

MILITARISATION OF THE INDIAN OCEAN - A THREAT TO THE LITTORAL AND HINTERLAND NATIONS**

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INTRODUCTION

The advent, in increasing the numbers of the armed military vessels of the United States of America and the U.S.S.R. into the Indian Ocean since the sixties, has been viewed by the people in the region as a threat not only to peace but also to the independence and sovereignty of the nations of the region. For nearly five centuries the peoples of the Indian Ocean region were dominated and exploited by European empires built on maritime power. This historical experience has taught many lessons which are now embedded in the cultural parlance of the people. The intrusion of the superpowers is reminiscent of the natural wisdom of the Laotian people, who have a saying "When buffaloes fight, it is the grass underneath which is damaged".

There was a time when the Great Powers had paraded as protectors and guarantors of a dubious stability and order in the world. The time came, however, when they became the main source of raising insecurity and impoverishment and their behaviour gave the impression that they were playing with the fate of nations and of all mankind. Their political acts of aggression against weaker and smaller countries discredited and demolished earlier myths about their so called reasonableness and wisdom. Today when the Big Powers make demands, even if they are clothed in sweet words, the people will tend to react like the farmer, who, even when he sees a friendly looking fox invest in an extra lock for the chicken door.

The age of obeisance to Big Powers is now over. Events in Indochina put paid to that pattern. The victory of the people of Vietnam and Kampuchea against the massive firepower of American imperialism will surely emerge as a major historical divide between the post war period and the advent of new era, which will clearly be marked by colossal shifts in the balance of world

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power. This historic victory will probably be seen as final proof of Western imperialism's failure to halt the evolution of indigenous social forces. In this sense, the victories in Indochina are not events but rather the summation of the historical process of man's liberation from outmoded systems and oppressive relationships. The attempts by the superpowers to create zones of influence in defence of their so-called vital interests in the Indian Ocean must, necessarily be seen in this historical backdrop for it must remain a failure of the capitalists need to defend markets and sources of raw materials.

THE LIMITS OF THE OCEAN

According to the Report of the Ad hoc Committee of the United Nations of the Indian Ocean there are 36 littoral and immediate hinterland countries of the Indian Ocean.¹ Time and again these countries have received the support of the majority of the nations of the world in their desire to establish a zone of peace in the Indian Ocean. At the 1974 voting in the United Nations 103 states voted for the Peace Zone proposal and 26 abstained. The two superpowers have cynically disregarded these views and continued with their expansion of military might in the Indian Ocean. They have come up with all kinds of arguments ranging from the power vacuum theory to the theory of the freedom of the high seas in International Law in defence of their actions. They have made promises that they will not interfere like the preceding European powers. Such guarantees are naturally treated with distrust for in their historical memory the Afro-Asian people have learnt that they will be the losers in such arrangements. A long time ago a King of Sri Lanka accepted the help of the Dutch in order to oust the Portuguese. The Dutch who came to help stayed and went on "helping" themselves for another 150 years. The people even today have a saying to illustrate this experience. They say it was "like giving ginger in exchange for pepper".

The Indian Ocean comprises 17 million square miles and its littoral countries contain one fourth of the world's population. A report submitted by a Committee of Experts to the U.N. Secretary-General in May 1974 seems to have made a constructive effort to draw the boundaries of the Ocean. In the South West it suggests that the meridian of Cape Agulhas (20° OE) should be the dividing line between the Atlantic and the Indian Oceans. In

the South East it suggests the meridian of the South East Cape of Tasmania (147° OE) as the dividing line between the Pacific and the Indian Oceans. To the South, 60° S South latitude as the dividing line between the Atlantic and the Indian Oceans. The northern part needs no demarcation.² Accepting the definition, it is clear that apart from the massive resources of the sea and the seabed the area contains fabulous wealth - the mineral wealth of the East African coast, the oil of the Arabian and the Persian gulfs, the mineral and manpower resources of South Asia, the riches of the Indonesian archipelago and the riches of Australia. Speaking merely of one of these areas in 1967 former President Nixon said, "with its 100 million people and its 3,000 mile arc of islands containing the regions' richest hoard of natural resources, Indonesia constitutes the greatest prize in the South East Asian area". Seen in this context, the destruction and defoliation of Vietnam was in fact an attempt to control South East Asian rubber, oil, tin, tungsten and timber by drawing a northern boundary denoting a zone of influence.

HISTORY

Ever since Vasco da Gama came to Calicut in 1498 in search of "Christians and spices" the Indian Ocean has been under European hegemony. Vasco da Gama came at a time when the Chinese and Arabs were already in decline. The western part of the ocean had for centuries before been used by the Phoenecians, Persians, the Greeks, the Romans and the Arabs. The eastern seas had come under the sway of the Tamil kingdoms of South India, the Sir Vijayans and Sumatra and the Kalinga of Java. They were replaced between the 10th and 15th centuries by the Malay power of the Madjapahit kingdoms, in turn to be replaced by the Chinese. During the sixteenth century the Portuguese held a semblance of power in the region, but were unable to control the seagoing tradition of the East African, Persian gulf and Indian traders. The Dutch having been barred from the spice trade in Lisbon came eastwards and they in turn were replaced by the British. Throughout the 200 years or so of British domination of the Indian Ocean, they were in competition with the French and had to concede various ports and areas to them chiefly Reunion, Port Louis, Pondicherry and Vietnam. But after Clive's success in Bengal, the establishment of Singapore by Raffles and the British control of the Suez under Disraeli, the Indian Ocean became for all intents and purposes a "British Lake".

Theories in Support of Military Presence

The power vacuum theory referred to earlier suggests that the nations of Asia and Africa bordering the Indian Ocean are economically impoverished and politically so vulnerable as to be unable to defend themselves. Apart from the arrogance of power implicit in the concept it also makes certain assumptions. First, that it is the duty of the Big Powers to guard the interests of the small powers. History is replete with instances which show that the guardsman is quickly transformed into thief. Second, it correctly assumes that if one superpower delays in making its presence felt the other gains a foothold. In pursuance of this goal, the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R. are competing for the Indian Ocean as a zone of influence to replace the British who withdrew from the east to Suez. Third, the theory assumes that in the event of a conflict among the regional powers, the superpowers can act as arbitrators. Finally, implicit in the power vacuum theory is the intention to influence domestic policies in littoral countries, so as to bring them in line with the "vital interests" of one or other power. This blatant imperialist theory has been well articulated by the idea an Indian writer has stated that the Soviet Union's "rejection of the power vacuum theory is more an exercise in semantics rather than a reliable guide to its actions... although their modes of operation differ, in essential respects the policy objectives of the two powers seem to be similar."⁴ Despite the unanimous opposition from the Afro-Asian countries, Washington and Moscow have continued their policies of expansion in the Indian Ocean whilst accusing each other of generating tension and conflict.

The other theory put forward by the Big Powers is to use the argument that the international law of the sea does not permit the establishment of such a Peace Zone in the high seas. The Geneva Convention of 1958 which provides the basis of the international law of the sea makes little or no restraint on the high seas and its uses for military purposes. This outdated legal regime based on colonialism and imperialism grants the freedom of the high seas to all countries and that freedom includes military use by any country. It is the equality of the elephant among the chickens. The law of the sea was evolved by the colonial powers who restricted the territorial sea to three miles and obtained for themselves the complete freedom to do what they pleased beyond these limits. It is this kind of freedom which has been rejected in total by the non-aligned countries and

the "group of 77". The latter have demanded exclusive national jurisdiction of 200 miles and the establishment of a new regime protecting the reasonable economic rights of all states big or small. The Non-Aligned Countries have resolved that "the new rules of the law of the sea must effectively contribute to the elimination of threats to the security of states and ensure respect for their sovereignty and territorial integrity". The proposal of the majority of the countries of the world to establish this civilised legal regime has been rejected by both the superpowers. It is not surprising that they have taken this position in view of the fact that the resources of the sea bed and subsoil are now within the reach of mankind through technological advances and they are eager to gain control of this wealth for themselves. For instance, it is estimated that by 2,000 A.D. nearly 50 per cent of the world's oil, will be tapped from the sea bed. In addition to the oil there are on the sea bed polymetallic nodules containing manganese, cobalt and other minerals essential for industrial use. The resources of the sea bed and the subsoil must be equitably distributed on the basis of national jurisdiction rather than on the availability of technological know how and it is for control over this wealth that the superpowers speak of retaining the outdated regime of the so-called "freedom of the high seas". For instance, in an age when the majority of the people of the world are undergoing severe hardship for want of food a few countries dominate the fisheries of the world. In 1973 for instance Japan's fisheries catch amount to 24,000 million pounds and the U.S.S.R. catch amounted to nearly 20,000 million pounds. These two countries lead the world's fisheries table and nearly the entirety of their catch is taken outside their territorial waters. It is necessary, therefore, to take cognisance of these economic factors before assessing the value of these theories and legalities.

Economics of the Indian Ocean

It is not possible here to attempt a comprehensive survey of the mineral and other wealth of the Indian Ocean region. Instead we shall make some peripheral references to these resources, to show that the superpower rivalry in the ocean is primarily a result of not just political factors, but the establishment of relationships and zones of influence that will grant access to the raw material producing countries. The plans for the control of the wealth of this region at least on the part of the United States were

laid a long time ago. Lawrence H. Shoup in a recent article called "Shaping the Post War World - The Council of Foreign Relations and the United States war aims during World War II", has pointed out that "the present international and economic order resulted in large part from the Second World War. During the 1939-44 period, the powerful private New York-based organisation known as the Council on Foreign Relations brought together a group of elite businessmen, academics, lawyers, journalists and government officials to do post-war planning. These men in collaboration with the government, worked out an expansionistic conception of the national interest and war aims of the United States. This involved, first of all, a formulation of the minimum territorial living space necessary for the existing American economy and society, called the 'Grand Area'. Secondly, it required the delimitation of the twin threats to this 'Grand Area' - the ambitions of Imperial Japan and Nazi Germany. Finally, during the mid-1941 to mid-1944 period, the Council and government expanded the 'Grand Area' to include the entire world and developed the international institutions - International Monetary Fund, World Bank and United Nations - needed to integrate the planet under American domination."⁵

Among the countries within the capitalist system the most dependent on raw material from outside its territory is Japan. Japan imports all its oil, 85 per cent of iron ore and 72 per cent of its copper. As we shall see later the Washington-Tokyo axis is of primary importance for the continuation of the world capitalist system itself. Most of Japan's raw material imports come from the Indian Ocean region. Similarly the United States imports most of its rubber, tin and timber from the region. Though U.S. dependency on oil from the Middle East is at present small, it has massive investments in Middle Eastern oil. This investment alone brings back to the United States an annual sum of \$1,500 million which amounts to one half of the annual U.S. balance of payments deficit. In addition, American and European capitalism has massive investments in the entire region, particularly in the processing zones set up in Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan and South Korea. Approximately 15 million barrels of oil per day leaves the Persian gulf for the Western world. Over 50 per cent of Europe's energy resources come from the Middle East. American investments in Indonesian oil results in its controlling 90 per cent of the Indonesian oil industry. These investments reflect the fact that the United States is dependent for a third of its essential minerals on the Third World and this dependency is escalating. For instance, the eight billion dollar U.S. oil gap in 1970 is expected to reach 64 billion dollars in the year two thousand on present levels of

consumption. Admiral Moorer, Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chief of Staff in a speech he made before the U.S. Navy League Conference to explain how U.S. military power is necessary to safeguard future supplies of these key materials, said "a report by the Secretary of the Interior relates that the U.S. is now almost completely dependant on foreign sources for 22 of the 74 non-energy mineral commodities considered essential for a modern industrial state. In 1971 this country imported about 20 per cent of its total mineral requirements and consumed about 35 per cent of the world's mineral product. But by the end of the century it is estimated that over half of our primary raw materials demand will have to be met from abroad.

"We are involved worldwide because we have interests worldwide - interests that involve all elements of our national power - political, economic and military. Our interests do not always coincide with the interests of the nations and therein lies a possible source of tension and possible confrontation. (our emphasis)

"The successes thus far achieved through negotiations can be attributed, of course, to a willingness of the negotiating parties to accommodate conflicting interests". Admiral Moorer continued, "But let there be no mistake, such willingness is significantly related to the relative bargaining power of the parties concerned. And in those negotiations related to military arms, bargaining power is synonymous with military strength."⁶

Admiral Moorer is referring to the known reserves of 18 billion barrels of oil and the 8 trillion cubic feet of gas in Asia, that four countries in the region alone namely, Indonesia, Phillippines, Malaysia and Thailand produce 85 per cent of the world's rubber, 98 per cent of albaca, 84 per cent coconut, 60 per cent of the tin and 60 per cent of the world's hard wood and spices, the oil wealth of the Middle East and the riches of the African soil.

This is hardly the place to enumerate the massive wealth of the African continent bordering the Indian Ocean, for it will be dealt with elsewhere. I shall merely make reference to the fact that British investments in South Africa alone amount to over £1,200 million whilst the Americans share is \$601 million. South Africa's trade with Asia and Oceania amount to nearly \$800 million in 1969, and in the same year the Japanese traded with South Africa to the tune of \$475 million. The U.S.S.R's trade with Africa jumped from \$300 million in 1960 to \$617 million in 1968 and this is a sufficient basis for the increasing interest of the Soviet Union in the region. The great victory of the Mozambican people has removed some of the tensions of power politics from the

Indian Ocean littoral of Africa, but sadly the fate of the people of South Africa, Rhodesia and Angola is still within the clutches of Big Power manipulation. Meanwhile, it has been pointed out as early as 1969 that the South Atlantic Treaty Organisation encompassing Brazil and Argentina, Australia, South Africa, Rhodesia and the western imperialist powers is a part of the Southern defence line planned to preserve the perimeter of the white world against the National Liberation Movement.⁷ Such military pacts are motivated by the desire to control the mineral and manpower wealth and these plans exclude in their calculations, the peoples of the region. Throughout history, the Big Powers in their drive to retain their raw material resources and markets have not been reluctant to forment racial, tribal or ethnic differences to gain their ends. It is such interference that is feared and resented for it leads to in one way or the other subversion of the national independence and sovereignty.

Communications

The trade in this wealth results in a great deal of shipping in the Indian Ocean. Among the major routes that cross the ocean are Europe - Far East, Europe - India, Europe - Australia, U.S. - India, Europe - Middle East and Europe - Africa, 80 per cent of the shipping in the Indian Ocean fly the flags of NATO countries and most of the rest is Japanese. The shipping trade is controlled by cartels and shipping conferences in which the littoral and hinterland countries have little say. The cartels combat competition from tramp steamers and vessels of non-members and keep the freight rates artificially high. This control over merchant shipping is strengthened by the presence of the military vessels.⁸

Power Politics and Military Development

The competition between the super powers and the increasing military escalation has been explained thus by Professor Howard Wriggins from the American perspective.

"The substantial worldwide naval building of the U.S.S.R. requires a measured response on Washington's part to sustain a modern mobile naval capability generally, As far as the Indian Ocean is concerned, however, U.S. developments should not now be increased there. The United States should make clear the possibility that it might do so if there is a rapid and sustained Soviet buildup that appears to threaten either direct political interventions

that could become cumulatively significant to U.S. interests or to the safety of the sea lanes and other interests important to Western Europe, Japan and Australia".⁹

Bases

Though neither superpower is a littoral state of the Indian Ocean or has direct access to it, they have bases and other facilities in addition to deploying military vessels. Despite the modern form it takes, this development smacks off the old gunboat diplomacy. Whilst the United States has its Polaris and Poseidon missiles placed around the Indian Ocean, the U.S.S.R. has deployed its underwater nuclear delivery system and its hunter killer submarines. The United States has based in Asmara, Diego Garcia, the North West Cape of Australia and Masirah. It also has access to British and Australian facilities in addition to its network in the far east ranging through the Philippines, Thailand, Taiwan, Japan and Okinawa. The U.S.S.R. is reported to have facilities in Berbera, Mogadiscio, Socotra, Hodeida, Aden, Visakhapatnam, Port Blaire, Umm Qasr. In addition to this the French have facilities in Djibouti, Reunion, Mayotte and Diego Suarez. The British have access to Masirah, Gan, Singapore and despite recent developments probably to Simonstown and Durban. Such bases are planned to give logistic support to their rambling military fleets. The superpowers also tend to develop relations with the littoral countries, making use of their economic backwardness. The development of relationship with one power results in the competing interests of the other and has the natural effect of importing tensions to the region.

Weaponry

On 1/1/1972 the United States Department of Defence transferred operational jurisdiction over the Indian Ocean from its European Command to its Pacific Command, (PACOM) symbolising linkages between the Western Pacific, South Asia and the Middle East and facilitating the expansion of United States naval power into the Indian Ocean. The Pacific Command covers approximately 94 million square miles. The United States Pacific Fleet consists of 286 war ships (including seven aircraft carriers, 265,000 sailors and 2,100 war planes). The transfer of power to the Pacific Command signifies the importance of the Pacific Basin to the United States. In the words of Admiral Moorer "the United States has important interests in the area, even beyond the self-evident need for access to oil and mineral resources. We must demonstrate to both allies

and would-be adversaries U.S. resolve to deter threats to the vital sea lanes of communication in the area."¹⁰ The Pacific Basin concept has been vital to U.S. businessmen and the Indian Ocean has been described as the "heartland of the world". In protecting this Basin for penetration by Western capitalism, the objectives have not changed. The objectives remain the containment of the People's Republic of China, the defeat of national liberation movements and the restoration of Japanese capitalism. As at 1974 the U.S. fielded 158,000 troops in Asia but conscious of the fact that the American public will no longer tolerate warfare based on ground troops, the strategy has changed to naval deployment using the various bases and strategic islands for logistic support. It is in this context that the former Defence Secretary, Schlesinger, threatened the developing solidarity of the Third World and advocated the "carrot and stick" policy in future for these countries. It is possible that with the increasing development of the Washington-Tokyo axis and Japan's continuing loyalty to the world's capitalist system, that the United States may delegate to Japan a policing role over the Indian Ocean region by handing over the bases in Yokuseka, Sasebo, Iawkuni, Yokita and Yokohama to Japan whilst giving them facilities in other U.S. bases in the Far East and the Indian Ocean.

Both the Americans and the Russians have regularly conducted naval operations in the Indian Ocean. The Soviet Union in May 1975 massed 420 ships in a global naval exercise and has nearly 50 ships permanently in the Mediterranean. The U.S. Sixth fleet resides in the Mediterranean while its Seventh Fleet is based in Japan. The rivalry between the superpowers has resulted in their spending approximately \$7,000 million each year on the military, and this is despite detente and Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT). In space every year sees an escalation of the space race and it has been estimated that to date the United States has launched nearly 800 spacecraft whilst the U.S.S.R. has launched nearly 900. Despite the beautifully orchestrated symphony of peace and harmony at Helsinki and the talk of arms limitation and detente the arms build up goes on. The last time the world's powers met to speak of peace with the same grandeur was in Vienna in 1815. For 100 years after Vienna there was peace in Europe but it was a strange kind of peace for this was the age of imperialism when these same powers gobbled up Third World causing death and destruction in their trail. It is natural, therefore, for the littoral countries of the Indian Ocean to view these developments with cynicism and disregard. Despite the call by the Third World countries for nuclear

weapon free zone in South Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Latin America and the Indian Ocean the response has been to ignore these demands. As far as the Indian Ocean is concerned the following figures are self explanatory.¹¹

	Ship-Days		Port-Calls	
	1968	1973	1968	1973
U.S.S.R.	1,760	8,543	42	153
United States	1,688	2,154	71	115

The Afro-Asian Response and the Peace Zone Concept

The response of the Afro-Asian countries to these developments has been one of consistent opposition. In 1964 at the Second Non-Aligned conference in Cairo they called unanimously for denuclearisation of the oceans. At Lusaka in 1970 the Non-Aligned Nations called upon "all states to consider and respect the Indian Ocean as a zone of peace from which great power rivalry and competition, either army navy or airforce bases are excluded. The area should be free also of nuclear weapons". At the Commonwealth Prime Minister's Conference in Singapore in 1971, Sri Lanka circulated a paper which carried this statement: "Recent reports point to an increasing naval presence of the Soviet and U.S. naval fleets in the Indian Ocean. It would also appear that these fleets carrying nuclear capability are becoming part of the strategic defence system of world power. Another disturbing development is the militarisation of the Indian Ocean. The same report indicates that various land based facilities are being utilised to facilitate operation of these fleets."

The resolution calling for the peace zone was placed on the agenda of the United Nations General Assembly at its 26th session and the Sri Lanka's request was co-sponsored by Tanzania. The preamble to the resolution refers to the "determination of the peoples of the littoral and hinterland states of the Indian Ocean to preserve their independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity and to resolve their political, economic and social problems under conditions of peace and tranquility". Presumably the reference here is to peace in the international context but be that as it may the resolution also calls for a freeze on military competition, withdrawal from bases, the removal of nuclear weapons and the termination of manifestations of rivalry between the superpowers. The Non-aligned countries have made a specific demand to prohibit the use of the Indian Ocean for "any threat or use of force" against a regional country. Both the

U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R. have responded by stating that the peace zone concept must not interfere with the international law of the sea. The United States has specifically opposed any attempt by regional groups of countries to change the law of the sea unilaterally. As we have said earlier it is worth remembering that the law of the sea was not made by the Third World countries nor did they take part in the formulation of these laws. These laws did not descend from heaven, they were imposed on the world by the Big Powers in pursuit of their interest and, therefore, do not have eternal sanctity.

There has been a tendency on the part of academics of the Western world to treat the Indian Ocean Peace Zone proposals as being idealistic. For that matter most proposals by the weak Third World countries are dismissed on these grounds. But, it is worth remembering that, "Each idea not yet realised curiously resembles a utopia". On the other hand, the increasing solidarity of the Third World countries through their policy of non-alignment it pursued to its logical end with determination, particularly by a refusal to offer bases and other facilities will help the Indian Ocean Peace Zone proposal to descend from this alleged idealism to a hard reality with which the superpowers will have to deal with, for after all the raw materials and future markets are in our part of the world and they need us perhaps more than we need them.

FOOTNOTES:

1. See U.N. General Assembly Official Records, Twenty-eighth Session, Supplement No. 29 (A/9029), pp. 6-7.
2. See U.N. General Assembly, A/AC-159/1, May 3, 1974, Annex IV, p. 1.
3. Foreign Affairs, October 1967, quoted in Caldwell, "South East Asia 30 Years On", Social Scientists Vol. 38 September 1975, p. 10 Trivandrum, India.
4. Missra, K.P. "International Politics in the Indian Ocean", Orbis, Vol. XVIII No. 4, Fletcher School of Law & Diplomacy, Tufts University, U.S.A. p. 1090.
5. Quoted in Caldwell, *ibid* p. 7.
6. See Pacific Imperialism Notebook, August, 1973 pp. 175-6.
7. Abdul S. Minty, South Africa's Defence Strategy, Anti-Apartheid Movement London, pp. 20-22.
8. See Economist Intelligence Study Vol. 3, Statistical Survey of Western European Maritime Trade.

9. Howard Wriggins, "U.S. Interests in the Indian Ocean", p. 375 in Cottrell and Burrele, The Indian Ocean: Its Political Economic and Military Importance, N.Y. 1972. This collection is the most comprehensive so far published on the Indian Ocean question.
10. For a full description see, Klare, "From Yokosuka to Diego Garcia: US Naval/Island Strategy in Asia, "Race and Class Vol. XVI No. 4 pp. 359 et seq.
11. See Misra, Ibid, p. 1101.

TANZANIA NOTES AND RECORDS

special issue no. 83:

THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT IN TANZANIA

now in press

Published by:

The Tanzania Society
P.O. Box 511
Dar es Salaam