Portuguese Maritime Meddling In the Indian Ocean

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The Arab ship burned brightly on the Indian Sea. A pillar of flames leapt from the water. A funeral was underway. But this was not a noble burial like the Vikings of yore. Portuguese adventurers seeking to establish a trade route and eager for plunder boarded this merchant vessel and ravaged it thoroughly. They then locked the Arabs, many women and children, below the deck and burnt it whole. Such were the methods of the Portuguese. They did not come in peace but in pursuit of prosperity, by any means necessary.

Born in a Reconquista, militaristic culture, the Portuguese on the edge of the European continent took to the seas on the eve of the 16th century embarking on an odyssey which by century’s end would result in a far-flung thalassocracy. This maritime empire would dot the coasts of Africa and India and would possess certain Southeast Asian posts. This maritime endeavor represented Europe’s first direct forays into Asian maritime trade. It sought to bypass the middlemen Muslim traders of the continent. The purpose of this essay is to explore in no uncertain terms how the Portuguese managed to achieve this awesome feat. It is not an attempt to recreate linearly all the details of expansion such as legal promulgations establishing the Estado da India. Instead it will illustrate through key details and broad and consistent themes a central question. The essential question is: did military tactics and engineering associated with the military revolution as addressed by Geoffrey Parker in his seminal work The Military Revolution 1500-1800 account for Portugal’s ability to loudly insert itself into the bustling Indian Ocean trade; or was it an absence of power or neglectful apathy, referred to by some as maritime exceptionalism, which permitted Portuguese colonial polity? Special emphasis will be placed on its establishment and early years roughly from 1500-1550.

The majority of historians today emphasize the serendipity of the Portuguese in arriving on the scene at a uniquely advantageous time. Malyn Newitt, Jack Goldstone, Tonio Andrade, and others all state quite clearly in their works on the issue that the Portuguese entered the Indian Ocean in a period when the major Asian states were tending more to the turmoil within their vast land based empires. They hardly cared who dominated the maritime trade as long as taxes and goods flowed inland. The Portuguese did not interrupt this flow. They were very eager to trade silver and gold for the precious and rather inexhaustible Asian spices and commodities.

The traditional perspective of Western superiority has given way to this much more historically accurate framework for understanding Portuguese expansion. However, their military advantage was not to be ignored. Portugal enjoyed, at least for a long enough period to establish themselves, naval superiority and an artillery edge. Michael Pearson notes the insufficiency of Asian states’ naval power. This insufficiency allowed for ostentatious Portuguese claims to a sovereign-less sea. Furthermore, Geoffrey Parker outlines in his salient treatise The Military Revolution: 1500-1800 reasons for why early modern Indian states were unable to imitate the
European military revolution in field warfare. He cites the 1571 siege of Chaul, where 140,000 Indian troops were eventually routed by just 1,100 Portuguese defenders, as an example of “the superiority of Western techniques of both offence and defense [being] proved time and again, even against the most powerful adversaries.”¹

This paper seeks to demonstrate through the facts and through the analyses of these eminent historians the reality of what allowed the Portuguese to establish themselves in the Indian Ocean economy. An accurate historical perspective is one that incorporates both the aforementioned approaches to understanding Portuguese expansion.

The scene the Portuguese arrived upon in the Indian Ocean was an established and thriving trade network of various port cities. Due to specialization and large heterogeneous communities, segregated by sectarian differences like religion and ethnicity, these mercantile cities operated with high levels of autonomy aside from paying deferential taxes to whoever ruled the specific port city. In effect many of these most important ports were city-states with a lack of intrinsic allegiance to the ports’ rulers and an abundance of money to pay tribute to whoever happened to be or become the rulers.² Faced with these circumstances the Portuguese realized the difficulty it would take to break into and dominate the well-established markets. Use of force was definitely an option, one exercised almost immediately. In addition, precipitating the difficulty of peacefully inserting itself in the complex and well-established markets of India was a heavy Islamic presence. Detest and suspicion mutually shared by the Catholic Portuguese and Islamic merchants quickly resulted in an inescapable cycle of violence and retribution.

After initial contact was made by a small expeditionary fleet led by Vasco de Gama, Pedro Alvares Cabral, a minor fidalgo, was dispatched in March 1500. His voyage was of mixed fortunes for the Portuguese. He made the trip to Calicut in only six months, half the time it took for da Gama. Also, initially Cabral was successful in Calicut, a port city highly important in the pepper trade. He was able to establish a factory and curry some favor with the Samudri Raja, the ruler of this port, by capturing an enemy vessel. However, the Portuguese irrevocably burned bridges with Calicut when they retaliated against a perceived Muslim conspiracy, by capturing a ship from Jiddah. This resulted in their factory being attacked. Cabral than bombarded Calicut with his ships and set sail to Cochin and Cannanur who being rivals to the Samudri Raja were quite happy to meet him. Cabral traded with both Cannanur and Cochin before making a return to Portugal. The poor relations Cabral initiated with Calicut were exacerbated by a follow-up expedition under the command of Joao da Nova which continued the pattern of trade with Cochin and Cannanur and belligerence towards vessels from Calicut. This voyage which was dispatched before Cabral’s return indicates an elevation in importance the Portuguese court placed in its Eastern enterprise from a fledgling query to a genuine interest. Da Gama set sail again in 1502 with around twenty ships. Da Gama utilized a militaristic approach subjugating and forcing tribute from Kilwa in

Eastern Africa, systematic piracy of Muslim Arabian vessels and attacks on ships from Calicut. He also established factories and fortifications in Cochin among others.

Da Gama and Afonso de Albuquerque, the latter a commander of a fleet sent in 1503, were effective in establishing trading factories and a network of alliances with Melinde, Kulam, Cochin, and Cannanur. The importance of naval superiority in establishing the Portuguese is exemplified from a passage in Revista de Cultura (International Edition 26). It describes Civente Sodre’s successful command of 18 vessels against some 90 ships from Kerala. The Portuguese obtained victory by firing broadside at the Indian vessels with heavy guns as well as smaller munitions. They targeted the body of the ships with the large guns and with the smaller weapons fired on the masts and crew from Kerala. Meanwhile, the Indian vessels made no significant damage because they possessed only small guns incapable of structural damage and the Portuguese crew kept mainly below deck. Rivalries among these port city-states enabled the Portuguese to develop a foothold. However, Portuguese emphasis on gunpowder was critical to maintaining its hold. A Portuguese controlled town would have heavy guns placed on bastions in the new style of geometrical forces, while harbor defenses allowed relief from the sea. A major Portuguese fortress was not taken until Ormuz in 1622.

However, the various Asian powers were not entirely void of gunpowder and artillery. The various polities responded by habituating quickly to the new emphasis on artillery. Whereas Cabral’s bombardment of Calicut in 1500 was heavily one sided, only two years later when da Gama engaged the port he was met by a stockade of palm trees and artillery pieces. Although this was overcome quite easily it shows a certain readiness by the natives to adapt quickly to the new threat. On land too adaptation was quickly pursued. Goa which Afonso de Albuquerque took in 1510, lost, and retook was heavily fortified by the natives. Albuquerque declared artillery and guns were “better produced from iron in Goa than in Germany.”

Sanjay Subrahmanyam and Geoffrey Parker argue that the ports and states of India turned increasingly to firearms between Portugal’s arrival and 1520 for several reasons. These are the presence of Portuguese and Portuguese renegades, connections with military specialists from the Ottoman Empire, and indigenous innovation in metal munitions. So, it would seem that militarily speaking the indigenous peoples were not far behind the Europeans (indeed if at all.) How then did the Portuguese successfully establish the Estado? At the time of the first Portuguese forays into the Indian Ocean the sea was a vast untamed expanse with no civilization laying claim to it in its entirety. Piracy was ubiquitous yet the Asian states lacked effective navies. The navies they possessed were mostly used as auxiliaries to their land forces. They did not force ships to call. Instead, they attempted to entice them with low taxes and safe cities to conduct their business in.

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3 Ibid., 68.
4 Parker and Subrahmanyam, Revista de Cultura, 20.
5 Newitt, A History of Portuguese Overseas Expansion, 90.
6 Parker and Subrahmanyam, Revista de Cultura, 19
7 Ibid., 21.
8 Ibid., 21.
Portuguese forts at strategic locations, especially Diu and Ormuz were very effective in forcing ships to call to port for trade and ‘safe’ passage.\textsuperscript{10} The Portuguese introduced a completely new mode of thinking when they arrived and Dom Manuel asserted himself ‘King of Portugal and of the Algarves on this side and beyond the sea in Africa, Lord of Guinea and Lord of the Conquest, Navigation and Commerce, of Ethiopia, Arabia, Persia and India.’\textsuperscript{11} Tonio Andade concurs with this interpretation quoting the eminent Indian historian Kitri Chaudhuri:

Before the arrival of the Portuguese in ... 1498 there had been no organized attempt by any political power to control the sea-lanes and the long distance trade of Asia. The Iberians and their north European followers imported a Mediterranean style of warfare by land and sea into an area that had hitherto had quite a different tradition\textsuperscript{12}

The Portuguese enforced this concept of sovereignty of the seas with true naval superiority. Jack Goldstone summarizes the situation:

The Portuguese entered the Indian Ocean with a clear advantage in naval armaments over the Muslim vessels operating around the coasts of Arabia, Africa, and India. The latter had small guns mounted fore and aft, whereas the Portuguese ships were built to hold larger cannon all along their sides. European naval artillery was thus far more powerful than any ship-mounted weapons in Muslim navies\textsuperscript{13}

This is not to say that Muslim navies were totally inept. The Battle of Chaul represented a devastating defeat to Portuguese forces. A combined Mamluk, Gujarat, and Mappila fleet attacked a fleet commanded by the viceroy’s son Dom Lourezo de Alemedia. Both sides utilized artillery but apparently preferred grappling and boarding techniques. Dom Lourenzo would lose his life in the battle.\textsuperscript{14} This confrontation seems to have occurred in direct conflict to orders of engagement provided by the King Manuel. Several years before this disaster Dom Manuel instructed Cabral that he was “not to come to close quarters with them if you can avoid it, but only with your artillery are you to compel them to strike sail... so that this war may be waged with greater safety, and so that less loss may result to the people of your ships.”\textsuperscript{15} The Portuguese rallied a year later defeating the aforementioned Mamluk fleet near Diu. Professor Vitorino Godinho contends that this victory was due to the Mamluks naval inferiority as they “did not possess a body of well-trained marines.” Yet, others argue that the problem was more the lack of assistance from their Diu allies and not true naval inferiority.\textsuperscript{16} Portuguese naval superiority was further cemented following the siege of Diu in which a large Ottoman fleet was repulsed by a much smaller Portuguese garrison.

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 65.
\textsuperscript{11} Newitt, A History of Portuguese Overseas Expansion, 73.
\textsuperscript{13} Why Europe? 56
\textsuperscript{14} Parker and Subrahmanyan, Revista de Cultura 20.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 19.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 20.
Portuguese fortifications consolidated their territorial gains. The geometric designs of the trace italienne entrenched Portuguese gains. The map of Diu above is an excellent example. A star shaped design of the main fort allowed canon fire to cover all angles. Additionally, bastions and crownworks can clearly be seen. The fortresses of Ormuz, Diu, and Malacca were critically strategic choke points in the international trade of this region and were extremely effective in projecting Portuguese influence. So it would seem that military innovations consistent with the Military Revolution were critical in establishing the Portuguese thalassocracy.

Unions with various indigenous polities were also critical in lodging the Portuguese firmly in place. "Portuguese maritime strength led to their friendship being sought by the states that bordered the Indian Ocean and to the Crown’s factors being able to trade profitably in one new market after another." Ambassadors from Persia, Ethiopia, Siam and a multitude of Indian and Indonesian states courted Governor Albuquerque. Enemies were made but this network of allies was effective in neutralizing any true threat. Despite the apparent influence the Portuguese were now able to exert, Jack Goldstone declares:

The Portuguese’s main advantage was that the true powers in Asia—the Mughal rulers of India and the Ming rulers of China—cared little who managed trade along their coasts, as long as taxes and trade continued to flow inland. Most of all, the scale of Portuguese activities was never a threat to anyone other than the local rulers of small coastal kingdoms or of island states.

Tonio Andrade concurs with this assessment arguing for a maritime exceptionalist model. He draws support from Historian Michael Pearson who believes Indian states were funded by

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18 Ibid., 85.
agricultural rather than commercial revenues and were thus indifferent to maritime trade. Even Gujarat, one of South Asia’s most maritime-oriented states, drew only six percent of its revenues from sea-trade, which is why... it did not busy itself with the ocean.\(^{20}\)

Furthermore, Newitt and others acknowledge that Portugal entered the scene at a fortuitous time. The Ottomans, the imperial Chinese, the Delhi sultanate et al. were all dealing with political upheavals in the continents interior. Newitt cautions, however, that “the role of gunpowder in... European expansion is not to be easily dismissed [remaining] an important line of argument.”\(^{21}\)

I concur with Newitt in his assessment on the importance of artillery and naval supremacy. Large naus stocked with bombarda grossas could deliver 90 pound shots per cannon. Artillery lined the broadsides as well as the bow and stern. (Pictured is the Victoria a naus under the employ of the Portuguese explorer Magellan. It excellently illustrates the 360 degree range of fire.) Landing craft often had light artillery mounted on the prow; effective in shocking defenders immediately prior to invasion. Also, by arguing Gujarat was uninterested in sea-trade as it represented a fraction of its revenue Pearson contradicts himself. In an Essay previously referenced to in this paper (footnote 10) Pearson states “[Portuguese] forts at Diu (and others) enabled them to inspect most ships.” Diu never fell until the modern Indian state invaded in 1961. The fortress was a prime example of the trace italienn design and withstood multiple sieges by the Ottoman Empire with the support of the Gujarat Sultanate.

The maritime exceptionalist model is inherently laudable and accurate but it does not tell the whole picture. Portuguese concepts of the priority of naval supremacy and bombardment strategy, and fortifications in the new geometric design, and militarily sound strategic alliances established the Portuguese in such a way that they did not face serious threat until other European forces especially the Dutch and English began arriving in mass. Newitt strongly insists on Portugal’s nautical prowess as the key to their Estado. He claimed:

The Portuguese had a system of communication and an ability to mobilize resources that enabled the silver of South America, the armaments of the Netherlands, the ships built in Portugal... and the manpower of Asia and Africa to be brought together for service literally anywhere in the world. Not even the greatest of the Asiatic powers could remotely emulate


\(^{21}\) Newitt, A History of Portuguese Overseas Expansion, 89.
this. Only the Turks came close to replicating the global spread of Portuguese power, and their major preoccupations were in the Middle East and Mediterranean.22

Geoffrey Parker argues in The Military Revolution 1500-1800 that by the 1550's a trio of Islamic empires, the Safavids, Ottomans, and the Mughals were capable of resisting Portuguese monopoly of the seas.23 While it is true that Portuguese monopoly of the seas and Indian spice trade was nominal rather than factual,24 these great Muslim powers were either unable or unwilling to dispel the Portuguese. Despite united attacks against them in 1509 at Chaul, 1538 and '46 at Diu, Goa in 1571, and East Africa in 1631 each met with Portuguese victory.25 It was only in the 17th century with the dogged assaults of powerful Dutch fleets and overextension of forces pursuing territorial gains in Ceylon and Mozambique which saw Portuguese presence wane.26

In conclusion, the Portuguese went from a rag tag expeditionary force led by Da Gama at the dawn of the 16th century to under a hundred years being a major presence in the Indian spice trade, and the dominant naval power operating in the Indian Sea. They attained this amazing feat in several ways. First, they exploited rivalries of coastal states and merchant towns such as Cochin and Calicut. Second, by preferring to stick to coastal fortifications over land conquests they created a thalassocracy which was able to maintain sea influence. Finally, they achieved the creation of the Estado by utilizing aspects of the military revolution described by Geoffrey Parker specifically the use of heavily armed naval vessels and geometric fortifications employing bastions, bulwarks, crownworks etc. pursuant to the trace italienne design.27 The Portuguese arrived on a scene ripe for the tactics they gravitated to. They were not desirous of land conquest but wanted to dominate the maritime commerce of the Indian Ocean. They filled a seaborne power vacuum, introducing a new political concept to the region—that of sovereignty of the seas. They were aided in their endeavors by superior nautical force and fortifications each employing broad use of artillery. Thus, in answer to the premise the Portuguese were able to create a thalassocracy because of an initial void in Asian civilizations’ emphasis on maritime trade, referred to by some historians as maritime exceptionalism, and because of military supremacy connected to the military revolution of early modern Europe.

22 Ibid., 268.
25 Ibid., 268.
27 Ibid., 11-12.