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[Handwritten signatures]

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E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PFOR, MARR, PARM, IN, US, XO
SUBJECT: The Indian Ocean: An Embassy View

REF: New Delhi 5376 (NOTAL)

SUMMARY: This is a long cable. ^{Try to}~~Put to~~
~~XXXXXX~~ read to the end. What you will find there, after some talk about US interests in the Indian Ocean and Indian concerns, are suggestions about how through political initiatives we might promote our security interests in the area. In essence, ^{we}~~we~~ would like to have a simple consistent, long-range rationale for whatever we are going to do with respect to deployments and basing. ^{Get here.} Something we in the field can count on, can lean on. ^{We would hope for} And more active US participation in molding to our own purposes ongoing discussions about Indian Ocean restraints, limitations, and peace zone. END SUMMARY.

1. Sitting in Delhi, we of course don't have a full picture of where the balance of US interests fall with regard to our military posture in the Indian Ocean: the range of our political, economic, and military objectives toward the Indian Ocean littoral states, the Middle East, China and the USSR. We've not been told. Perhaps we don't really need to know.
2. The US has had ships sailing in the Indian Ocean for years. Why do we just now find it important to build up our facility

on Diego Garcia? Merchant ships have not been interfered with on the high seas except in time of war for decades. Do we really require a substantial naval presence in order to keep the sea lanes open? Do we believe that an over-the-horizon presence of a naval flotilla will significantly change or influence the policies of the oil states of the Middle East? Or India? Do we believe the Soviets intend to use their vessels to threaten the countries of the area, and that we would not have sufficient time to react in their defense unless we have a more regular and systematic presence in the Indian Ocean? Or that a US naval presence is relevant to a Soviet threat to littoral states inherent in the Soviets' geographic propinquity? Is it our assessment that the movement of the Hancock Task Force played a significant role in the Middle East crisis last fall?

3. All these are questions the Indians have asked us, and which we find it difficult if not impossible even to attempt to answer. They all relate to the broad strategic view the US has of this area and how we believe our military resources play a role in influencing policy and events. They are not all questions we would or even should answer if asked. But the answers should be made clear and understandable to all US diplomats if they are to comprehend the well-springs of our policy in this area of the world.

There are ~~three~~ ^{possible} ~~three~~ ^{possible} interests in the Indian Ocean:

(1) free and unimpaired movement for US and allied merchant

ships particularly to the Persian Gulf--and for our naval vessels in moving between oceans; (2) an option to deploy SLBM's in this strategic area; (3) a capability at some point, if we wish, to exert pressure for political/military reasons on some of the countries bordering the ocean and a capability to inhibit the Soviets from doing so. The first interest is clear and unexceptional to India and, we believe, to all the other countries on the Indian Ocean littoral. The second is one of those closet skeletons which many of the littoral countries suspect, which some--including India--fear, and which virtually all will believe to be true regardless of what we may profess in public. The third interest is the one which ^{was} creates the greatest frustration and suspicion in India and whose rationale we, quite frankly, ^{world} find most difficult to explain and justify.

5. India's colonial experience ^{of} ~~was~~ assault from the sea still lingers vividly in Indian minds and was freshly polished by the Enterprise Task Force in 1971. For Indians, aircraft carriers and their entourage mean potential intervention. True, India was more than happy to have a US naval presence in the Bay of Bengal in 1962 when it was being ^{menaced} ~~hit~~ by the Chinese, but precisely for this reason it assumes that a US naval presence in the Indian Ocean is designed to permit the US to threaten to intervene elsewhere--perhaps against India the next time. And the testimony given this spring on the Hill in connection with Diego Garcia encourages this conclusion since it frankly envisages US

[forces functioning as a deterrent with regard to "internal tensions" and "unresolved differences" between neighboring states in the area.

6. Looked at from the vantage point of New Delhi, we conclude that the Indian Government is sincere in its belief that a substantial US military presence in the Indian Ocean area is not in ^{the Indian} ~~the~~ ^{Indian} interest. The presence is directed either at the USSR, in which case the Soviets will certainly build up a counter-force to deal with it, or it is directed at other Afro-Asian states, in which case the Soviets may also become involved. Moreover, the Indians see themselves as big boys on the Indian Ocean littoral and don't want any external powers mucking about in the water to balance off neighbors against one another. They are more suspicious of a US presence than a Soviet presence because they see the Soviets as being on the defense against a potential US SLBM threat in the Indian Ocean and because in the past the Soviets have almost always supported India politically. At the same time, the Indians are wary that a growing US presence could give rise to Soviet pressure for base or port rights, perhaps as a gentle request for a quid pro quo for Soviet help in time of particular Indian economic debility. The Indians are also suspicious that the Chinese, while criticizing the US, have been more energetic in attacking the Soviet presence in the Indian Ocean and may thus be subtly encouraging US moves.

7. The Indian Government has responded to domestic and par-

liamentary pressures--mainly Communist but from within its own ranks as well--by reasonably moderate affirmations of its opposition to the US naval presence and base and by supporting efforts to make the Indian Ocean a Zone of Peace. While moderate, these statements have not been disingenuous. That's what the Indians believe. That's what they're doing. The moderation has been prompted (a) by a desire not to allow Diego Garcia and US naval movement to undermine prospective economic cooperation with the US and (b) by considerable skepticism that the Peace Zone idea will bear fruit. But the Indians have been active--spurring on the ad hoc committee in New York and drumming up support among the littoral nations. On the substance of any Indian Ocean Zone of Peace, the Indians have favored formulations that tend to work against great power activities in the Indian Ocean, but they have been suspicious of and have resisted Sri Lanka's occasional interest in constraints that would foreclose military options for India.

8. Are the Indians playing a Soviet game? Not really. Their interest in campaigning against a US presence in the Indian Ocean happens to parallel the Soviet interest. (Soviet media here have been hammering away at the Diego Garcia threat.) But the Indians are delighted to be able to talk to the Australians, New Zealanders, and others about this issue and, if they came under Soviet pressure, we believe they would cite these consultations and positions taken as reasons for not

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accommodating Soviet demands.

9. The Soviets, whatever their blacker thoughts about the IOZP, appear from our vantage point to have handled the issue rather well. The Brezhnev statement in June 1971 provided a basis for publicly maintaining a positive posture. And the Brezhnev-Gandhi joint declaration in November 1973--affirming a readiness "to participate, together with other states concerned, on an equal basis, in finding a fair solution to the question of making the Indian Ocean a Zone of Peace"--has served the Soviets well. It has been cited here as a clear indication of Soviet cooperativeness--and of course it hasn't cost the Soviets a kopek in terms of restraining their Indian Ocean activities. Such as they are, these activities have continued untrammelled by elaborate public rationales.

10. So much for the past. For the future, it seems to us we need first of all a simple, minimal, and above all consistent long-range rationale for whatever we are going to do with respect to deployments and basing in the Indian Ocean. And a rationale that is accepted and adhered to by all agencies of what is, after all, one US Government. If we know why we need to be in the Indian Ocean, and that tomorrow's reason will be similar to that of today, the US Government can structure a public posture consistent with ~~our~~^{its} intentions and plausible to its own loyal defenders.

11. Second, more serious consideration of how we can

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[promote our interests with respect to the Indian Ocean not simply in terms of one or another naval option but also through political initiatives. The question of Indian Ocean restraints, or limitations, or Zone of Peace is an issue now very much in play, with even such allies as the Australians telling the Soviets to talk to us about it and talking about it themselves with the Indians. And it is an issue that will remain in play and can undercut our objectives, both in terms of international pressures and domestic support at home--particularly if we continue^{an}/aloof hands-off posture.

12. Proposals for Indian Ocean naval restraints and the IOZP, it seems to us, are messy, diffuse, and largely political. They have a lot to do with domestic postures and undercutting the bona fides of opponents. They are not readily susceptible to discrete arms control solutions. The Indian Ocean countries are, after all, a menagerie, not a species, and we suspect it will be difficult to find sufficient common interest among regional countries and outside powers to provide a basis for any generally accepted limitations. But, this is an issue that we should try to manage, to mould, to cope with as best we can in the UN context and outside--with the expectation that solid agreements will not be reached and that majority resolutions are not going to determine our security interests in the area.

13. Specifically, we suggest Washington consider:

(a) A major statement at an appropriate time in an [

[appropriate forum of our support of the objective of a peaceful Indian Ocean. We have already said as much softly. In explaining our abstention on IOZP resolutions at the UN, we stated that the US shares the desire to promote conditions of peace and tranquillity in the Indian Ocean area and to seek to avoid a competitive expansion of military strength on the part of the major powers. Similar themes have been echoed in recent testimony. What needs to be done is to proclaim these thoughts in a significant, widely publicized statement. An affirmation of positive objectives can help undercut an otherwise negative image of US opposition to UN resolutions and the aspirations of littoral states--and US deployments in the face of these resolutions and aspirations.

(b) An affirmation of basic criteria for any Indian Ocean restraints, limitations, or zone that would protect US interests; e.g., any restraints must bear equally on littoral states and relevant external powers (a concept hardly to India's liking); all littoral states and permanent members of the Security Council should be included at all stages in discussions of restraints (the Tanzanians, say, are unlikely to sit down with the South Africans for this purpose); a disclaimer to protect our law-of-the-sea concerns; and so forth. Washington, we are sure, can develop criteria on the basis of which we could move from aloofness and abstention to active participation in international discussion of Indian Ocean issues. As it is, we have

largely abandoned the formulation of the terms of reference for this discussion to countries whose interests are quite different from our own. Moreover, by refusing to join in a dialogue, we frustrate, antagonize, appear indifferent to the views of the countries around the Indian Ocean littoral, and add to an image of provocation and threat when we do engage in naval activities in the area.

(c) Thus we would urge that we engage in active consultations with relevant countries on the issue of Indian Ocean restraints. Consultations are going forward without us, headed we believe not toward any agreement but toward a manipulation of the issues in ways that undercut our interests. The UN ad hoc committee is at work. Peace Zone resolutions get more votes each year. We are likely to be the principal target at the UN this fall. The Indians are apparently canvassing the idea of some sort of conference of Indian Ocean littoral states and external powers. Armed with a clear rationale for our present Indian Ocean activities, a statement of our positive objectives, and US criteria for any restraints, we believe we could insert ourselves into this process and do pretty well or as well as the Soviets. At a minimum, we might learn more about how Indian Ocean countries see their varied and conflicting interests in the Indian Ocean and elicit greater cooperation in managing proposals and initiatives by others in coming years.

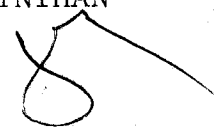
14. In sum, we would like to see Washington think more about

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how, through active political efforts, we can further and protect our security interests in the Indian Ocean area. We believe the returns both in terms of greater international understanding and domestic support for US interests could be considerable. Let's put our diplomats to work!

Let's put our diplomats to work!

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