

OCI No. 0427/74
February 25, 1974

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT : Soviet Propaganda on US Naval Activity and
Plans for the Indian Ocean

Summary

There has been little authoritative Soviet comment-- public or private--on US activity and plans for the Indian Ocean. This is in keeping with past Soviet practice on this issue. Such comment as there has been has not surprisingly played up the opposition of the littoral countries, and has expressed the USSR's concern about what the current US activity portends for the future. In the process, Soviet media have expressed fresh interest in the Indian Ocean zone of peace idea (IOZP). If this treatment of the IOZP represents anything more than a short-term attempt to win propaganda points vis-a-vis the US, some more authoritative comment is likely. Even this, however, will not really resolve the problem of how to head off the increase in US naval activity the USSR expects to take place as a result of the Diego Garcia decision. This would require a much more specific agreement on great power naval limitations.

US Deployments After the Middle East War

Soviet propaganda on the movement of the US carrier task group into the Indian Ocean last fall at first did nothing more than replay comments from the littoral countries opposed to the move. The Soviets then described the move as a threat to the Arabs, inconsistent with efforts to achieve a Middle East peace settlement, and as a threat to the littoral states. The Soviets contrasted US behavior with their own support for the IOZP idea and

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Brezhnev's own amorphous Asian collective security idea. None of this was very exceptional, nor did it provide any hint that Moscow was taking a fresh look at the problem of future US naval deployment in the Indian Ocean.

Great Power Naval Limitations

It was not until December, after Secretary Schlesinger's announcement that the US planned to deploy ships more frequently in the Indian Ocean that Moscow made an authoritative comment, and raised the possibility that they might be interested in doing more than making cheap propaganda points. On December 12, Pravda carried an article which played up the opposition of the littoral countries to the Secretary's announcement and decried the October deployments in terms similar to the earlier routine propaganda. Pravda ended, however, with a statement that fleet maneuvers by countries far from Asian borders in no way contributed to the relaxation of tensions in the area.

This language was reminiscent of the rationale used by Brezhnev in June 1971 when he said publicly that the USSR favored limitations on great power naval deployments far from their own shores. In that statement Brezhnev seemed to be putting on the public record an idea first broached privately by Ambassador Dobrynin in March of 1971. This was that the US and USSR issue a joint declaration that the Indian Ocean should be free of military bases and fleet concentrations. The Dobrynin overture in turn seems to have been in reaction to the announcement in late 1970 that the US was building a communications facility on Diego Garcia.

Efforts by the US to explore Soviet intentions came to naught. Last week a retired Soviet admiral visiting India told an Indian newspaper that the USSR had tried to reach an understanding with the US on the Indian Ocean, but the US was not interested. This is the first reference by a Soviet to the Dobrynin overture in 1971.

The Soviets never seriously followed up on the naval limitation idea, but they have not completely dropped it either. In October 1972, for example, an article in USA reiterated Soviet willingness to discuss "on an equal basis" restricting the cruising areas of the navies of the great powers. In March 1973, another journal

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offered Brezhnev's proposal as an alternative to US plans for Trident and Poseidon.

Diego Garcia

Routine-level propaganda on the recent US-UK announcement regarding Diego Garcia has been similar to that following US deployments in the Indian Ocean last fall. The Soviets have:

- reported comments by littoral countries opposed to the move,
- alleged that the USSR has no bases in the area while the US has many,
- expressed concern that an expanded Diego Garcia will be used to support increased US naval deployments, particularly carriers and Polaris submarines,
- attacked the Chinese for allegedly supporting US actions,
- attributed these "aggressive" US moves to the Pentagon and US forces opposed to detente rather than to the Administration itself.
- contrasted US behavior--which is contrary to the "spirit of the times" with Soviet support for Asian collective security and the IZOP.

The propaganda notwithstanding, authoritative comment has been limited on the Diego Garcia base and the question it raises. Pravda and Izvestiya reported the announcement on February 6-7, and Izvestiya cited an Indian press account which charged that Diego Garcia would be used to support Polaris submarines, combat ships, and military aircraft. On February 10, Pravda disingenuously argued that the US could not justify expanding the base on Diego Garcia as a reaction to the Soviet naval presence in the Indian Ocean because the Soviet ships there serves only peaceful purposes. US activity, Pravda charged, was really aimed at the African liberation movements and littoral states trying to increase their economic and political independence. Pravda concluded by noting that the move had aroused fear and concern on

the part of these countries who advocate that the area become a zone of peace. In short, Pravda did not go much beyond the line taken in the routine propaganda.

As befitting a military journal, a Red Star article on February 13 talked about the military consequences of the Diego Garcia base. It stated that the base would service US carriers and nuclear submarines and would effectively link US bases in Africa and the Arab world with those in Southeast Asia and Australia. Red Star dismissed US statements that the decision had been prompted by the advantages the Russians will gain as a result of the reopening of the Suez Canal. It piously proclaimed that the USSR--in contrast to the Pentagon--was working to create a healthier climate in the Indian Ocean basin. As proof, Red Star cited the communique issued at the end of Brezhnev's visit to India in late November when the Soviets agreed to work "toward resolving the question of making the Indian Ocean a zone of peace."

The idea of keeping the Indian Ocean free of the great powers' rivalry has been a pet theme of Sri Lankan Prime Minister Bandaranaike since the early 1960s. It gained considerable support from other Afro-Asian countries after the British announced plans to withdraw their forces east of Suez and after initial Soviet deployments there. The concept is still ill-defined, but it has been endorsed at the last two nonaligned conferences. The UN General Assembly passed a resolution in 1971 proclaiming that the area--"within limits to be determined"--be for all time a zone of peace, and urging the great powers to halt their military escalation and remove their bases and nuclear weapons from the area. Two more UN resolutions have been passed since then, and a committee is studying ways to implement them. As a first project, the committee has decided to prepare a study, due late next month, on the great powers' military presence in the Indian Ocean "in all its aspects."

Until recently, Moscow has been lukewarm to the Indian Ocean zone of peace idea reportedly because of its implications for freedom of navigation. It abstained on all the UN votes. In a speech last November during his visit to India, however, Brezhnev cited the IOZP idea as one of a number of interesting Asian initiatives that could contribute to his own Asian collective security idea. And, as noted above, in the communique issued at the end of the visit, he went a bit further, agreeing to work together with all other interested parties toward making the idea a reality.

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What it Means

Moscow's more positive public line on the IOZP idea may be nothing more than an opportunistic attempt to win points at the expense of the US. Brezhnev's favorable references to the IOZP while in India were surely aimed at this. Moscow may believe that support for IOZP costs the USSR nothing as long as the US continues to oppose it. Furthermore, it gives the USSR an argument to counter protests against its own naval activity in the Indian Ocean. Indeed, Moscow may share US concern about the IOZP's implications for freedom of navigation. In any event, a change in the Soviet attitude will not really be put to the test until the IOZP question again comes to a vote in the UN General Assembly.

Soviet support for the IOZP, however, does not resolve Moscow's problem of how to forestall an anticipated increase in US naval activity in the area. The Soviets will do what they can militarily to counter US deployments, but they cannot match the US without drawing down forces now allocated to higher priority tasks elsewhere. If the Soviets are really interested in limiting Indian Ocean deployments, therefore, they may go beyond the IOZP and raise again in the bilateral context the Brezhnev-Dobrynin concept of 1971.