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# Superpower Interests and Naval Missions in the Indian Ocean

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Howard M. Hensel

Over a decade and a half ago, two events of considerable significance occurred in the history of the Indian Ocean basin. First, in January 1968, the British government announced its decision to withdraw its military forces from the region east of Suez. Shortly after this announcement, Soviet naval vessels appeared in the waters of the Indian Ocean. Most scholars and policymakers from both the littoral and interested Western states agreed that these two developments would have an impact on the regional power balance. Some observers argued, however, that, while these events were perhaps significant for the region itself, they were of marginal importance for Western security. Others disagreed and stressed the global importance of these regional developments.<sup>1</sup>

Given the perspective of a decade and a half of superpower naval rivalry in the Indian Ocean, it is perhaps an opportune moment to reflect upon the many and varied interpretations that have been posited in Western foreign policy and national security oriented publications concerning superpower interests in the Indian Ocean and the roles which their respective navies play in promoting those interests. Such a review of superpower interests and naval missions in the Indian Ocean basin should help to clarify some of the key determinants of US and Soviet policy in this increasingly important region.

## US Policy in the Indian Ocean Region

During the past 15 years, many Western analysts of Soviet national security policy have stressed the military significance of the Indian Ocean, within the context of Washington's effort to maintain a stable strategic nuclear balance, as one of the key factors explaining US interest in the region. Early commentators pointed out that by the mid 1960s, submarine launched ballistic missile (SLBM) technology had made it possible for American ballistic missile carrying nuclear submarines (SSBNs) to be deployed in the Arabian Sea and, if called upon, hit significant targets deep within European Russia.<sup>2</sup> Indeed,

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Washington's overtures to London during the mid-1960s concerning development of communications facilities on the island of Diego Garcia and the Northwest Cape of Australia seemed to suggest that a US SSBN deployment was imminent.<sup>3</sup>

Almost from the outset, other analysts questioned the validity of the contention that the United States was deploying or was about to deploy nuclear submarines in the Indian Ocean. First, they pointed out that Washington had never acknowledged that there indeed were US SSBNs in the Indian Ocean. Furthermore, they maintained that Diego Garcia was not equipped as a submarine base and without such a base, an SSBN deployment in the Indian Ocean would not be cost effective. Too much time would be consumed in transit to the station area, thereby significantly reducing the time on station. Similarly, US SSBNs would have to be accompanied by a submarine tender, yet no American tender had ever been sighted in the region.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, by the late 1970s, many of the original proponents of the US SSBN theory had revised their position. They concluded that, since Diego Garcia had apparently not been developed as a submarine base, it was unlikely that the United States maintained a permanent SSBN presence in the basin. Conversely they pointed out that the United States might consider such a deployment in the future, especially if technology were to make antisubmarine warfare operations more effective. Finally, it was suggested that in a crisis with the USSR, Washington might deploy its SSBNs into the basin as an emergency measure to elude Soviet antisubmarine warfare (ASW) efforts.<sup>5</sup> Looking to the future, some analysts argued that the relative geostrategic significance of the Indian Ocean would tend to decrease as the new US Trident submarines came on line.<sup>6</sup> Others disagreed, contending that the increased range of the Tridents would allow US SSBNs to be stationed virtually anywhere in the vast Indian Ocean expanse, thereby complicating Soviet ASW efforts. Thus, many felt that the Indian Ocean would increase, rather than decrease in military significance.<sup>7</sup>

Another category of American interest in the Indian Ocean centered on the US Navy's traditional use of the Indian Ocean as a transit route for naval ships steaming from the Atlantic to the Far East. Indeed, several analysts have consistently suggested that an American naval presence in the Indian Ocean serves as a vital link between the US naval presence in the Far East and that in the Mediterranean and the Atlantic. Conversely, since the Indian Ocean is also a pivot between the USSR's Pacific and Black Sea Fleets, they note that US control of the Indian Ocean would be vital for both the worldwide projection of US naval power and the inhibition of Soviet naval activities in the event of a military confrontation between the superpowers. Furthermore, both in peace and in times of crisis, a US naval presence in the Indian Ocean would help guarantee the security of the United States' worldwide

communications and satellite tracking network, while simultaneously helping to facilitate the collection of intelligence material in the basin.<sup>8</sup>

Economic factors constitute a third category of American interests in the Indian Ocean basin. Virtually all analysts agree that it is extremely important for the United States to ensure a dependable flow of strategic materials from the countries of the Indian Ocean to the Western industrial consumers. The term, strategic materials, however, is an umbrella phrase which includes both nonfuel minerals, as well as petroleum. For example, oil, drawn from sources in the Indian Ocean area is important in varying degrees to all the Western industrial powers, as well as to the less developed countries. One should also remember that the regional oil producers have an interest in keeping petroleum flowing to the consumers, since much of their revenue is derived from oil sales. Based upon this global interdependence, some analysts have consistently emphasized that international market forces are sufficient to keep the oil flowing. However, others argue that these market forces are not immune to the impact of regional instability, which often assumes a violent character.<sup>9</sup>

There are two distinct aspects to the interest of ensuring the free flow of strategic materials from the basin. First, the Western powers are interested in the security of the sources of these materials. For example, the oil flow could be interrupted at the source by disrupting or closing operations at the oil fields or at those refineries located in the oil producing regions. The other aspect of guaranteeing the free flow of materials from the basin centers on uninterrupted maritime traffic. In this context, naval analysts have stressed the significance of numerous "chokepoints" as potential sites of maritime vulnerability.<sup>10</sup>

Threats to the sources of strategic materials or the maritime routes can take a variety of forms. First, there is the possibility that terrorists might upset the flow of strategic materials, especially oil. One of the most cited points of vulnerability to terrorist attack is the Strait of Hormuz. Professor Rouhollah K. Ramazani, however, suggested that this strait's vulnerability to terrorist attack may be overdrawn. He noted that there are several bypasses available which would enable ships to pass through the strait, while remaining outside the effective range of most shore-based weapons. Moreover, guerrilla operations designed to close the strait would need a nearby base from which to operate and there is little prospect of such a base being established. Finally, Professor Ramazani pointed out that, even assuming that the terrorists were successful in sinking one or two tankers, it was unlikely that such a development could physically block passage through the strait. He admitted, however, that such an act could generate "great fears about the vulnerability of the Strait's channels."<sup>11</sup>

Regional instability, involving states which produce materials vital to the West or which are located in close proximity to one of the Indian Ocean's

maritime chokepoints could also pose a threat to the flow of strategic materials. Such instability could take the form of revolutionary upheavals within any of a number of regional countries or it could assume the form of military conflicts involving one or several of the states in the basin. Finally, many Western and regional analysts have discussed the prospect of a Soviet threat to secure access to materials vital to the Western industrial societies. While this threat will be examined more fully later in this study, suffice it to say for the moment that many, both in the West and in the region, take it extremely seriously.<sup>12</sup>

In reference to discussions of the US commitment to the defense of strategic materials, especially oil, originating from the Indian Ocean basin, some analysts have observed that since these resources are more vital to the United States' allies than to the United States itself, it would be appropriate for these states to assume a greater responsibility for protecting access to them. In an effort to explain this apparent lack of willingness Philip Towle contends that the possibility of military intervention to prevent an interruption of the oil flow at source "has never been taken seriously in Japan or Western Europe." Other analysts have emphasized that many Western powers, either collectively or individually, lack the capacity to defend access to materials vital to their interests. Hence, many continue to argue that the United States must protect the vital interests of the entire Free World, not merely those of the United States.<sup>13</sup>

Besides its importance as a source of vital materials, the Indian Ocean basin has additional economic significance for the United States. American companies and private American investors have extensive interests in the economies of many of the littoral states. The United States also exports agricultural products to several of the countries of the basin. Finally, the United States trades in arms and manufactured goods with many of these countries. In short, while the relative importance of these additional economic factors pale in comparison to the significance of the basin as a source of strategic materials vital to the survival of the Western industrial economies, the importance of the former should not be underrated either. Hence, many analysts emphasize that the United States must be capable of protecting American property and, if necessary, evacuating American nationals from the area in time of emergency.<sup>14</sup>

Intimately related to the above-mentioned cluster of economic interests, but analytically distinct for purposes of clarity, are US political interests in the Indian Ocean basin. Some scholars such as Professor Howard Wriggins have contended that the United States "has an interest in the continued openness and reasonably orderly development of the littoral countries, done in their own way with a minimum of outside interference."<sup>15</sup> This implies that the United States should deter all powers from intervening in regional conflicts or the domestic affairs of the Indian Ocean states, while itself refraining from doing so.

Other Western scholars have gone even farther and argue that the United States has an interest in preventing any power which threatens Western security from dominating the basin. The focus of most discussions along these lines usually concentrates on the "Soviet threat." Suffice it to say at this point that proponents of this viewpoint argue that for geostrategic reasons, as well as American prestige generally, the United States must oppose any and all encroachments upon the states of the Indian Ocean basin, even if American economic or military interests are not immediately jeopardized.<sup>16</sup>

Insofar as Soviet encroachments would involve Soviet or Soviet proxy military and/or naval forces overtly violating the integrity of a particular state in the basin, or interfering in a regional conflict, there is a coincidence of viewpoints between the position exemplified by Professor Wriggins' comments and those who feel that the United States must contain the Soviet threat. However, opinions differ concerning the proper US response in situations where overt, external military interference is not involved but, instead, the threat emanates from foreign-sponsored subversion from within. In these instances some maintain that the people of the region must be allowed to decide their own fate, even if that involves the demise of a pro-American government and the establishment of one with an anti-American, even Marxist orientation. Others sharply disagree and emphasize that US political interests demand that elements hostile to the United States, especially those seeking to spread communism, must be contained. Proponents of this latter viewpoint maintain that this overrides any American commitment to noninvolvement in the affairs of the region beyond deterring external intervention.

Another element complicating a clear definition of US political interests in the region is that quite often, pro-American governments have a record of violating the "human rights" of their citizens. When confronted with such situations, some argue that the attitude of the government toward the United States must be paramount. Others disagree and contend that defense of the cause of human rights must come first. On balance, Washington has traditionally urged pro-American authoritarian regimes to adopt a more enlightened domestic policy, but generally has not done so at the expense of US political, military and economic interests.<sup>17</sup> Yet, often, the American commitment to the principles of human rights, like its commitment to national self-determination and its opposition to communism or any other elements inimical to US interests, has created vexing dilemmas for Washington in determining American priorities abroad.

Just as many analysts argue that a US SSBN presence in the Indian Ocean would help promote the United States' interest in a stable strategic nuclear balance, the US surface naval presence in the basin is often cited as reinforcing American economic and political interests in the region.

Indeed, some contend that naval power is the most effective way to influence the littoral countries. To support this conclusion, they argue that throughout history foreign domination over the littoral countries has been most often exercised from the sea. Some analysts, such as Professors Cottrell and Burrell, have asserted that naval power “has an historical acceptance in the area.” Others such as Dr. Ferenc Vali have disagreed, stating that, “In most countries around the Indian Ocean gunboat diplomacy is naturally unwelcome, except when it is directed against an enemy.”<sup>18</sup> Regardless of its degree of acceptance by the littoral powers, proponents of naval power have consistently stressed that naval power is flexible and “has none of the potential provocation of a territorial military commitment.”<sup>19</sup>

Thus, Western analysts have collectively assigned some seven different roles which US naval power can play in promoting American political and economic interests in the Indian Ocean basin. First, it has been suggested that US naval power in the Indian Ocean serves as a *symbol* of the United States—recognizing the importance of the region to the United States and the other Western industrial powers, support for littoral friends, determination to counterbalance the Soviet naval presence in the Indian Ocean, and cooperation with the PRC. Second, American naval forces could assist in humanitarian relief efforts in response to natural disasters which periodically occur in the littoral countries.<sup>20</sup>

Third, deployment of naval forces in the Indian Ocean also serves as a deterrent to any other powers which would otherwise be tempted to intervene in the affairs of the basin. This role takes two forms. In situations involving a military confrontation between two or more of the Indian Ocean states which jeopardizes US interests, the deployment of US naval forces could help isolate the conflict and prevent it from escalating through the intervention of external (especially Soviet) or indigenous (especially Soviet proxy) forces. Moreover, in situations of revolutionary unrest within a particular Indian Ocean state, the United States may wish to exercise the same deterrent role vis-à-vis other regional or external powers. Implicit behind any credible deterrence must rest a resolve, or at least a perception by those who are to be deterred of resolve, that appropriate force will be used should deterrence fail.<sup>21</sup>

Fourth, deployment of US naval vessels in the basin would enable the United States to guarantee the freedom of the Indian Ocean's maritime routes. Here, again, proponents of this mission point out that the mere presence of US naval forces may serve to deter any who would threaten those routes. But, if challenged, the United States must be prepared to commit its forces to combat in order to “police” these routes.<sup>22</sup>

There are some analysts, however, that even go beyond deterrence and argue, fifth, that the United States should be prepared to use its naval power to intervene in the internal affairs of the littoral states if domestic

developments within, or military confrontations between those states appear to be taking a course which clashes with US interests, irrespective of whether the threat of outside intervention exists or not. For example, many have suggested that US naval power should be used to break a prolonged oil boycott, prevent the overthrow of a friendly littoral government, or affect the outcome of a war between the littoral countries.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, Geoffrey Jukes went so far as to state that "Western naval presences, though often justified in terms of a hypothetical Soviet threat are really determined by a perceived Western need to maintain a means of bringing pressure on oil producing states." Hence, for Professor Jukes, "this perceived need existed long before any Soviet presence came into being and would continue even if that presence were withdrawn."<sup>24</sup>

Sixth, many have observed that, irrespective of an interventionist, or even a deterrent mission for US naval forces in the Indian Ocean, the United States should have naval vessels available to facilitate the evacuation of American citizens from portions of the basin, should local developments make such an evacuation necessary. Seventh, it is also argued that the presence of US naval forces in the region helps facilitate the "administration of military assistance programs."<sup>25</sup>

In discussing the implementation of these various missions, some analysts have maintained that, "in the nuclear age, a superpower need not have large fleets and bases all over the world to be insulated from military challenges," and that US military/naval power could be projected into the basin from existing American bases in the Mediterranean and the Far East. Others sharply disagree and argue that bases outside the region are incapable of supporting US naval operations in the Indian Ocean. Therefore, they emphasize that the only guarantee that the United States will be able to project force into the area is to have a permanent naval force on station, supported by adequate regional base facilities.<sup>26</sup>

In a larger sense, several observers have raised questions as to the viability of using American naval power to support its politico-economic interests in the region. For example—regarding securing the flow of strategic materials, especially petroleum—many Western analysts have questioned the US military/naval capacity to guarantee access to the sources of these materials should their security be jeopardized by local terrorists, domestic revolutions, or regional hostilities. More specifically, in securing the Persian Gulf oilfields and refineries, several observers have noted that an American expeditionary force would, quite likely, be confronted with facilities already destroyed by the retreating hostile forces. Moreover, even after the local facilities were secured, a permanent American garrison would be needed to maintain security. It is probable, however, that such a garrison would be surrounded by hostile elements. In addition, the United States would possibly stand alone in such a venture and, some suggest, even face hostility from our allies as well as



the threat of intervention by the USSR. Finally, while the American people might be prepared to support a rapid operation, many doubt their willingness to support a prolonged involvement.<sup>27</sup>

Simultaneously, many analysts have questioned the American capacity to effectively use naval power to guarantee the security of the strategic maritime routes, especially at the Strait of Hormuz, should there develop a concerted challenge from terrorists, revolutionaries, or regional hostilities. Such an action would encounter difficult operational problems, as well as the threat of possible local hostility and Soviet counterintervention. Even if these difficulties could be overcome, it is still possible that supertanker crews would refuse to enter such a dangerous area, and that Western insurance companies would so increase insurance rates as to significantly reduce shipping in this area.<sup>28</sup>

From another perspective, several writers have pointed to the changing attitudes toward the traditional concepts of the freedom of the seas. While some feel that "showing the flag," especially at certain chokepoints such as the Strait of Malacca, would help assert the international character of these waters, others argue that questions such as this must be resolved by political and diplomatic methods, not military or naval power.<sup>29</sup>

Concerning symbolic naval visits and even military and naval interventions on behalf of friendly littoral governments, many analysts feel that American naval power often is, at best, ineffective in influencing the course of events and may possibly even be counterproductive, especially in highly charged nationalistic atmospheres. As evidence, several writers cite the example of Iran in late 1978 and early 1979, where American naval power was incapable of positively influencing the course of domestic developments and, indeed, may have served as a negative factor in promoting the US objective of supporting the Iranian monarchy. Moreover, others maintain that naval forces alone are insufficient and, that in order to effectively influence events such as these, the regional states must be prepared to allow the United States to maintain ground forces on their soil. Yet, given the traditionally hostile attitudes of the littoral countries to such a presence, this does not appear to be a viable possibility. Thus, many analysts have concluded that the most the United States can and should do is to provide weapons and advisors, but avoid heavy reliance upon naval power in order to affect regional developments.<sup>30</sup>

Finally, regarding the argument that the American naval presence has influenced the actions of the Soviet Union, a contrary body of opinion holds that the Soviets would have behaved the same way over the last decade and a half even if there had been no regional US naval presence. Many admit that a unilateral Soviet naval presence "would reinforce the widespread belief that Soviet power is waxing whilst Western power is waning," but proponents of this viewpoint hasten to add that, "such a belief does not, of course, rest only on the growth of Soviet naval power."<sup>31</sup>

In summary, Western analysts clearly disagree as to the exact definition and priority of US interests in the Indian Ocean basin. Moreover, they disagree as to the role which American naval power can and should play in promoting those interests. There is a consensus, however, that the United States has at least some significant interests in the region and that American actions, particularly its military and naval policy in the region will ultimately have an impact on those interests.

### Soviet Policy in the Indian Ocean Region

Military-strategic factors are often identified by Western observers as being of paramount significance in Moscow's decision to deploy naval vessels in the Indian Ocean. These analysts argue that one of the principal factors, if not the primary motivation which led to that decision, was concern about the prospect of a US SSBN deployment in the Arabian Sea. Thus, Soviet military planners, allegedly building upon a "worst case" estimate, were said to have argued that even if the US SSBNs were not yet deployed in the area, sooner or later the United States would decide upon such a deployment. Therefore, according to this line of analysis, the Soviet naval high command urged the Kremlin leaders to authorize the deployment of Soviet naval forces in the basin to watch for signs of a US SSBN presence, as well as to familiarize themselves with a heretofore relatively unknown ocean.<sup>32</sup>

Other scholars have consistently questioned this interpretation, arguing that, since there are neither signs nor an acknowledgment by Washington that the United States deploys SSBNs in the basin, attributing the Soviet decision to send naval ships into the area to Soviet concern for US SSBNs is to base the analysis "on nothing more than speculation and conjecture." Moreover, critics of the military-strategic defense interpretation of Soviet behavior remind their colleagues that the USSR did not possess an effective ASW capability when the decision to deploy naval vessels in the basin was made. Furthermore, even now, the Soviet ASW capability appears to be quite limited.<sup>33</sup>

In response, proponents of the military-strategic defense argument maintain that it is "irrelevant" whether the United States had actually deployed SSBNs in the basin when the Kremlin leaders made their decision to send Soviet naval vessels into the region. They contend that prudence dictated that Soviet naval planners would have to base their estimates and recommendations and, ultimately the Kremlin leadership itself would have to act, based upon a "worst case" estimate. Regarding the lack of an effective ASW capability, one proponent of the military-strategic defense interpretation commented that, "all navies live in hopes of a breakthrough in anti-submarine warfare, and it is sensible to acquire operating experience in the likely deployment area against the hoped for day of the breakthrough."<sup>34</sup>

By the late 1970s, however, many of the original proponents of the military strategic defense explanation had modified their position in response to what even they came to admit was an absence of a permanent US SSBN deployment in the basin. Those who felt that the Indian Ocean would remain a likely but, as yet, potential deployment site for US SSBNs, argued that the Soviet naval high command would continue to want to provide their crews with area familiarization cruises. Indeed, given the Soviet Navy's reliance on conscripts, "the Soviet naval presence acquires its own self-sustaining momentum from the exigencies of the Soviet training cycle." Conversely, those who felt that the increased ranges of US SLBMs would reduce the geostrategic significance of the Indian Ocean concluded that "the combat mission that first brought the Soviet navy into the Indian Ocean on a permanent basis is likely to cease to have even the hypothetical significance that it has had in the past." Thus, they felt that "having first entered the Indian Ocean for familiarization," the Soviet Navy "has found other functions to fulfill."<sup>35</sup>

Another, albeit long-range element in the Kremlin's Indian Ocean calculations was said to be Soviet concern about the future possibility that the PRC might deploy naval forces in the basin. Even more haunting is the future prospect of the development of a Chinese SLBM capability which would enable them to use the Arabian Sea as a staging area for Chinese SSBNs directed against Soviet territory. Most dreaded of all is the Soviet nightmare of Sino-American military-naval collusion in the Indian Ocean area.<sup>36</sup> Conversely, however, some Western analysts have pointed out that the Indian Ocean provides a possible site for Soviet SSBN deployments directed against targets in the PRC.<sup>37</sup>

In addition to its military-strategic significance, the Indian Ocean also has logistical importance for the USSR. While only a relatively small portion of Soviet domestic trade passes through the Indian Ocean, the significance of the maritime passage for Soviet domestic transportation could increase dramatically in the event of Sino-Soviet hostilities and the loss, or even threatened loss of rail links between the eastern and western portions of the USSR. Similarly, the Indian Ocean constitutes the only dependable link between the USSR's three European based fleets and the Soviet Pacific Fleet in the Far East. Hence, some observers have suggested that the Soviets may have deployed their naval forces in the basin in order to secure control over their seaborne lines of communication.<sup>38</sup> Since one of the main threats to Soviet maritime routes would be from submarines, (either Western or potentially Chinese) this further reinforces the ASW mission of the Soviet Navy discussed earlier.<sup>39</sup>

In addition to the military-strategic and logistical factors, several analysts have drawn attention to the USSR's economic-scientific interests in the Indian Ocean area. This cluster of interests ranges from commercial

considerations and access to strategic materials,<sup>40</sup> to the emergency recovery of Soviet space vehicles.<sup>41</sup> Soviet fishing activities also constitute an important Soviet maritime interest in the Indian Ocean. These activities have a number of dimensions. First, Soviet trawlers regularly work the regional fishing grounds, especially those off the coasts of southern Africa. In addition, the Soviets also assist several littoral countries in the latter's efforts to develop their own fishing industries. Consequently, Soviet oceanographic activities are often designed to help refine both Soviet fishing activities, as well as those of Moscow's regional associates. In this context, a measure of the USSR's "scientific research" in the Indian Ocean also has a military application in that it is designed to help improve Soviet ASW efforts.<sup>42</sup>

Soviet fishing activities are, of course, intimately linked with Soviet political interests in the Indian Ocean area. Most Western analysts agree that Moscow seeks—with varying degrees of determination depending largely upon the circumstances—to undermine the West's political, military, and economic position throughout the developing world, while simultaneously attempting to expand its own presence and influence. As applied to the Indian Ocean area, many observers have maintained that prior to 1968, the British presence east of Suez deterred the USSR from "introducing its naval forces into a long-established British preserve." They argue, however, that London's withdrawal announcement created a political vacuum in the basin and "tempted Moscow to pursue its traditional policy of watching for any reduction of Western vigilance and thereafter seizing the first available opportunity for replacing Western influence with its own, particularly when it appears that the United States is not prepared to fill the vacuum."<sup>43</sup>

Other analysts, however, have sharply disagreed with the proponents of the "vacuum thesis." Many scholars along the littoral maintain that the alleged "power vacuum" is really "a myth, something created by major powers to deny access to other powers."<sup>44</sup> In this context, Nehru University Professor K. P. Misra was perhaps representative of the thinking of littoral intellectuals when he observed that: "This line of thinking carried several implications, particularly in the context of superpower rivalry. First, if one power failed to act, it would be placed in a disadvantageous position because the other was bound to take appropriate initiatives, thereby creating for the 'timid' one an unfavorable balance of power in the area. Second, related to the first was the implication that the littoral countries needed some kind of guardian or caretaker in the area so that the weaker countries could be protected from the possible encroachments of outside powers. Third, in case of conflict among countries within the area, it was thought that the major outside powers, thanks to their superior military capability, could act as arbiters whenever necessary. Fourth, though it was not clearly and openly articulated, implicit in the power vacuum concept was the desire of outside powers to be in a position to influence domestic trends in littoral countries if

these proved unfavorable to them and if, in their judgment, the cost of influencing did not outweigh the benefits. Thus, the power vacuum theory, generating an artificially created atmosphere of competition and contention in the area, had international and regional as well as domestic ramifications.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, many intellectuals from the littoral states contend that the great powers, especially the United States and the USSR complicate rather than ameliorate basin problems and insist that the destiny of the region must be left in the hands of the Indian Ocean peoples, without outside interference.<sup>46</sup>

From another perspective, Professor Laurence Martin rejected the "vacuum thesis," reasoning that "only if one views the tasks of contemporary strategy and diplomacy entirely as a huge campaign to contain communism can the Indian Ocean be seen as a great hole to be plugged . . . . Such a view would tend to render all the problems of the area aspects of the single threat of Communist expansion and suggest a single strategy of containment." Indeed, Philip Towle contended that irrespective of the scope of the British military commitment in the basin, "it is probable that the rivalry between the two Super Powers in the area would have increased." In a similar vein, John Badgley suggested that, since the USSR "correctly perceives itself as an Asian power, with vital strategic interests along its vast border, in the Atlantic, Pacific, and in the Indian Ocean" then "objective analysis justifies Soviet strategic interest in the Indian Ocean." Finally, Dr. Oles Smolansky argued at the outset of the 1970s that, irrespective of the British military presence or the lack thereof in the region east of Suez, it was Western initiatives that were "a major consideration impelling the establishment of a Soviet naval presence in the area. Thus, far from the aggressive intent so frequently ascribed to these recent Soviet moves, Moscow's main concern seems to have been military defense."<sup>47</sup>

Beyond the alleged timing link between the British withdrawal announcement and the subsequent arrival of Soviet warships in the waters of the Indian Ocean, some scholars interpret Soviet policy from a historical perspective and argue that the Kremlin's interest in the region "is an extension of an old Czarist thrust for an outlet to the south, dating from the time of Peter the Great." Many go on to assert that this historical motivating factor "is overlaid with the ideological drive for world-wide Soviet hegemony."<sup>48</sup> Other writers, however, take issue both with the historical parallel,<sup>49</sup> as well as with the ideological interpretation of contemporary Soviet policy.

Finally, some analysts interpret Soviet behavior in the context of a perceived desire to gain control over the Persian Gulf oil sources, as well as establish control over the petroleum transit routes and thereby hold hostage a resource vital to many Western states.<sup>50</sup> In this context, some analysts stress what many project as a coming Soviet oil shortage.<sup>51</sup> Here, as will be

further discussed, many observers question the Soviet capacity to achieve this goal.

Notwithstanding differences of opinion concerning the validity of these interpretations, most analysts agree that the Soviet Union and the United States will continue to compete with each other for influence throughout the basin for the foreseeable future. Indeed, because of the politico-economic instabilities which presently characterize most of the states of the basin, the opportunities for "Soviet penetration either directly or via revolutionary groups" exist.<sup>52</sup> Many scholars and policymakers accept the analogy that Moscow "is prepared to push on every door to see if it will open easily." When they sense little or no counterpressure, they press on; conversely, when counterpressure is present, they retreat and move on to the next door. The problem, however, lies in determining "how hard they will push" and "how much resistance they would want to overcome in moving through the door."<sup>53</sup> Some analysts feel that the USSR will tend to move cautiously, engaging in "low-risk" political competition.<sup>54</sup> Others see the Soviets as behaving more aggressively and adopting a more adventurist strategy in pursuing their objectives.

Finally, in addition to Moscow's interest in its own position in the region relative to that of the West, many observers remind us that the Soviets are also interested in "containing" PRC attempts to strengthen its position throughout the Indian Ocean basin. Many claim that the Soviets are attempting to "outflank Peking and shield the Ocean from Chinese incursions." Similarly, others interpret Soviet links with various states in south and southeast Asia as part of a larger effort "to foster self-defense and cooperation against China" under the protection of the USSR. Although agreeing that the Chinese factor is an element in Soviet interest in the Indian Ocean basin, most observers appear to agree with Dr. Cottrell who commented that "this is surely secondary to their other aims."<sup>55</sup> In short, while there tend to be differences as to the relative weight assigned to the various component parts, most Western scholars agree that the Soviets have a variety of political and economic interests in the Indian Ocean area.

Consequently, they argue that, in addition to deploying Soviet naval forces in the basin to help promote the USSR's military strategic security and protect Soviet lines of communication which pass through the region, the Kremlin also hopes to use its naval power in the basin in order to help promote its political and economic regional interests. Drawing upon the propositions set forth earlier regarding the traditional role played by seapower in shaping the political and economic development of the littoral countries, some analysts feel that the Kremlin leaders seek to display Soviet power in terms which are readily comprehensible to the littoral peoples and especially the regional political leaders. In any case, most Western observers seem to agree with Professor Smolansky's observation that the Soviet decision to deploy

naval forces in the Indian Ocean was based, in part, upon a desire to demonstrate "Moscow's status as a superpower with genuinely global interests and the ability to protect them."<sup>56</sup>

More specifically, Soviet naval forces are said to play a variety of political and economic missions in the basin. For example, Soviet naval forces assist in intelligence gathering operations, as well as in the recovery of space vehicles. They also provide a measure of support and protection for Soviet fishing trawlers and merchant ships operating in the basin.<sup>57</sup>

In addition, the Soviet naval presence provides a symbolic challenge to what has been, since the 16th century, a Western dominated ocean. In this way, Moscow may be attempting to assert a claim to participation in any international or regional efforts to determine the future political directions of the region. Indeed, some observers have raised the possibility that the Soviet Union could potentially offer its naval forces in the service of the UN resolutions, with the side effect of gaining still further respectability among the littoral states. Equally important, Soviet naval forces provide a symbolic reminder to the littoral states that the USSR has an interest in their activities and empathy for their problems.<sup>58</sup> In this context, Soviet naval forces have occasionally assisted certain littoral countries in performing maritime oriented tasks, such as the mine-clearing operations conducted for Bangladesh during the early 1970s.<sup>59</sup>

Beyond this, the Soviets have apparently deployed their naval vessels in the area in order to deter other external powers, especially the United States, as well as the West's regional associates from intervening in the domestic affairs of the Indian Ocean states when developments within these countries are taking a direction which accords with Soviet interests. Similarly, the Soviet Indian Ocean squadron appears also to be designed to deter unwanted intervention by Western or pro-Western littoral states in regional confrontations involving one or several littoral countries.<sup>60</sup>

Some observers, however, feel that the Soviet Navy is also deployed in the Indian Ocean in order to influence the domestic and foreign policies of the littoral governments along lines desired by the Kremlin, especially at times of crisis or decision. More specifically, some feel that the Soviets are prepared to use naval power to demonstrate support for and perhaps directly intervene on behalf of friendly governments in the basin.<sup>61</sup> In addition, some argue that Moscow also seeks to capitalize upon regional instability by using Soviet naval forces in support of pro-Soviet national liberation forces.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, some feel that the Kremlin leaders want to be in a position to use their naval power to intervene in regional hostilities, irrespective of whether there is a prospect of Western intervention or not, when to do so would coincide with Soviet interests.<sup>63</sup> Finally, several Western writers suggest that the USSR might attempt to use its naval power to interrupt the flow of strategic materials, especially petroleum,

to the Western industrialized powers, either at source or in transit, or both.<sup>64</sup>

Several scholars, however, have expressed reservations regarding the Soviet capacity to perform these last two missions. For example, assessing the prospects of a Soviet attempt to cut the oil flow, Professor Smolansky observed that, "the prospect of controlling the flow of petroleum to some of the major allies of the United States would no doubt have an enormous appeal to Soviet leaders were it easily attainable." He and several other analysts, however, raise a variety of questions concerning the feasibility of attaining this alleged objective.<sup>65</sup>

Discussing the possibility of a Soviet military seizure of the oilfields of the Persian Gulf in order to compensate for domestic shortages, Dr. Jukes observed that this scenario "rests on an implicit predatoriness of the Soviet Union for which there is no evidence in Soviet political or military doctrine, nor very much historical Soviet behavior with regard either to the Middle East area or to other strategic raw materials (e.g., rubber) in which the Soviet Union is deficient." Dr. Jukes and others also assert that even if the Soviets did undertake such an operation, there would be enormous risks of indigenous resistance and sabotage to the local oil facilities. Moreover, as Dr. Smolansky observed, "Moscow must be perfectly aware of the fact that Washington would not tolerate a Soviet takeover of the Middle Eastern oilfields and that no prize, Middle East or otherwise is worth a nuclear holocaust."<sup>66</sup>

Similarly, many scholars have cast doubt on the USSR's ability to sever the maritime transit routes through the Indian Ocean. First, they suggest that the size of the Soviet naval squadron would have to be considerably increased from its present size in order to give the Soviets clear command of the seas. Moreover, skeptics contend that any Soviet effort to interfere with Indian Ocean shipping generally, and the oil flow specifically, would alienate both the oil producing states, as well as those Third World states dependent upon Persian Gulf oil for their own consumption. Finally, most significant of all, such an initiative would undoubtedly be interpreted as an act of war by the Western industrial powers.<sup>67</sup>

Many writers, of course, argue that in a general war between the USSR and the United States, the Soviet Navy would attempt to sever the West's maritime links with the Indian Ocean, and especially the Persian Gulf. Even here, however, a number of analysts have expressed reservations and have pointed out that the USSR would experience problems in attempting to cut the sea lanes. For example, it is unlikely that Soviet surface ships would be able to play an important role given the improved surveillance and communications technology available to the Western navies. In this context, "the life expectation of the surface-ship component of the Soviet Indian Ocean force would be measured in days rather than in months," and that to be effective, the Western powers would have to be deprived of petroleum for a



prolonged period. Indeed, some are of the opinion that dispersion of Soviet naval forces implied in the commitment of large numbers of combatants into Indian Ocean waters would actually facilitate their early destruction. Thus, many writers conclude that it would be illogical for the Soviets to use their surface vessels in this manner. Submarines, of course, would present a more serious threat to maritime shipping, but limitations as to capacity to carry munitions, etc., would require some form of support to service operations. These support systems would then be targets for counteraction by the West.<sup>68</sup>

Finally, skeptics have argued that none of the chokepoints in the area, except the Suez Canal, constitutes a real bottleneck. Consequently, given the width of the straits in the basin, the sinking of a small number of ships would create a navigational hazard, but a totally effective blockade would require a disproportionately large commitment of Soviet naval vessels in the basin. Thus, given the operational problems and the absence of counterbalancing opportunities in the Indian Ocean, many writers would agree that "a major Soviet submarine effort against Western sea lanes is likely to be mounted nearer to the tankers destinations in Europe and Japan, simply for operating convenience and closeness to bases in Soviet home territory, which are more effectively protected and therefore more likely to continue to function in war."<sup>69</sup>

Of course, Soviet interference with maritime transport routes would inevitably lead to countermeasures directed against Soviet shipping on the high seas. For example, it would not be unreasonable to expect Japan to react defensively to Soviet threats to Japanese maritime lifelines. Japan's location, in turn, would enable it to impede Soviet access into the Pacific Ocean. Similarly, the USSR's merchant and naval operations emanating from the Black and Baltic seas would be vulnerable to European countermeasures. In short, given all these difficulties associated with severing maritime transit routes, many writers have simply discounted the prospect of such a Soviet initiative. In the event of a general war, they contend that Soviet efforts to deprive the West of petroleum would be more effectively accomplished by air and ground strikes at the sources of the oil, and consequently, would not require a Soviet naval presence in the Indian Ocean to perform that mission.<sup>70</sup>

In response, while analysts less sanguine about the Soviet threat to maritime transit routes admit that "the contingency is implausible, at least in the foreseeable future, that the Soviet Union itself might directly undertake hostile operations against vital Western sea lanes," they stress that there is still a threat posed by local radical regimes. Discussing the possible linkages between these regimes and the USSR, Professors Cottrell and Hahn write that, "the Soviet Union could transfer shore guns, missile patrol boats, land-based aircraft, and a variety of other weapons and naval platforms which would threaten Western shipping." Finally, these two scholars are much more reluctant to dismiss the submarine threat, stressing instead that

submarines would be “particularly troublesome” due to “problems of detecting and identifying them and of establishing state accountability after the damage has been done.”<sup>71</sup>

Several Western analysts have also expressed reservations concerning the Soviet capacity to use naval power to intervene in the domestic affairs of the littoral states or regional conflicts between those states. For example, many have noted that, thus far, the Soviets have intervened only in situations in which there was very little prospect of direct military confrontation with the United States generally, and its naval forces particularly. Moreover, the Soviets would need a large naval force, larger than they presently deploy, in order to effectively intervene in most situations. Hence, given the risks of superpower confrontation, operational problems, and the threat that an amphibious operation could be transformed into a protracted involvement, many have concluded that “in the past the Soviet Union has normally not risked sending forces into noncontiguous countries and probably would not do so in an Indian Ocean littoral state.”<sup>72</sup>

Finally, in addition to the USSR’s military-strategic, economic, and political interests in the Indian Ocean basin which help explain the Kremlin’s decision to deploy naval vessels in these waters, several Western analysts have cited one last factor to complete the equation. This is the impact of Soviet domestic politics, particularly the politics of the Soviet military high command. According to this interpretation, the Soviet naval deployment in the Indian Ocean represents an aspect of an effort by the Soviet Navy to expand its mission and, therefore, increase its relative importance in the Soviet defense establishment. Since the death of Mr. Stalin, the Soviet Navy has grown from the maritime adjunct of the Soviet Ground Forces to an important service branch in its own right and a visible, worldwide symbol of Soviet power. In another sense, however, in order to justify the commitment of past defense resources and reinforce arguments that additional resources should be allocated in the future, the Soviet Navy is under obligation to produce tangible results. Consequently, in this sense, investment in the expansion of naval power and the accompanying expansion of both mission and deployment areas, often acquires a momentum of its own. On the other hand, Dr. Jukes reminds us that “however much naval officers might relish the prospect of penetrating new seas, political leaders are bound to look askance at the costs involved and the possible political repercussions.”<sup>73</sup>

## Conclusions

The preceding review of Soviet and American interests in the Indian Ocean basin and the survey of the various missions performed by the respective superpower navies in promoting those interests suggests a number of considerations which must be taken into account in the policy formulation

process. Clearly, neither the regional interests of the two superpowers, nor the missions assigned to their respective naval forces operating in the region are unidimensional. Rather, they represent a complex, mutually reinforcing matrix, only a portion of which can be explained in terms of superpower rivalry. Whether that portion constitutes a majority or minority of the whole depends largely upon the individual analyst's assumptions concerning the degree of aggressiveness inherent in contemporary Soviet foreign policy. Irrespective of the question of proportion, however, superpower rivalry itself does not constitute the whole and, consequently, a complete interpretation must take into account those elements which transcend that rivalry.

For example, the United States has been, is presently, and is likely to continue to be interested in secure access to strategic materials and regional commercial opportunities, as well as guaranteeing the physical safety of its citizens living and traveling in the area. Moreover, it is concerned with the freedom of the maritime transit routes which traverse the basin. Finally, it is concerned with insuring the protection of the human rights and national self-determination of the littoral peoples. Obviously, challenges to these American interests may, in individual situations, be inspired by Moscow, but to interpret all challenges to these interests as being solely the result of Moscow's machinations would be erroneous. Many regional events, ranging from the Kurdish uprising in northern Iraq, to the fall of the Iranian monarchy, to the periodic hostilities between Iran and Iraq, have been the products of factors indigenous to the regional and local context and are only marginally attributable to Soviet activities. Challenges to American interests, such as these, would arise irrespective of whether or not the USSR maintained a regional presence. Conversely, the Soviet Union remains particularly alert to Chinese activity in the basin and is likely to continue to do so regardless of the nature and scope of an American presence.

Finally, American interests in maintaining reliable communications links throughout the area and in supporting scientific-technical activities have little to do with superpower rivalry. Similarly, Soviet interests in regional fishing, utilization of the basin for scientific research and as a possible site for the recovery of space vehicles, as well as utilization of the ocean's maritime transit routes as an alternative link between the European and Asiatic portions of the USSR, are equally independent of Soviet-American relations. In short, to overemphasize any single interest, or even cluster of interests to the exclusion of the others in assessing the regional policies of either of the two superpowers would be to oversimplify what is, in reality, a very complex picture. Such an error, in turn, is likely to yield unrealistic strategy recommendations. Instead, all dimensions of Soviet and American interests must be taken into account and then juxtaposed against state capabilities to fulfill those interests. These factors, in turn, must be framed against the perceptions, interests, and objectives of the littoral states and the various

factional groups within those states. Only then can analysts prescribe viable strategy options for the United States in such a complex and diverse area as the Indian Ocean region.

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64. Millar, *Soviet Policies in the Indian Ocean Area*, p. 20; Coye, p. 41; Cottrell and Burrell, *Iran, the Arabian Peninsula and the Indian Ocean*, pp. 9, 34, 37; Harrigan, p. 19; O'Connor and Prokofieff, p. 487; Vali, p. 181.

65. Smolansky, p. 349.  
66. *Ibid*; Jukes, "Soviet Naval Policy in the Indian Ocean," pp. 178, 180-181; Alford, p. 146.  
67. *Ibid*; Millar, *Soviet Policies in the Indian Ocean*, pp. 14-15; Wriggins, "Heading Off a New Arms Race," p. 10; Wriggins, "U.S. Interests in the Indian Ocean," p. 369; Jukes, "The Soviet Union and the Indian Ocean," p. 373; Jukes, *The Indian Ocean in Soviet Naval Policy*, p. 21; Vali, p. 181; Bezboruah, pp. 39-40, 228; Tahtinen, pp. 16, 42-43; Ramazani, p. 11.  
68. Towle, *Naval Power in the Indian Ocean*, p. 34; Jukes, "Soviet Naval Policy in the Indian Ocean," p. 182.  
69. Jukes, "Soviet Naval Policy in the Indian Ocean," p. 182; Jukes, *The Indian Ocean in Soviet Naval Policy*, p. 21.  
70. Jukes, "Soviet Naval Policy in the Indian Ocean," p. 181; Tahtinen, p. 43; Vali, p. 186; Wriggins, "Heading Off a New Arms Race," p. 10; Wriggins, "U.S. Interests in the Indian Ocean," p. 10.  
71. Cottrell and Hahn, p. 33.  
72. Tahtinen, p. 16; Towle, *Naval Power in the Indian Ocean*, pp. 28-29; Kelly and Peterson, p. 18.  
73. Smolansky, p. 343-346; Jukes, "The Soviet Union and the Indian Ocean," p. 372; Jukes, *The Indian Ocean in Soviet Naval Policy*, p. 11; Adie, p. 20; Ghebbardt, p. 673.

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### Operational Competence

Historians have tended to explain the German victories in the first years of the war as the result of operational and strategic factors. What they have generally overlooked are the doctrinal, training, and organizational elements that contributed to the victories; in other words, they have rarely addressed the issue of German military competence . . . .

The critical element in the German evaluation process was the system of after-action reports. Nearly all military organizations use similar systems, but German reporting methods were unique because they worked. Unlike many armies where the reporting system is distorted by what commanders wish to hear, the German system was both highly critical and honest within tactical operational spheres. The higher the headquarters, the more demanding and dissatisfied were commanders with operational performances . . . . This willingness to criticize itself was to be a major factor in the German army's high level of competence throughout the Second World War.

Williamson Murray's  
*The Change in the European Balance  
of Power, 1938-1939.*