US treaty obligations to New Zealand in 1985, and the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization fell apart in 1977, leaving little appetite for multilateral security cooperation for decades (Bisley 2009). On top of the formal alliances, the US also maintains informal strategic partnerships that wax and wane in intensity – Singapore houses a US naval support facility, while Indonesia receives aid from the US and Australia for counterterrorism. While the Asian allies’ relationship with each other is usually cordial, it often is not (namely between Japan and South Korea) (Cha 1999), and there is no formal treaty binding them to each other. With that said, more informal strategic partnerships are emerging, such as between Australia and Japan (Terada 2010), and the annual Cobra Gold military exercises in Thailand provide an opportunity for US allies and friends to train together and increase interoperability.

The US alliance structure in the Indian Ocean Region does not exhibit the same patterns as either Europe or East Asia – rather than the fairly coherent architecture in those regions, the
Indian Ocean contains a hodgepodge of alliances and partnerships that are only residually focused on the region and do not bespeak a cohesive strategy to protect US interests on a region-wide basis. US alliances and strategic partnerships are clustered in three sub-regions around the Indian Ocean – in Southeast Asia, in South Asia, and in the Arabian Peninsula. The first and third alliance clusters are strategically situated to guard the southeastern and northwestern entrances to the Indian Ocean, thus maintaining the security of the sea lines of communication carrying oil, natural gas, and trading goods between Europe and East Asia. While the US has played a coordinating role in maintaining security of the Indian Ocean sea lines of communication, the alliance clusters are not set up in such a way that the US can dominate the Indian Ocean as it does the Atlantic and the western Pacific.

The formal alliances in Southeast Asia with Thailand and Australia, and the strategic partnership with Singapore, as well as the burgeoning military-to-military cooperation with Malaysia and Indonesia, mean that the US is well placed to cooperate with local allies and friends in the defense of the eastern entrances to the Indian Ocean from the Strait of Malacca. While it is the dominant naval power in East Asia, however, the US does not enjoy unlimited freedom of action in Southeast Asia. The Strait of Malacca littoral states, for example, are keen to be seen as able to patrol the Strait themselves without US help (Yeoh 2004). The MALSINDO anti-piracy patrols in the Strait of Malacca, jointly conducted by Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia beginning in 2004, came into being after Malaysia and Indonesia rebuffed US suggestions that the US Navy might patrol the Strait of Malacca to deter pirates, and US Navy ships were allowed temporarily to operate off Indonesia’s coast only in the wake of the 2004 Asian Tsunami. MALSINDO was hindered by the initial reluctance of participating countries to allow hot pursuit into each other’s territorial waters (Mak 2007). The hub-and-spoke US alliance
structure in East Asia has been useful in maintaining stability in the region, but US dominance in Southeast Asia is more tenuous, and the US role in guarding the security of the eastern Indian Ocean more tenuous still, particularly when attempting to move beyond simply protecting the integrity of sea lines of communication. The US is attempting to address this by re-orienting the Australian alliance toward the Indian Ocean, with a strategic defense agreement negotiated in 2010 that envisions joint basing on the western coast of Australia, and boosting its use of a naval base in Singapore (Gates 2011).

In the west, the US maintains strategic bilateral relationships with most of the countries on the Arabian Peninsula, particularly Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Kuwait, as shown by weapons sales and pre-positioned US personnel and equipment, although only Bahrain (which house the US Navy’s Fifth Fleet) and Kuwait are officially major non-NATO allies. The Eagle Resolve military exercises, held annually, allow many of these countries to train together, one of the examples of what US CENTCOM commander David Petraeus termed ’multi-bilateralism,’ wherein the US uses its bilateral relationships in the region to create the equivalent of multilateral efforts (with the US essentially acting as a coordinator) against common threats (Petraeus 2009). Yet the US partnerships with Arabian Peninsula states are geopolitically oriented inward, and centered around maintaining political and military stability in the Persian Gulf, thus assuring a free flow of oil and natural from the primary energy-producing areas in the Middle East. For problems in the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea side of the Arabian Peninsula, this alliance structure is less useful.

This can be seen in the membership of the three multinational Combined Maritime Force commands coordinated by the Fifth Fleet out of Bahrain. Combined Task Force 150 (CTF-150) covers maritime security operations (primarily anti-terrorism activities, and patrols to ensure
freedom of navigation) in the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, the western Indian Ocean, and the Horn of Africa. CTF-152 is the equivalent task force in the Persian Gulf, while CTF-151 was established in 2009 as a spinoff from CTF-150 devoted exclusively to anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden (Combined Maritime Forces Public Affairs 2009). Notably, CTF-152 is the only maritime task force that includes US allies in the Arabian Peninsula as members. The membership of CTF-150 and CTF-151 by and large come from outside the Indian Ocean Region – the command of CTF-151 has rotated among the US, Turkey, Singapore, South Korea, and New Zealand, with Singapore and Pakistan (which had a rotation commanding CTF-150) the only Indian Ocean Region countries to play a significant role in either CTF-150 or CTF-151. The general structure of the Combined Maritime Forces relies upon voluntary contributions from any interested nation (although in practice all contributing nations have been US allies or friendly nations), without long-term binding commitments, rotates command among member nations every couple of months, and is directed at non-state adversaries – pirates, smugglers, and terrorists – so as not to be threatening to any potential state adversaries (such as China) and downplay overt US leadership (although Combined Maritime Forces as a whole is commanded by a US naval officer out of Bahrain) (Combined Maritime Forces 2011). The US alliance structure with western Indian Ocean Region countries is, in other words, limited both in geographical scope and functional ambition, requiring *ad hoc* multilateral arrangements to project power beyond the Persian Gulf into the sea lines of communication of the Arabian Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the western Indian Ocean.

The final US alliance and partnership cluster, in South Asia, is oriented toward more conventional strategic ends, encompassing as it does the nuclear-armed countries of Pakistan and India. While US-India relations were hobbled for decades by Cold War politics and India’s
autarkic tendencies under the Congress Party prior to India’s debt crisis in 1991, the economic and political reforms instituted by Manmohan Singh from 1991 and the end of the Cold War paved the way for an improvement in US-India relations. While India’s nuclear test in 1998 chilled relations temporarily, subsequent US support for India’s position during the Kargil Conflict in 1999 provided an opportunity for a thaw. The relationship has largely blossomed since then, with the US and India signing a strategic defence cooperation agreement in 2005, coming to an agreement to share civil nuclear technology in the same year, and joint military exercises and US weapons sales to India (Mohan 2006). The 2010 US Department of Defense Quadrennial Defence Review devotes a paragraph to India.

As the economic power, cultural reach, and political influence of India increase, it is assuming a more influential role in global affairs. This growing influence, combined with democratic values it shares with the United States, an open political system, and a commitment to global stability, will present many opportunities for cooperation. India’s military capabilities are rapidly improving through increased defense acquisitions, and they now include long-range maritime surveillance, maritime interdiction and patrolling, air interdiction, and strategic airlift. India has already established its worldwide military influence through counterpiracy, peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief efforts. As its military capabilities grow, India will contribute to Asia as a net provider of security in the Indian Ocean and beyond (Department of Defense 2010, p. 60).
There are two implications for the discussion. First, the US recognizes that India is acquiring military assets – long-range maritime surveillance, and air and maritime interdiction capabilities – that will specifically allow it to play a greater role in patrolling the Indian Ocean, and interdict threats (both state and non-state) to security in the region that are operating from the Indian Ocean. Second, the US sees this as a good thing, to the extent that it is unclear if the US sees any downside to the rise of India (Twining 2011; Holmes and Yoshihara 2008). Inasmuch as the US is generally interested in the security of the Indian Ocean and its SLOCs, India’s military modernization and capacity improvements are contributing to US security, and the US is willing to defer to India on strategic issues in the Indian Ocean Region. This stands in stark contrast to the QDR’s commentary on China’s rise immediately prior to the section on India, where the authors emphasize the need to take measures to reduce the chances of conflict with China (Department of Defense 2010, p. 60).

The US perception of India as a net contributor to security in the Indian Ocean stands in contrast, as well, to the implicit US perception of Pakistan. The United States, across both the Bush and Obama Administrations, has attempted to conduct armed interventions (both drone attacks and, in the case of the May 2011 raid on Abbottabad to kill Osama bin Laden, special forces) to disrupt al-Qaeda and Taliban networks while also propping up Pakistan’s government with military and financial aid in a bid to keep the country from falling into anarchy, thus becoming a potential source of (even more) terrorists and loose nuclear weapons. United States efforts are thus aimed at mitigating the negative security effects emanating (often unintentionally) from Pakistan, rather than, as with India, accentuating positive security externalities. Moreover, the US geopolitical perception of Pakistan is not as a lynchpin of security in the Indian Ocean Region but as a pivot between the (sub)continental regions of
Central Asia (and China) and South Asia. The Quadrennial Defence Review says as much, characterizing Pakistan as standing ‘at the geopolitical crossroads of South and Central Asia’ but also facing threats from ‘extremism, economic instability, resource scarcity, and illicit trafficking’ (Department of Defense 2010, p. 60).

This parallels Victor Cha’s characterization of the US bilateral relationships with South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan at the dawn of the Cold War (Cha 2009/2010) – the US uses its disproportionate power with Pakistan to restrain behavior that could threaten the security of the US, as witnessed with pressure on Pakistan to cooperate in the War on Terror, and to pull back from the Kargil Conflict. Unlike in East Asia, however, Pakistan has other potential allies to turn to, notably China, thus complicating the picture for the US and India. Immediately after Osama bin Laden was killed by US special forces in Pakistan, for example, the Pakistani government pointedly asked China to build it a naval base in the (currently civilian) port of Gwadar, which a Chinese corporation had constructed several years before, and further asked China to pass along a message to the US that Pakistan’s sovereignty should not be violated (Ali 2011). While China itself denied that it was in talks to build a naval base at Gwadar (and in general has remained wary of Pakistan for many of the same reasons that the US lists in the Quadrennial Defense Review) (Press Trust of India 2011), the episode highlighted the uncertainty of the US strategic presence in South Asia.

To the extent that there is a US strategy for South Asia, it appears to come in building economic, military, and political ties with India so as to support India’s rise as a ‘leading and stabilizing force in South Asia’ (Willard 2010, p. 2), and countering increasing Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean Region. While neither India nor the US seek an antagonistic relationship with China, as China pursues trade ties and builds or invests in port facilities in countries around
the Indian Ocean Region, both the US and India are concerned about the possibility of an eventual permanent Chinese naval presence in the region (Pehrson 2006), particularly now that China has announced the construction of its first aircraft carrier (Agence France Presse 2011). In general, increased US presence in the region decreases Chinese pressure on India’s room for maneuver in the Indian Ocean (Berlin 2006). It is unclear, however, the extent to which India is willing to serve US interests if they diverge in any way from Indian interests. India is loath to agree to any formal alliance with the US, or to help to contain China’s expansion at the cost of its own relationship with China (although the US itself may be engaging in strategic hedging rather than containment, particularly with regard to China’s search for energy supply routes from the Indian Ocean back to the Chinese homeland (Tessman and Wolfe 2011)). India has also been wary of participating in US-led multilateral initiatives such as the Proliferation Security Initiative, even when it has agreed with the basic principles, due to lingering resentment about nonproliferation standards (Kumar 2009; Holmes 2007). Moreover, while the US sees little downside in Indian maritime expansion in the Indian Ocean, India will not engage in a hierarchical partnership with the US, as Japan has, nor is it willing to see US naval or military presence in the region (such as at Diego Garcia) if this presence comes at the expense of its own strategic influence, given that it is, after all, the primary great power in the geographic center of the Indian Ocean Region (Berlin 2010; Holmes and Yoshihara 2008). The growing US partnership with India has many benefits for both sides, but it is too soon to say that the partnership will form the basis for a cohesive strategic architecture in the Indian Ocean Region, let alone one that is led unequivocally by the US.
US Geopolitical Perceptions, Military Forces, and Credible Commitment in the Indian Ocean Region

If the US alliance structure in the Indian Ocean Region consists of three largely unconnected clusters on the periphery of the region, a second, more fundamental question is one of capabilities: even if the US were somehow to encourage the creation of a cohesive regional security architecture, does it have the military means of making its commitments to that architecture credible? If we look at US strategic doctrine statements, the most recent Department of Defense document, the 2010 Quadrennial Defence Review, has a brief mention of the Indian Ocean as such in an overview of US interests in various parts of the world.

The United States has a substantial interest in the stability of the Indian Ocean region as a whole, which will play an ever more important role in the global economy. The Indian Ocean provides vital sea lines of communication that are essential to global commerce, international energy security, and regional stability. Ensuring open access to the Indian Ocean will require a more integrated approach to the region across military and civilian organizations. An assessment that includes U.S. national interests, objectives, and posture implications would provide a useful guide for future defense planning. (US Department of Defense 2010, 60)

Several points can be drawn from the DOD’s statement on the Indian Ocean as a measure of how the DOD perceives of the Indian Ocean Region. First, there is currently no assessment of ‘U.S. national interests, objectives, and posture implications’ for the Indian Ocean, nor apparently a coherent defence plan, both of which would be the primary documentary outputs of a regional
unified combatant command if one existed for the Indian Ocean Region. Second, the specific reason given for the US strategic interest in the Indian Ocean is its sea lines of communication, which ‘are essential to global, international energy security, and regional stability.’ Put less euphemistically, the Indian Ocean is important because it is how vital economic goods get from some, more obviously strategic parts of the world, such as the Middle East, with its oil and natural gas, to other, more obviously strategic parts of the world, such as western Europe and East Asia. The Indian Ocean Region is the geopolitical periphery to the regions that are at the core of US interests – Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East, all of which have their own dedicated command and control structures and forward operating forces.

In this section, I argue that the geographical fracturing of the command and control structure in the Indian Ocean Region both hinders Indian Ocean Region-wide activities and signals US perceptions of the Indian Ocean Region as geopolitically peripheral, despite its rhetoric. The forward operating military forces, while impressive in their capacities, reflect the geographical distribution of US strategic perceptions and would require substantial revision to make a credible long-term US commitment to the Indian Ocean Region.

*The Geopolitics of Unified Combatant Commands*

The US Department of Defence’s combat forces are organized into nine unified combatant commands, each of which is led by a four-star general-level officer who, upon receiving orders from the President through the Secretary of Defence, is responsible for the command and control of any combatant forces that have been assigned to him. The six regional commands’ Areas of Responsibility (AORs) cover the entire globe with the exception of Antarctica. Within these AORs, the regional combatant commanders are charged with planning
and carrying out military operations. In practice, given the United States’ cooperation with allies in training and combat operations, regional combatant commanders often function as the military equivalent of ambassadors to the countries within their AOR, encouraging military-to-military cooperative relationships, and assessing how political, military, and economic conditions might impact the ability of the US military to operate, activities reflected in the combatant commands’ posture statements (Willard 2010; Ham 2011).

The actual countries covered by each geographical AOR, and the boundaries on the map between the AORs, are partly determined by logistical realities, partly by economic, political, and cultural similarities within a region, and partly by how US policymakers perceive the spatial distribution of US strategic interests. Unified combatant commands can be created (or dismantled) as US strategic interests or geopolitical conditions change. Organizationally, during the Cold War, military defence of the US homeland was left almost entirely in the hands of the North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD) since any attack on the homeland was assumed to come from Soviet long-range bombers, rather than by sea or land. It was not until after 9/11 that the US created a Northern Command (NORTHCOM) to handle US homeland defense (the NORTHCOM commander is simultaneously NORAD commander), as US strategic thinkers realized that the homeland itself was now vulnerable to terrorist attacks and other non-state threats that could cause mass US casualties without flying troops or missiles in over the Arctic Circle (Joint Chiefs of Staff 2005).

Likewise, while all of sub-Saharan Africa was initially part of US European Command (USEUCOM), USEUCOM also included the United States’ commitment to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and geographically covered all of Europe and the vast majority of Russia in addition to Africa. The result was that, prior to the September 11, 2001 terrorist
attacks, according to the commander of USEUCOM, USEUCOM planners were devoting almost zero time to thinking about Africa (Royce 2007, p. 6). This neglect of Africa can be seen outside the DOD as well. Between the end of the Cold War and 9/11, due to budget cuts, the US Central Intelligence Agency had almost no intelligence agents on the ground in sub-Saharan Africa, leading to low situational awareness of events on the continent, and signifying the lack of importance Africa played in the US geopolitical map (Dozier 2011). In terms of US resources committed to the continent, Africa was ‘abandoned’ to the State Department and USAID.

Following a series of nation-building debacles and conundrums in the 1990s, including in Somalia and the Balkans, as well the catalytic events of 9/11, US policymakers came to the conclusion that weak and failed states in Africa were not only a humanitarian problem, they were also a security problem, inasmuch as terrorism, poverty, hunger and disease in Africa threatened both human security and, indirectly, state security. It was unlikely that the US would be called upon to fight wars in sub-Saharan Africa (and with the exception of Somalia, it has largely not), so USAFRICOM was created in 2008 as a way of re-emphasizing not only the strategic priority that the US placed on Africa and directing policymaking and analytical resources toward that priority, but also affirming the holistic security approach that the US would take with regard to Africa. Unlike other regional combatant commands, USAFRICOM is primarily involved in ‘war prevention’, not warfighting per se. Strategically, USAFRICOM is charged not only with denying terrorist organizations the use of African territory, but also with engaging African countries in security cooperation, training for non-traditional threats, and norm-building in civil-military relations (Whelan 2007, p. 20). Structurally, this means that one of the two co-equal deputies to the commander of USAFRICOM is an official seconded from the State Department or USAID (as of June 2011, the civilian deputy is from the State Department), and that
USAFRICOM maintains liaison offices in a number of African countries, as well as with intergovernmental organizations such as the African Union. (Ham 2011)

The decision to create USAFRICOM out of three separate regional commands (aside from USEUCOM, USPACOM had been responsible for African countries in the Indian Ocean, and USCENTCOM had been responsible for the Horn of Africa) was viewed as a logistical necessity – the Department of Defence argued that it needed a unified command to provide adequate logistical support to State Department and USAID security cooperation and humanitarian relief operations in Africa. It was also viewed as a strategic necessity. During testimony about the creation of USAFRICOM, a DOD representative stated that created a unified command would move Africa into the centre of US strategic interests, after years of attempting to implement Africa policy on the geopolitical edges of three separate commands.

…AFRICOM represents an opportunity to eliminate the bureaucratic divisions and operational seams created by this organizational structure. We hope that AFRICOM will allow DoD, civilian and military leaders to take a more holistic and operationally efficient approach to the opportunities and challenges that lay ahead as Africa’s multilateral institutions such as the African Union and the regional economic communities figure more prominently in African security affairs. Consolidation under one command has the potential to better support the development of these important regional mechanisms and relationships. (Whelan 2007, p. 17).

What is notable about the Indian Ocean Region, then, is that it now faces the same fractured strategic perceptions that led to US disinterest and ignorance toward Africa after the Cold War.
In the US Department of Defence’s map of the world, the Indian Ocean Region and its littoral countries are divided up among three different unified combatant commands: PACOM covers the vast majority of the Indian Ocean itself, as well as all littoral countries west to India, while CENTCOM covers Middle Eastern countries, the Arabian Sea, and the Gulf of Aden, and AFRICOM covers the eastern coast of Africa, and the western waters of the Indian Ocean from Somalia southwards. Interestingly, the fractured command and control structure prior to the creation of USAFRICOM made it difficult for the US DOD to organize a security conference in 2006 on the southwestern Indian Ocean (bringing together both US military representatives and local representatives) because East Africa and the waters of the southwestern Indian Ocean were spread across three commands. (Whelan 2007, p. 34). While the problem of Africa spanning multiple AOR boundaries has been solved organizationally, the Indian Ocean Region now faces the same problem.

*United States Military Forces in the Indian Ocean Region*

While the lack of organizational coherence suggests that the US does not necessarily view the Indian Ocean Region as a strategic region in and of itself, or at least that, if it does, it will have to overcome organizational hurdles to implement its strategic vision, forward operating forces in the region may be able to signal US credibility in the region regardless. Precisely *because* the Indian Ocean Region is on the periphery of two core regions – the Middle East and East Asia – the US is not without regional allies, strategic interests, or military forces that could theoretically protect those interests. Aside from standard diplomatic activities and development aid provision, the US (or any great power) has several options when signalling its commitment to a region. While the forces the US has in different parts of the Indian Ocean Region allows it to
back its verbal commitments militarily if necessary, the distribution of those resources presents problems in promoting the credibility of long-term US engagement in the region as a whole.

The US can sign mutual defence treaties with allies that put the force of law behind US verbal commitments to stay engaged in a region, and more specifically to defend allies in the event of a crisis. Relative to simple diplomatic engagement, this approach is a costly signal of US resolve. Abrogation of a treaty, and abandonment of the treaty ally, incurs reputational costs, since the ally will have little reason to see future commitments by the US as credible, and other allies (and even neutral) will factor the abrogation into their future calculations about how to deal with the US and its promises (Leeds 2003).

During and since the Cold War, one of the more visible US methods of signalling commitment to an ally (and through those allies, the region) has been forward basing. This not only makes it logistically easier to make shows of force and to intervene in the event of crises elsewhere in the region, but also sets up US forces as ‘tripwires’ that will guarantee US involvement in the event of an attack on the ally, although the necessity of US forces as tripwires has declined since the end of the Cold War, given modern technology and the changing nature of conventional warfare (Nam 2006, p. 629).

In general, with the exception of Diego Garcia, the geographical distribution of forward deployed US forces in the IOR tracks the alliance clusters in the Middle East and Southeast Asia. Among the littoral states in the IOR, only Australia and Thailand are treaty allies (that is, an alliance formalized by a mutual defence pact), Australia through the ANZUS Treaty, and Thailand through the 1954 Manila Pact, while Kuwait, Bahrain, and Pakistan are major non-NATO allies. The US currently has no bases in Thailand, and does not have permanent forward basing with combat troops in Australia. There are significant US forces, facilities, or equipment
in Kuwait, Qatar, and Bahrain, which is the headquarters of the US Navy’s Fifth Fleet, and extensive (and contentious) US military involvement with Pakistan, particularly in the border areas separating Pakistan proper from Afghanistan. In AFRICOM’s AOR, the US maintains an active naval air base in Djibouti, strategically located astride the Red Sea. Actual military personnel (with the exception of those afloat, which make up the bulk of the US commitment to the Indian Ocean Region) are light on the ground, totalling 4,047 known personnel at land bases in the Indian Ocean Region in 2010, with the largest contingent operating out of the Fifth Fleet Headquarters in Bahrain (International Institute of Strategic Studies 2011, pp. 67-69). The pre-positioned equipment in Arabian Peninsula countries are largely designed to aid in the credibility of US security guarantees to those countries, and to enhance the ability of the US to engage in military conflicts in the Middle East.

According to the United States 2007 Maritime Strategy, the US envisions maintaining ‘credible combat power’ (implicitly, fleets centered around at least one carrier strike group) in the Arabian Gulf/Indian Ocean, ‘to protect our vital interests, assure our friends and allies of our continuing commitment to regional security, and deter and dissuade potential adversaries and peer competitors,’ (Navy, Coast Guard et al. 2007) a shift from the Cold War focus on the Pacific and the Atlantic. In theory, US naval forces have the Indian Ocean well covered, with the Fifth Fleet in the western Indian Ocean, and the Seventh Fleet in the eastern Indian Ocean. In reality, the Seventh Fleet’s single forward-deployed aircraft carrier group, currently centered around the USS George Washington, is based in Yokosuka naval base in Japan, and is primarily designated for use in the western Pacific. The Fifth Fleet does not have a forward-deployed carrier group, and must use ships seconded to it. In practice, over the past decade the US has generally attempted to have at least one carrier group present in the Arabian Sea at any given
time. In June 2011, for example, there were two carrier groups assigned to the Fifth Fleet – *USS Enterprise* and *USS Ronald Reagan* (Stratfor 2011). There are no US bases along the Indian Ocean littoral between the Persian Gulf and Singapore, nor are there US bases in eastern Africa south of Djibouti. The Fifth Fleet’s Area of Responsibility does not extend south of Somalia or east of Iran, and the Seventh Fleet has little base presence in the eastern Indian Ocean, leaving holes in coverage in the eastern Indian Ocean and the southeastern Africa littoral.

The lack of significant military forces in the Indian Ocean Region are not *per se* a sign of lack of US commitment to the region – Erickson, Ladwig et al. (2010) note the difficulty that the US has in maintaining permanent bases in many countries of the Indian Ocean Region. In the Middle East in particular, the very presence of those bases may cause security problems for the US due to local populations’ disapproval (as in, perhaps, Afghanistan), and host countries may change their attitudes quite suddenly (as happened when the US was forced to vacate an air base in Saudi Arabia it had built at a cost of over US$1 billion on the eve of Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003) (Cooley 2008; Erickson, Ladwig et al. 2010). Diego Garcia, the joint UK-US base that hosts pre-positioned Army and Marine Corps equipment, long-range bombers, and naval ship support facilities in the centre of the Indian Ocean, offers the political stability that comes from cooperation with a long-time, close US ally, and could theoretically be used to support US operations anywhere in the Indian Ocean. The centrality of Diego Garcia, however, also means that it is not particularly close to any hotspot in the Indian Ocean littoral. While this is not a problem for long-range bombers, basing ships or land units in Diego Garcia (as opposed to in bases in littoral states) increases the time it takes them to arrive at hotspots, and thus creates problems for the credibility of US commitments to regional countries if the US relies solely (or even mostly) on Diego Garcia as a way of demonstrating its presence in the region. Given that
Diego Garcia is at the extreme edge of USPACOM AOR, the US experiences coordination problems when the base’s resources are needed in USAFRICOM or USCENTCOM (Erickson, Ladwig et al. 2010).

[Insert Table 1 here]

Given the relatively light footprint in the Indian Ocean Region (despite the continual presence in the Arabian Sea of naval assets), one way that the US can demonstrate defence commitments to the Indian Ocean Region to allies, friends, and adversaries alike is through joint military training exercises in the region. Indeed, at the 2011 Shangri-la Dialogues in Singapore, US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates discussed an increase in joint training and port calls in the near future as a way of showing US commitment to the Asia-Pacific (Gates 2011). Depending on the definition of the Indian Ocean Region, the US was involved in at least seven joint exercises with regional countries in 2010 – two in Africa, one in the Middle East, one in the Indian Ocean itself, and two in Southeast Asia. Military exercises are not costless – aside from the financial and military resources that must be expended by the participants, they necessarily exclude certain non-participating countries, and make clear (to participants and non-participants alike) the presumed future interoperability and increased capabilities of the participants, and potentially the perceived threats faced by the participants. As such, military training exercises have some use as signals of resolve, and are certainly taken that way by adversaries. North Korea’s predictable outrage at joint annual US-South Korean military exercises is a case in point, as is the decision of the US and South Korea to carry with those exercises during periods of North Korean provocation such as after the Yeonpyeong Incident in 2010 (British Broadcasting Corporation
Finally, the nature of exercises can send signals – the Garuda Shield 2010 exercise, for example, was focused on peacekeeping techniques, and as such sent little information to potential adversaries. The annual Cobra Gold exercises, on the other hand, brought together US treaty allies and friendly Southeast Asian militaries in a show of force, incorporating amphibious assaults and live fire exercises, sending a signal to potential adversaries about the ability of participants in operate collaboratively in kinetic operations (notably, China was invited to observe the exercises in 2011) (Associated Press 2011).

While the US has been fairly active in participating in joint military exercises with Indian Ocean Region countries, thus signalling its intention to remain militarily engaged with countries in the region, its combat training exercises have been concentrated on clusters of countries within sub-regions of the Indian Ocean littoral, particularly Southeast Asia (Cobra Gold and Crocodile), South Asia (Malabar), and the Middle East (Eagle Resolve). While the Garuda Shield peacekeeping exercise involved countries from Southeast Asia and South Asia, there were no combat exercises that involved Indian Ocean region countries from more than one cluster. This is not to say that the US and its partners have not attempted cross-cluster exercises. The Malabar 2007 exercises included not only the US and India, but also Australia, Singapore, and Japan. The multilateral exercises, which foreshadowed the beginnings of a multilateral alliance and partnership structure involving the US in the eastern Indian Ocean, was met with a demarche by China, which objected to the implications of the exercises (India Defence 2007). In response, although the 2007 exercises went ahead, Malabar exercises since then have not included Singapore or Australia, and Japan’s participation has been spotty. The contraction of the Malabar exercises from multilateral cooperation to bilateral cooperation illustrates the difficulty of constructing a coherent alliance structure for the Indian Ocean Region that will not antagonize
other powerful actors. In general, the spatial distribution of the United States’ command and control structure, and thus of military forces and training exercises in the Indian Ocean Region, follow the United States’ formal and informal alliance commitments. While this is not particularly surprising, it does create problems when the US wants to back its rhetorical commitments to the Indian Ocean Region as a whole with military commitments across alliance clusters, or in areas that do not have alliance networks, such as East Africa.

[Insert Table 2 here]

Conclusion

Rhetorically, the United States is slowly waking up to the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean Region. However, it has yet to shift its resources and commitments in the region in a way that treats the Indian Ocean as central to its core interests, as opposed to both geographically and strategically peripheral to those interests. While I focused on the structure of US alliances, and the resulting military force structure, as a metric for how the US perceives the geopolitical centrality of the Indian Ocean Region, more generally the US has not yet shifted its resources to match its rhetoric. Even low-cost signals of commitment to the region are sometimes lacking. The United States is not a dialogue partner of the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC), despite the involvement of two of its main partners in Asia, India and Australia. In the 2010 National Security Strategy, the Indian Ocean Region is never mentioned, while the IOR-ARC is left off a list of multilateral organizations the US intends to support, including the East Asia Summit and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (White House 2010, p. 43).
Australian commentators, recognizing the increasing strategic importance of the region, conclude that “the US continues to dominate the Indian Ocean strategically and militarily.” (Bateman and Bergin 2010) Yet if the US does dominate the Indian Ocean, it does so right now almost as an afterthought, its military forces and commitments focused on the entry and exit points to the Indian Ocean rather than on the region as a whole, thus leaving significant parts of the Indian Ocean Region without US engagement. While the US is actively attempting to strengthen alliances in the region, and shifting the focus of the alliances toward the Indian Ocean, as is the case of the burgeoning US relationship with India, and the recent US agreement with Australia to look into expanding joint basing on the Indian Ocean (Gates 2011), it is an open question whether simply reorienting existing alliances is sufficient, or whether the US needs to rethink how it projects evidence of credible, sustained commitment to the region, particularly if it, or its allies, are unwilling or unable to maintain significant forward operating forces. Indonesian elites, for example, perceive long-term US engagement with Asia as periods of neglect interspersed with promises of reengagement (Bower 2011). If countries in the Indian Ocean Region have doubts about the credible commitments of the US, reorienting alliances or doing more port calls may not be enough – the US cannot pursue its strategic interests in the region on the cheap. It will be difficult for the US to establish long-term credibility in the Indian Ocean Region if it has not engaged in some sort of costly signalling of commitment, with a viable strategic plan that perceives the region as an integrated whole at the core of US interests.


_Agence France Presse_. 21 June.


### 1. US Forces Deployed in the Indian Ocean Region (Indian Ocean or Littoral States) in 2010 (International Institute of Strategic Studies 2011, pp. 67-69)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unified Combatant Command/Country</th>
<th>Number of Personnel</th>
<th>Facilities/Equipment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>CENTCOM</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arabian Sea</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bahrain</td>
<td>1339</td>
<td>USN Fifth Fleet HQ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuwait</td>
<td></td>
<td>2 Patriot missile batteries; 1 pre-positioned equipment unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persian Gulf</td>
<td></td>
<td>CTF-152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qatar</td>
<td>531</td>
<td>1 pre-positioned equipment unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>258</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Arab Emirates</td>
<td></td>
<td>2 Patriot missile batteries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PACOM</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>Pine Gap Station (SIGINT, communications, electronic warfare)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British Indian Ocean Territory</td>
<td>261</td>
<td>2 space tracking stations (STRATCOM); 1 support facility; 1 naval air base; 1 support squadron with 5 logistics and support ships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>1 logistical support squadron; 1 support facility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>122</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>AFRICOM</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Djibouti</td>
<td>1285</td>
<td>1 naval air base</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seychelles</td>
<td>Reaper UAVs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2. US Joint Military Training Exercises with Indian Ocean Region Countries in 2010

(International Institute of Strategic Studies 2011, pp. 467-468)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exercise Codename</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Purview</th>
<th>Countries Involved</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cobra Gold 2010</td>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>Air, land, sea combat exercises</td>
<td>Indonesia, Japan, ROK, Singapore, Thailand, US</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crocodile 2010</td>
<td>Timor Leste</td>
<td>Naval combat exercises</td>
<td>Australia, New Zealand, Timor Leste, US</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garuda Shield 2010</td>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>Peacekeeping training</td>
<td>Indonesia, Bangladesh, Brunei, Nepal, Philippines, Thailand, US</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malabar 10</td>
<td>Arabian Sea</td>
<td>Naval combat exercises</td>
<td>India, US</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eagle Resolve 2010</td>
<td>Bahrain</td>
<td>Air, land, sea combat exercises</td>
<td>Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, US</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared Accord 2010</td>
<td>Mozambique</td>
<td>Peace and stability operations</td>
<td>Mozambique, US (although revolves around Africa every year)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amani Africa</td>
<td>Ethiopia</td>
<td>Testing rapid reaction forces</td>
<td>EU, US, African standby brigade elements</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>