

Revisiting Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace during the Cold War

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Abstract

The Indian Ocean appeared large within the context of superpower rivalry in the Indian Ocean during the Cold War, especially after Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and its entry into the warm waters of Indian Ocean. The prophecy of Alfred Thayer Mahan an American naval strategist is becoming a reality, “Whoever controls the Indian Ocean dominates the Asia. In the 21st century the destiny of world will be decided on waters”. The European powers, after Second World War gradually gave up most of their territories in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Even though, Britain and France maintained a modest but notable colonial presence in the Indian Ocean. Whereas with the coming up of Cold War between U.S. and Soviet Union, new comers on the scene, gradually appeared with their naval forces and imposed their geopolitical, geostrategic and geo-economic weight on littoral powers in the Indian Ocean. It is in the context of binary division of cold war the present paper purports to examine the history of the zone of peace process within the Indian Ocean, as it relates to the interests of regional littoral states and extra regional powers entry in the Indian Ocean. Further the paper also tries to examine the role and response from these regional and extra regional powers in the formation of Indian Ocean as a zone of peace.

Keywords: Cold War, Geopolitics, Indian Ocean Region, South Asian Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone, Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace, Extra-Regional Powers

Introduction

The Indian Ocean during the Cold War was turning the sea into a series of militarized geography based on shipping lanes, defense areas and strategic chokepoints. As a result maritime perception and policies of the littoral states in the Indian Ocean came to be dominated by the binary division of Cold War geopolitics. In this power politics, driven and excessively state centered geopolitical discourse and the policy-making influenced by it, territory and territorial control always necessarily implied more power and capability. However, in a classical geopolitical context, it was in the ancient Greece period, the application of naval resources to systematic political purposes came to be known as 'Thalassocracy' meaning '*maritime supremacy or rule of sea*'. The term appears to be popularized in Athens, in the fifth Century B.C. (Modelski & Thompson,4-5). Furthermore, one of the most influential naval officer, Rear Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840-1914) of U.S.Navy, established his reputation as a naval historian and strategist (Gray & Sloan, 37-62). Mahan's idea about sea power, which among other things dealt with the inter-connectedness of force, economies and geography have prompted considerable discussion of the relationship of his work to geopolitics. The Indian Ocean may have passed through many stages in history but the contemporary maritime traditions can be traced back to imperial powers that was greatly influenced by intra-European power politics as reflected in the region. The Cold War geopolitics were not only developing the techniques for placing sensing devices on sea floor but also nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction in Indian Ocean

The Indian Ocean as a Zone of peace (IOZP) has wide ramification as it envisaged by bringing about a new trend in the international developments. It was more or less an extension of the spirit of détente aimed at contributing towards the relaxation of international tension, especially in the Indian Ocean. The concept also proposes to dismantle the external imperialistic military bases. Hence by implication, it was meant that no external power should ever threaten the independence of the littoral states of the IOR. The concept also advocates that the IOR must not be used in future, for further interests of the neo-colonialists or for the global policy of war and aggression. The aim of the states within the IOR was not imposing restrictions on the maritime activities of any nation both external and regional, which tend to promote international trade and scientific investigations. The states of IOR have an immediate reason to feel concerned with the peace in the Indian Ocean to eradicate poverty and thereby work for better future. This cannot be achieved in the face of military pressure of external powers and enlargement of the regional countries in the military alliance with the latter. The concept of peace zone in the Indian ocean thus has vital relevance to the littoral states. On the account of their long history of colonialism there was a desire to safeguard their political independence and achieve economic growth un-interruptedly. For this, sustainable peace in the Indian Ocean was an essential precondition.

The concept of IOZP, broadly speaking included many aspect, like to render Indian Ocean a nuclear free zone, to bring to a close the further expansion of military presence of great powers in the region, to eradicate the superpower rivalry in the IOR, to resolve political disagreement or acceptance of arms control restriction among the littoral and hinterland state themselves, to eliminate the colonial domination of island (Kumar,2000, 52-55).The proposal for the IOZP should be seen in the backdrop of the late 1950s and early 1960s, when the world witnessed many new ideas and approaches to arms control and peace. It was during the 1960s that the Indian Ocean began to identify as an area of superpower confrontation. The geopolitics of oil was the driving force to keep presence in securing the safety of sea lanes of communications in Indian Ocean. It was comparatively low strategic priority in 1960s, but safeguarding of U.S. oil company investments must have been a reckonable factor. By 1960s the deployment of the Strategic Launch of Ballistic Missiles (SLBMs-Polaris) with their limited range of around 3000 km. made the north quadrant of the Arabian Sea an important location to target Southern parts of the Soviet Union as a part of its strategic nuclear second strike capability (Bruce, 1993, 205). Both the superpowers, U.S. and USSR introduced naval forces on a more or less on permanent basis and sought supporting naval facility from the littoral countries. These developments must have caused serious concerns to the regional states and especially to the Srilanka. The proposal for nuclear free zone in the Indian Ocean numbered notably in the resolution passed by the 1970 Lusaka summit of Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and was recalled in the 1971 General Assembly resolution (Kumar,2000,53). The proposal was initially directed at superpowers, but Srilankan representatives made it clear, renunciation of nuclear weapon by including the zonal power in the above arena (Ibid, 2000,102).

Objectives of the Study:

1. To examine in brief the historical process during Cold war in making Indian Ocean as zone of peace.
2. To analyse the interests and perspective of regional littoral states within the Indian Ocean region.
3. To understand and examine the role and responses from the regional as well as extra regional powers, in the formation of Indian Ocean as a zone of peace.

Methodology

At a conceptual-analytical level, the present research proposes to apply the insights offered by what has come to be known as a 'critical' perspectives or approaches in political geography and geopolitics. What is common to such diverse but critical approaches is that they knock down the core elements of classical geopolitics into pieces. The proposed research will be based on data collected from various primary and secondary sources pertaining to government, non-governmental organizations and the relevant policy documents, reports, and debates to identify particular approaches or study to locate Indian Ocean as a zone of peace.

Theoretical Framework: A Brief Overview

Locating Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace: Cold War Period

While defining its position vis-à-vis IOZP, the countries like India, Pakistan, Srilanka, Nepal and Maldives also called upon to halt any further escalation of their military presence and to eliminate all bases and other great power competition and moved resolution for making a zone of peace. Since its inception, India's approach towards Indian Ocean was shaped by it's by its own understanding of Indian Ocean. The inference can be drawn from India's first and foremost maritime thinker K.M. Panikkar argument, "*While to many other countries, Indian Ocean is only one of the important oceanic area, to India its vital sea and her life lines are connected to the sea. There is no development possible unless the Indian Ocean is free and her shores are fully protected. The Indian Ocean must therefore remain truly Indian*" (Panikkar, 1945, 84).

By the time India has acquired its maritime capacity in the 1960s and 1970s, it started actively opposing the presence of extra regional powers in the Indian Ocean (Garver, 2011, 277). In view of this, it was in December 1971, India planned out the passage of a United Nations General Assembly resolution for declaring the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace for further expansion of military presence in the Indian Ocean (Ibid, 2011). In the decade of 1980s India started emphasizing on a broader geostrategic role with its littoral states in the Indian Ocean especially like Mauritius, Madagascar, the Maldives, Sri Lanka and the Seychelles (Brewster & Rai, 2011, 58-62).

Whereas, Pakistan initially faced a dilemma being a member of South East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and Baghdad Pact. It is argued that Islamabad was not clear to the proposal, does it mean exclusion of big powers or denuclearization or the induction of the one or more regional powers into the policing role (Siddiqui, 1979, 5). This is evident in Pakistan's understanding of IOZP as having been based on four principles; commitment by regional states to conduct mutual relations on the basis of U.N. Charters, establishment of procedure and machinery to secure compliance with U.N. conflict resolution decision in the region, a regional balance of forces; and renunciation of nuclear option by the regional states (Hussain, 1991,154).

However by the late 70s, Pakistan began to attach equal importance to both the context stated earlier (Ibid, 1991). There were some conflicting views from Pakistan regarding the superpowers presence in the Indian Ocean during the Cold War. Which can be gauged from an interview with the BBC correspondent on 26th April 1974, Mr. Bhutto expressed the view that, Pakistan would not object to the establishment of an American bases at Diego Garcia. But he added, "*While it would be ideal for the Indian Ocean to be a zone of peace, small countries could not dictate to the great powers*" (The Tribune News, 1974, 4). Besides this, there were other side of inconsistent reports that the plan to build a U.S. military base in Diego Garcia is a threat to the countries in the Indian Ocean area, "*says a resolution of the working committee of the, then ruling Pakistan's People Party (PPP). The working committee expressed unanimously that the Indian Ocean should be a peace area*" (The Times of India News, 1974,5). Further, Pakistan made it clear that it accepted the view that big powers had geostrategic interest in the Indian Ocean that could not be wished away. As one of the Pakis-

tani representative stated in the first committee: “*Denuclearization of Indian Ocean is a worthy objective, but we can’t ignore the fact that it touches the strategic interests of the great powers*” (General Assembly Official Records, A/C.1/28 P.V.1943).

With such a perception Pakistan’s hopes that presence of great powers in the Indian Ocean with divergent interests will inhibit the ambition of any regional power in the region. This was also the rationale for Pakistan’s silence on the Anglo-U.S. move to set up base at Diego Garcia. Pakistan besides Indonesia and Australia, during the discussion of Ad-hoc committee has urged the adherence of littoral states to the non-proliferation treaty in order to bring peace in the Indian Ocean (Kumar,2000,53). In a similar manner declaration was adopted at the Lusaka summit that called upon all states to consider and respect the IOZP from which great power rivalries and competition, as well as bases conceived in the context of such rivalries and competition, either army, navy or air force bases are excluded. However, it was made clear that the Indian Ocean should be free from the nuclear weapons (Bruce, 1993, 205).

In persistence of the scheme Sri Lankan Prime Minister, Mrs. Bandarnaike circulated a paper at the Commonwealth summit in January 1971, stating;

“Recent reports point to an increasing naval presence of the Soviet Union and naval fleets in the IOR. It would also appear that these fleets carrying nuclear capability are becoming part of the strategic system of the world powers. Another disturbing development is the militarization of the Indian Ocean. The same reports indicate that various islands and land based facilities are being utilized to facilitate the operation of these fleets” (Ibid, 1993).

These developments resulted in Sri Lanka’s Prime Minister Srimavo Bandernaike to introduce in U.N. General Assembly on 16th October 1971 a Resolution no. 2832 on declaration of “*Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace*” (Ibid, 1993).

During in May 1974, India successfully conducted its first underground peaceful nuclear explosion in Pokhran rejecting the Nuclear Proliferation treaty (NPT) on basis of its discriminatory nature. This led to considerable anxieties in the region, just as china has done on October 16, 1964. This prompted Mr. Amerasinghe to declare in 1975 at the United Nations;

“We do not want any great power there. By the same token, we do not intend that we should drive out Satan by Beelzebub and allow some other powers within the group of littoral and hinterland states to take the place of the superpowers”(United Nation Document,1975,155) .

Accordingly, Sri Lanka’s Prime Minister Srimavo Bandernaike introduced in U.N. General Assembly on 16th October 1971, a resolution no. 2832 on declaration of “*Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace*”. Whereas Pakistan’s preoccupation with regional security or with providing a regional context to the IOZP proposal found its best expression in what Pakistan considered a political option against the nuclear threat” posed by the peaceful explosion of nuclear India in May 1974 (Hussain, 1991, 155).

Results and Discussion

Proposal for South Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone in South Asia

It was in the 16th Annual Session of the U.N. Atomic Energy Conference held in Mexico in September 1972, Pakistan put forward the proposal to denuclearize South Asia and called for a treaty between South Asian countries similar to the Tlatelolco Treaty for the denuclearization of Latin America (Pande, 1999, 1681-1693). Hence the idea of a nuclear weapon-free zone was mooted much before two years, the Indian explosion took place. The India’s’ peaceful nuclear explosion merely provided Islamabad with an occasion to assert its stand on anxieties regarding its security as well as seeking parity with India. This is one of the reasons for most of author’s writings in Pakistan

on its proposal on nuclear free zone in the light of Pokhran test in 1974 (Ahmad, 1979, 96 & Khalilzad, 1976, 546).

Finally, the commencement of the proposal for a South Asian Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SANWFZ) was put forth on 28th October 1974, the concept was introduced by Pakistan in the First Committee of the 29th UN General Assembly for a SANWFZ (The United Nations Yearbook, 1974, 19-21). Whereas the Pakistani proposal for SANWFZ was considered complimentary to the objective of establishing a zone of peace in the Indian Ocean. Further, it was perhaps a realization of bleak future for its SANWFZ proposal that has led Islamabad to put forward other peace zone variants (Ibid, 1974, 155-156).

Although, there were certain anxieties in Pakistan's defense establishment regarding the Indian naval capability in the IOR that can be gauged from the comment made by Brig. Noor A. Hussain, who was the Director General of the *Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad* (IISS), in the mid-1970s that India's Indian Ocean policy seeks regional maritime hegemony under the pretext of declaring it a zone of peace to keep other bigger powers out (Hussain, 1978). Besides this to strengthen further her proposal Pakistan tried to make an effort to have the support of the South Asian neighbours for the establishment of a NWFZ in the region. The most wholehearted support came from Bangladesh. Whereas, Maldives agreed on principles to amend the proposal to make it more suitable. In order to move further UN Secretary General after ascertaining the view from the states within the region moved the provisional agenda of the 42nd session, 1987 in accordance with the General Assembly resolution 41/49 of the previous year (The United Nations Disarmament Year Book, 1987, 215).

It is also believed that Pakistan put forward many proposals in this regard that were rejected by the non-aligned group but it was only in July 1979 that the expansion of the region to include the littoral states in the IOZP proposal came to be accepted (Towle, 1981, 208-209). Even after the end of First Cold War, considerable hope was generated during the period of détente and it appeared that a peace zone in Indian Ocean might yet materialize. Pakistan's own security perception is reflected in its persistent effort to broaden the IOZP proposal so as to include a regional context. For the same reason the super power activity in the Indian Ocean were downplayed.

Extra Regional Powers in the Indian Ocean

There is no definite time to declare Indian Ocean as Zone of peace, but the very idea clearly stemmed out of the general interests of the non-aligned littoral states to protect them from the Cold war geopolitics. The British withdrawal from the area in 1968 made a way for the competitive superpowers involvement in the Indian Ocean. The closure of Suez Canal in 1967 and rising importance of oil from Persian Gulf accelerated the interest of external powers into the region (Buzan, 1981, 197-198). This transition was coordinated with the US, with a complex chain of regional events like prior to 1968, encouraging this handover of power including the 1955 Baghdad Pact, the 1962 Sino-Indian War, the 1964 Zanzibar Revolution, and the decolonization of East Africa more generally led to the increasingly involved US interests and direct participation (Lee, 2013, 525). During Indo-Pak war US sent its seventh fleets in the Bay of Bengal and this also coincided with the passage of IOZP resolution. Further in 1974, the pace quickened the US announced plans to expand the Diego Garcia facility by upgrading its support functions. By 1980 US had either constructed or access to naval facilities across the Indian Ocean region further leading to the militarization of Indian Ocean region in this decade.

Similarly, the Soviet Union had not had an influential presence in the Indian Ocean, but its interests equally centered on resources coupled with Cold War geopolitical competition. In 1967, the Soviet government publication military strategy included the Indian Ocean region within geostrategic concerns. In 1968, a flotilla of Soviet naval ships move around the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf

regions, bringing to a halt in India, Sri Lanka, Iraq, South Yemen, and Somalia. With the military presence and its activity in the region during in 1980s and the presence of Soviet troops in one of the hinterland states of the Indian Ocean not only challenged vital western strategic interests, but also made a neutralization of the IOZP area and superpower withdrawal from it impossible.

Though, Indian Ocean has been the low priority basis for the US in comparison to the Atlantic and the Pacific Ocean. Nevertheless, US maintained its naval presence in the Indian Ocean. There are different views about the naval presence of US in the Indian Ocean as some holding the opinion as the military outpost in the post-colonial era to ascertain their control over the former colonies. While the other holds of view that political instability and change at regional level in the Indian Ocean may tilt the balance of power in favour of the Soviet Union or the China. The Washington tried to maintain the status quo, more importantly it was providing billions of dollars as economic and military assistance to the countries of the littoral states of the Indian Ocean region to prevent them from being part of the communist regime (Gupta,1987,195). Further US policy was driven by its protection of Sea lanes of communication for flowing its trade from Persian Gulf.

Despite of various peace zone plans made by superpowers, as on 9th March 1977, President Carter made a proposal at a news conference for the demilitarization of the Indian Ocean by mutual military restraint with Soviet Union. Similarly, the Soviet Premier Kosygin responded to it positively on 24th March 1977. By June it appeared as if considerable progress has been made. A third round of talks between the U.S. and Soviet Union took place at Berne, Switzerland in December 1977, which seemed to have positive impact (Subramanyam, 1989,231). It was quite apparent that any agreement between the superpower on the Indian Ocean would be based on their respective global geostrategic perceptions. The situation suddenly deteriorated with the soviet Invasion of Afghanistan and sudden overthrow of the Shah of Iran by a hostile Islamic fundamentalist regime, which basically altered the situation in the IOR (Towle,1981,212). By the late 1980's the U.S. had deployed seven pre-positional ships at Diego Garcia, increased the naval presence in the Arabian Sea from one to two carrier battle groups and requested additional funds for enhancing the projection capability of the Rapid Development Force (RDF). These developments put a final stop to all efforts at creating an IOZP.

Besides these, the other set of proposals, were made to make the zone of peace in the IOR like the Indian Ocean Conference of left-wing movements in April 1978, which had focused on demilitarizing the Indian Ocean, had provoked the wrath of the superpowers bent on dominating the region and imperialism proceeded to recruit counter revolutionaries to plot an overthrow of the progressive government of President Rene` (Seychelles). Their aim was to create puppet regimes throughout the IOR (Prescott,1985,179). There were also certain resolutions introduced in related to nuclear weapon free Zones in the Indian Ocean, but hardly any consensus was evolved.

As far as China is concerned, there is certain evidences that China's view about zone of peace and nuclear free was directed against the two superpowers expansion of nuclearisation in the Indian Ocean. The 13 States draft of the Afro-Asian resolution was considered by the China as urgent desire "*to oppose the superpowers contention for the hegemony and division of sphere of influence in the Indian Ocean Region*"(Jain,1974,1-9). However, China interprets the purpose and objective of the 1971 Afro-Asian draft resolutions in U.N. their own way and subject to their reservations. However the main focus of Chinese attack was the Soviet Union. Though Beijing lashes out against both superpowers and it was very difficult to discern. But china's approach to the peace in the Indian Ocean and nuclear free gives us an impression being one side of the Afro-Asian countries and at the same considerably helps its struggle against the superpowers and the expansion of its naval

activity in the Indian ocean whenever necessary. It was like Beijing stands to gain the either way (Ibid, 1974).

Conclusion

Relatively speaking, the consideration of Indian Ocean as a theatre of military conflict needs to be understood in the regional as well as global context through the course of history in the process of decolonization to the end of cold war. The very idea of Indian Ocean as a zone of peace reflected the genuine concern of littoral states to the presence and Cold War rivalries of superpowers during this period. Even the response and role of the littoral states were having common viewpoint on making Indian Ocean as a zone of pace but were having contested orientations in relation to the presence of superpowers in the Indian Ocean. Despite of détente during cold war, Indian Ocean became geostrategically important and new arms race started in the 80s with two big powers US and USSR vying for the regional influence in the region.

There is no denying about the fact that most of the regional as well as extra regional, maritime powers in the Indian Ocean region have long- term interests. It appears to be inconceivable that is going to erode their vital access of naval wing as most of these like Western Europe, US, China and Soviet Union and others depends on navigational routes across the Indian Ocean region for trading and commerce. Thus in order to protect their interests and safeguard sea lanes of communications and geostrategic character of Indian Ocean further addition to the new law of the sea in 1982 led to the inconsistencies with the proposal for the IOZP during the Cold war and needs to be addressed in the Post-Cold war era. At the same time there is an urgency to make Indian Ocean region more sustainable by development of its economy, environment and facilitating an egalitarian society, despite of the challenges within the present century. Indian Ocean continues to create a contested maritime space even today with the geography of contact, exchange, and politics both regional and at global level-a phenomenon of the past and present that in the same way foreshadows of the future.

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