

Militarisation of the Indian Ocean

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BAHGLADESH is not only a riverine country but also a maritime nation that opens to the south toward Indian Ocean through the Bay of Bengal.

It was the ocean route that in the past led many foreigners to come to Bengal (now greater part of Bangladesh) and Chittagong port was the conduit for interaction between Bengalis and foreigners including European colonisers.

National power, wealth and land remain, however, largely oriented to the past territory of Bangladesh. The importance of rivers in our country is emphasized but often the significance of the vast maritime area that is being used for external trade is ignored. Lately, however, the importance of living and non-living marine resources is being realised.

Geographically dominating as the third largest ocean in the world, the Indian Ocean, covering about 20% of the water on the Earth's surface, is bounded on the north by South Asia; on the west by Africa; on the east by South East Asia, the Sunda Islands, and Australia; and on the south by the Southern Ocean.

The region contains 1/3 of the world's population, 25% of its landmass, 40% of the world's oil and gas reserves. The region is home to most of the world's Muslim population as well as India, one of the world's likely "rising powers."

The Indian Ocean is also home to the world's two newest nuclear weapons states, India and Pakistan, as well as Iran, which Western nations suspect, has a robust program to acquire nuclear weapons.

Just as Europe's rise made the Atlantic Ocean a setting for 500 years of maritime and naval contention, shifting power centres will draw new fleets of merchantmen and warships into play across the 68.6 million square kilometers of the Indian Ocean.

The Ocean is rich in mineral and energy resources (oil and gas), and the rising power of China and India is about to undergo a metamorphosis that would turn the world around.

In addition, the region constitutes one of the key centres of gravity of international terrorism. While India and some of the other littoral states appear to be on a path of sustained economic progress, most of the region is characterized by high levels of poverty.

Non-military threats to maritime security in the Indian Ocean region are also increasing. These include gunrunning, smuggling, container security, drug trafficking and oil related environmental disasters. Oil spills can seriously affect the flow of merchant vessels to the seaports.

The northern reaches of the ocean hum with the traffic of half the world's container ships, just under three quarters of global petroleum products and increasingly with immense tonnages of raw materials ripped from the ground of Australia, Africa and South East Asia, bound for China, India, Japan and South Korea.

Indian Ocean also has choke points, flash points, and arcs of instability, such as the Red Sea, the Strait of Hormuz, the Persian Gulf (Arab Gulf),



the pirate-infested water off the Horn of Africa (Somalia), the Malacca and Sunda Straits, through which passes 40% of the world's sea borne oil, including a third of China's supply, 70% of Japan's and 90% of India's.

Fifty-four kilometres across at its narrowest point, bordered by Iran on its northern shore and a short distance from the huge Chinese-built naval facility at Gwador (Baluchistan in Pakistan), the Strait of Hormuz is a place that keep admirals awake at night.

As Chinese and Indian resource demands grow over the coming decades, the Indian Ocean will feature more on the defence departments of nations. America's strategically placed military base at Diego Garcia will become more important than ever.

The contest between China and India has started sometime ago. Some Indian defence analysts argue that China, which simply cannot countenance the emergence of a rival power in Asia, has been determinedly working to minimize India's regional and global standing.

During 2005 Chinese diplomats reportedly visited South East countries lobbying against India to join the East Asia Summit. However South Asian nations wanted to include India as a counterweight to an increasingly powerful China.

The Indian Navy, already one of the largest in the world, is reportedly expanding from 155 ships

to well over 300, including three aircraft-carrier battle groups and a flotilla of nuclear-powered submarines. Indian policy makers worry the Chinese-built Gwador port of Pakistan.

The Chinese for their part worry over the Straits of Malacca, through which 80% of its oil supplies are presently shipped. On this Robert Kaplan quotes Zhang Ming, a Chinese naval analyst, who warns that 244 islands of India's Andaman and Nicobar archipelago could serve to block the western entrance to the Strait of Malacca.

This is one of the reasons that led China to have close bilateral ties with Myanmar. Myanmar has a strategically located Island (Coco Islands) north of India's Andaman Islands. It is reported that China has a naval base in the Coco Islands.

Japanese Maritime Self Defence Force destroyers and refuelling supply ships have been continually on-station in the Indian Ocean since November 2001. The MSDF ships were dispatched under the Anti-Terrorism Special Measures Law (2001), which has since been extended a number of times beyond its original two-year period of application. The new government in Japan has stopped refuelling US ships.

There is a continual tendency in both Japan and abroad to underestimate Japan's actual military strength - especially that of its naval forces. In 2006, Japan had 16 submarines and 54 principal surface combatants (destroyers and frigates), and 109

Lockheed Orion P-3C antisubmarine warfare aircraft in various modes.

Military power, including weapons of mass destruction and their delivery vehicles, is looming larger in the region. Malaysia, Indonesia and a variety of other littoral states of South East Asia are strengthening their militaries.

Malaysia, for example, is more focused now than ever before on the potential strategic importance of the Indian Ocean approaches to Peninsula Malaysia.

Not long ago, Malaysia's Navy chief said that the country's strategic location in the waterways of the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean exposes the country to serious dangers. Reacting to this challenge, the Malaysian Navy has inaugurated construction of a new navy base and command center at Langkawi, Kuala Lumpur's only port directly fronting the Indian Ocean.

Indonesia also has been establishing military infrastructure projects in the Ocean. Singapore monitors the situation on behalf of the US near the Straits.

Thailand, similarly, is now more aware of its status as an Indian Ocean littoral state. Arms trafficking in southern Thailand, which has fuelled conflicts in Sri Lanka and northeast India, has come under scrutiny as Thailand's neighbours have urged a more robust response from Bangkok.

In recent years, Bangkok also has joined a plethora

of Indian Ocean regional organizations - including BIMSTEC and IOR-ARC, and has pursued the so-called "Look West" policy of cultivating Indian Ocean states, especially India.

Thailand lately has also shown new interest in building a canal across the Kra Isthmus to forge a shorter direct route between the Pacific and Indian Oceans. However, large obstacles stand in the way of this dream being realized any time soon, not the least of which is Singapore's implacable opposition to a Kra Canal.

Moreover, many of these states are emphasizing power projection capabilities, often through the acquisition of more advanced military hardware and the construction of new bases intended for forward defence.

China and India perceive a potential threat from the US in the Indian Ocean as being the most dominant player in the Indian Ocean. The United States has the capability to project military power in the region and a well-defined strategy to pursue its policy of pre-eminence.

The U.S. maritime strategy of the 1980s envisioned a war at sea won by sea control. The new US strategic thrust aims to move away from classical sea control/sea denial to influencing events further ashore as exemplified by Afghanistan.

National, regional and global maritime security threats are interrelated and this requires strategy to meet maritime security threats.

Bangladesh needs to be prepared to address both military and non-military maritime security in the light of the above issues of the Indian Ocean.

It is noted Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, in course of her visit to the Naval Headquarters on 11 April 2010, talked about the government's mega plan for building Bangladesh Navy as a deterrent force.

The government is expected to procure maritime patrol aircrafts, modernize four missile boats and two patrol aircrafts by adding missiles, develop special naval force SWADS (the Navy's fleet air system) by installing surface to air missiles and air defence system. These plans and programmes will be implemented by 2012. Thereafter Bangladesh has a plan to equip the Navy with submarines having base facilities by 2019.

Within this time, the government plans to take all necessary steps for setting up the naval force's own air base, jetty for ship berthing, training school, and accommodation facilities for officers and sailors, the Prime Minister reportedly said. The plan, which has been chalked out for modernization of the Navy, will "turn the navy into a three-dimensional force by 2021."

The Navy thus equipped may safeguard maritime security that includes Bangladesh ports, shipping, offshore oil exploration and sea-lanes in the Bay of Bengal.

Furthermore, Bangladesh has been a member of Indian Ocean Rim for Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC) together with other 18 maritime nations in Asia and Africa. The two institutions may address the challenges posed by non-military maritime threats.

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Are Indo-US relations back on track?

M. SERAJUL ISLAM

UNDERSTANDING Cold War international politics was easy. The world then was fairly evenly divided between the two Super Powers and smaller powers belonged to one of the two camps. There was of course a third camp of Non-Aligned countries but most of them too in one way or the other belonged to one of the two camps. One of the themes of relations among nations then was: "the enemy's enemy is my friend."

With the Cold War in the graveyard of history, balancing contradictory interests among nations is now a very difficult task at the international level. Thus, today we witness far more conflicts than during the Cold War era. The war on terror has turned the world upside down with the introduction of non-state actors and terrorists. The US as the world's only remaining Super Power is now up to its wits in attempting to balance conflicting interests to make the world safer. US' predicament with its foreign policy goals is facing tough challenge in South Asia as it tries to balance the conflicting interests of India and Pakistan, both nuclear states, into some common purpose to win the war against terror.

USA had leaned towards Pakistan while keeping India at arm's length till Soviet Union dissipated in 1991. During the 1980s, USA and Pakistan were in very close alliance in attempting to deal with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Since then, USA has made amends and also moved towards India while keeping Pakistan happy with military and economic assistance. Since 9/11, US-Pakistan relations have regained more than the warmth that existed in the best of times in the past as President Bush accepted Pakistan as USA's most important ally in the war against terror, recognising the fact that without Pakistan's support US would never win that war.

President Bush, however, realised very well that the mindset in both the nations did not change with the end of the Cold War days where each saw US

closeness to the other as something negative to its interests. That notwithstanding, in acknowledgement of India's importance as an emerging major player in world politics, US initiated with India the process of signing the US-India civil nuclear deal in 2005 and signed it eventually in 2008. It gave India a pride of position as a nuclear weapons state in the same league with the other responsible nuclear powers. During President Bush's presidency, US-India relations were on an upswing although India had a long list of complaints on US's reluctance to talk to Pakistan on its role in cross border terrorism.

President Obama's decision to substantially increase US troops in Afghanistan in order to win it has placed US-Pakistan relations, despite its own hiccups, on stronger footing than in the past, much to the discomfort of the Indians. Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh was invited to Washington in November last year and shown great honour and courtesy that stabilized relations for a while. However, India's continued failure to encourage the US to use its overwhelming influence over Pakistan to give up terrorism as a policy has stalled relations. The relationships hit another serious snag over India's lack of success so far to extradite to India or gain access to David Headley (originally Dawood Jilani who accepted the Christian name to avoid detection), a US citizen of Pakistani origin now in US custody in connection with masterminding the Mumbai attack on 26th November 2008. In fact, India's patience has been tested to its limits because instead of acting on the Indian request to rein in Pakistan, US has been suggesting to India to engage in dialogue with Pakistan and solve these problems bilaterally and doing precious little over access to Headley.

From the Indian point of view, US' tepidity in talking to Pakistan has been complicated further because of the explosive nature of domestic build-up of sentiments around 26/11. The fact that Dr. Manmohan Singh has been the most pro-US Prime Minister in Indian history has put additional pressure on the Indian Prime Minister leading up to his meeting with the US President on the sideline of the Nuclear Summit where 47 world leaders gathered early last week (April 12-13). The US took special care to create the feeling that the Obama-Manmohan meeting, which was the first of five meetings the US President held that day, was the special one. While 45-minute time slots were reserved for the other 4 meetings, 90 minutes was allotted for the Obama-Manmohan meeting, though the two used 55 minutes of it. Media attention was also heavily focused on the meeting and generous references were made to the statesmanship of the Indian Prime Minister.

President Obama, whose use of words reveals the same charming nature of the man, said that US-India would work through the legal process for access to David Headley. He also said US would continue to depend on India for development of Afghanistan, a reference intended to take care of India's sensitivity about being historically a neighbour of Afghanistan till the partition of 1947 and Pakistan's contention that India should not meddle in affairs there as it is no longer a neighbour of that country. He also categorically asserted that US understood India's concern over the Af-Pak region and would not do anything that would in any way harm US-India strategic partnership. He added that there is no other country where "opportunities for a strategic partnership is greater" than in India. There was relief, satisfaction, and renewed confidence among Indian officials that US-India relations were firmly back on track, which was conveyed to the media by the Indian Foreign Secretary after the talks.

Everything did not go India's way at the talks although relations have been brought back on rails. President Obama did ask his guest to engage in negotiations that did not reflect that he fully acknowledged the depth of Indian concern over terrorism as a policy by Pakistan. There have thus been criticisms too about the outcome. Skeptics felt that despite assurances, US would not be able to force Pakistan on India's security concerns because its own security concerns needs a willing and obliging Pakistani army. These skeptics also feel that US would not allow access to Headley because he could reveal information that could embarrass the US. It was expected that President Obama would in some way talk about Indian concern in his meeting with the Pakistani Prime Minister. Instead, Yusuf Gilani asked from India more evidence against Lashkar-e-Tayyiba (LeT) in a press interview after his talks with President Obama. This angered the Indian Prime Minister so much that he ruled out all talks with Pakistan till it took "credible steps" against LeT. Such a statement also suggests that India would be overly optimistic to believe that US would push Pakistan seriously on its security concerns. President Obama is expected to visit India in August and one must wait till then to get a better grip on US-India relations.

The author is a former Ambassador to Japan and Egypt and Director, Centre for Foreign Affairs Studies.

Iran touts advanced capabilities of new drones

A top Iranian general said April 12 that the military's newly produced aerial drones, which have aroused U.S. concern, are capable of gathering intelligence and striking at targets.

"We have made good advances, and production is going on at suitable rate," ground forces commander Brig. Gen. Ahmad Reza Pourdastan told reporters ahead of the annual Iran Army Day on April 18.

"These planes would be used for operations as well as surveillance, which means they can send us online footage from faraway distances and can also be armed for striking at targets," the ISNA news agency quoted Pourdastan. He also said that Iran was working on producing unmanned helicopters, whose details would be announced later, ISNA reported.

U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates said in March that Iranian drones could "create difficulty" for the U.S. military in Iraq and Afghanistan and can also fall in the hands of terror groups. In February, Iran opened two production lines for the manufacture of the drones, saying the planes would be capable of carrying out "assaults with high precision."

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Taiwan displays plans for missile-carrying corvette

Taiwan has unveiled the first images of a high-tech missile corvette specifically designed to counter the threat of China acquiring an aircraft carrier, officials and media said April 12. A computerized graphic of the 1,000-ton "carrier killer," which has so far been kept secret from the public, has gone on display at Taipei's military museum, run by the defense ministry.

The vessel will be capable of cruising at speeds of up to 34 miles (55 kilometers) per hour and boast technologies helping it to evade radar detection, the Taipei-based Apple Daily reported, citing military officials. The Taiwanese Navy hopes to arm the corvette with Taiwan's home-grown Hsiungfeng III supersonic ship-to-ship missile, according to the report.

The military museum did not provide any details, while the defense ministry declined to comment on the report.

The report came after the head of Taiwan's National Security Bureau, Tsai Teh-sheng, told parliament in November that China has started building its first aircraft carrier.

Taiwanese military analysts expect China to need at least 10 years to build its first operating carrier group complete with carrier-based fighters and other warships.

But they warn that once the Chinese arms build-up is completed, it will have a far-reaching strategic impact on the region.

Ties between China and Taiwan have improved markedly since China-friendly Ma Ying-jeou became the island's president in 2008, vowing to adopt a non-confrontational policy toward the mainland. But China still regards Taiwan as part of its territory awaiting reunification, by force if necessary.

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Russia plans to upgrade Black Sea Fleet with new warships

Russia's Black Sea Fleet will receive up to four frigates and four diesel-electric submarines in the next five years, a Navy source told RIA Novosti on Tuesday. The Russian official said that the new warships were needed to replace vessels which have been in service for over 30 years and may soon not be fit for sea missions.

"The need to revamp the operational strength of the Black Sea Fleet is dictated by the decommissioning of various outdated vessels," the source said.

Earlier reports indicated that the Black Sea Fleet is set to decommission its Ochakov destroyer and a diesel submarine built in 1982. Next on the "scrap" list are the Kerch destroyer and several large support ships. The first new vessels that are likely to join the fleet in the near future are the Admiral Gorchkov frigate and the Lada class Sevastopol diesel submarine, which are still under construction. Russia needs to maintain a strong combat-capable fleet in the Black Sea and the Mediterranean not only to protect its interests in the region but also to contribute to international efforts in fighting sea piracy and drug-trafficking.

Warships from the Black Sea Fleet regularly participate in the Blackseafar naval drills, the Black Sea Harmony and the Operation Active Endeavor counterterrorist operations.

"The new ships will ensure the fleet's active participation in these operations and in other missions planned by the Russian Navy," the source said.

He added that the planned overhaul did not violate the 1997 agreements with Ukraine on the presence of the Black Sea Fleet in the Crimea.

"Our plans are absolutely transparent and they will be discussed at meetings of a Russian-Ukrainian subcommittee on the Black Sea Fleet."

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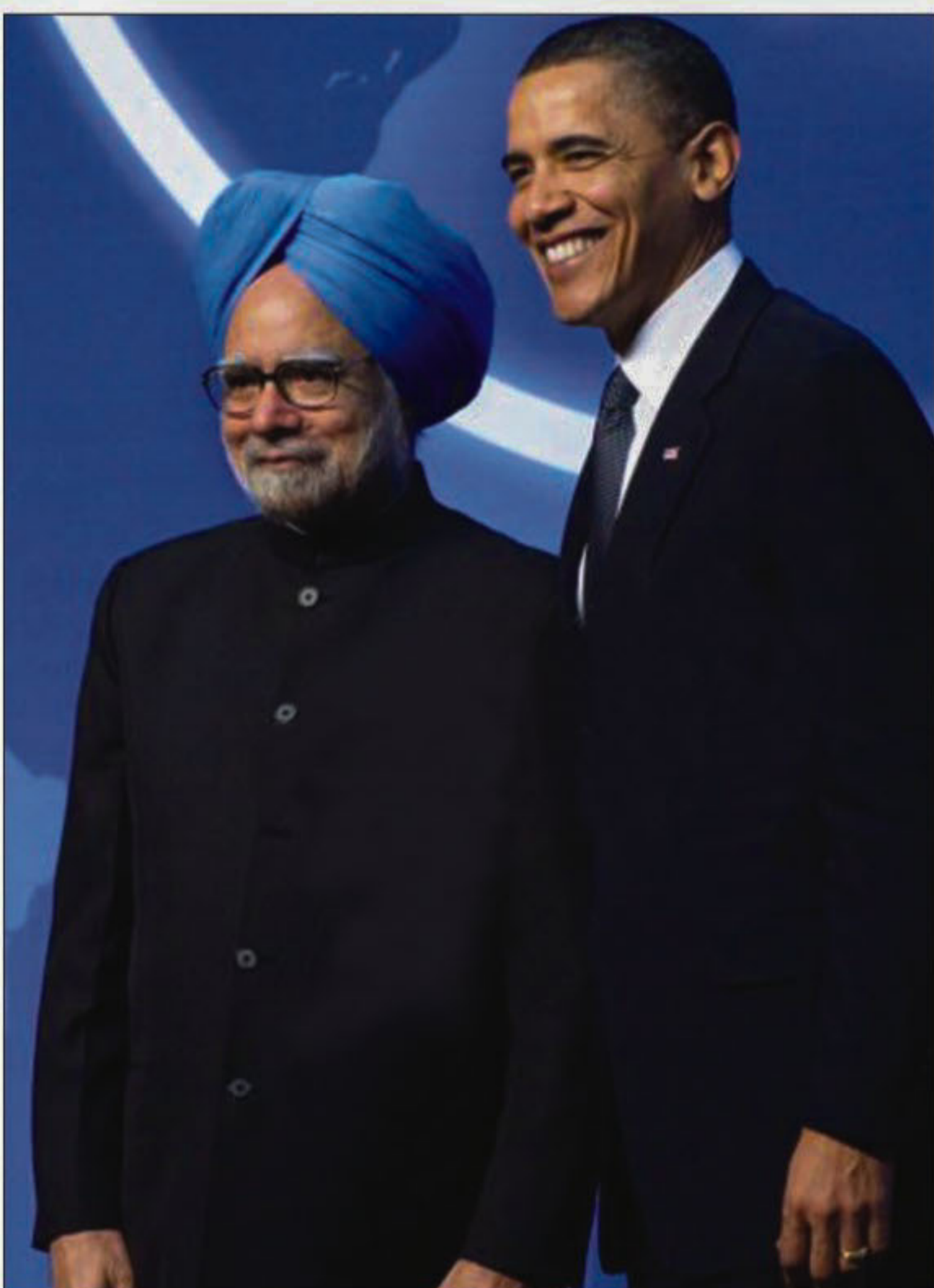


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