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**CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY**  
**OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES**

16 December 1970

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: The Soviet Naval Presence in the Indian Ocean

Nature of the Presence

1. The Soviet navy first became active in the Indian Ocean during the International Geophysical Year, 1957-58, with the dispatch of an oceanographic research ship. From then until 1965-66, activity was limited to the deployment of two to three ships per year on extended oceanographic cruises. The first appearance of a combatant came in early 1965 when the USSR sent a destroyer to join the Ethiopian Navy Day celebrations at Massawa. This was done again in 1966 and 1967. In mid-summer 1967, the Soviets dispatched 15 ships into the Indian Ocean in support of space operations. Among them were space event support ships, tankers, and auxiliaries.

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2. But the year 1968 marked the real beginnings of increased Soviet naval deployments to the Indian Ocean. In March of that year, three combatants, supported by two tankers, cruised for four months, making port calls in eight countries. Since then, surface ships and submarines from both the Pacific Fleet and the western Fleets have deployed to the Indian Ocean. In some cases western Fleet combatants have been transferred to Pacific Fleet control after lengthy Indian Ocean cruises. Combatant forces deployed since 1968 have usually included a guided missile cruiser, a guided missile destroyer, a tank landing ship, and one or two submarines. These ships have generally remained in the ocean for anywhere from three to six months with approximately three months elapsing between deployments. In addition, the Soviets usually keep at least one destroyer in the Indian Ocean between and during major deployments. The largest deployment of combatants occurred in April 1970 in connection with the world-wide Soviet naval exercise "Okean," when six surface combatants and two submarines were in the Indian Ocean. At the moment, the Soviets have three surface combatants and a submarine there.

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3. Since March of 1968, about half of the Soviet naval units in the Indian Ocean have been oceanographic and space-related ships. (Although naval-subordinated, these ships are non-combatants.) During the past two years there usually have been at least one and sometimes as many as five oceanographic ships operating there. The number of space-support ships deployed has varied according to the tempo of the Soviet space program. With the launching of Zond 7 in August 1969 there was a high of nine to the Indian Ocean; in mid-1970 there was only one.

4. Until now, the Soviets appear to have relied on accompanying support ships to provide necessary fuel and dry and refrigerated stores. Typical support for deployed combatants consists of three auxiliaries and two tankers. As is common Soviet practice in other distant areas where the Soviets do not have shore facilities, naval units operating in the Indian Ocean use a number of anchorages outside territorial waters as waiting positions, refueling points, and areas for general support. We have identified five such areas, all in the western Indian Ocean.

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Soviet Purposes

5. Soviet naval activities in the Indian Ocean serve a number of military or quasi-military purposes. They support space operations. The oceanographic operations, besides having scientific purposes, undoubtedly are connected with intelligence gathering and with efforts to improve Soviet ASW techniques, perhaps against the possibility of the use of the Indian Ocean by Western submarines. By giving crews operational experience in previously unfamiliar waters, they assist the Soviet navy in its efforts to extend its range and, in general, to develop further its blue-water capability. They prepare the way, against the day when the Suez Canal is reopened, for the establishment of a convenient transit route between the USSR's eastern and western Fleet operating areas. And, finally, Soviet naval units could offer some peacetime protection for the USSR's civil maritime operations in a potentially unstable area.

6. But operations in the Indian Ocean are, at the same time, part of a larger pattern which is more political than military in conception. This pattern encompasses an array of operations outside the traditional operating spheres of the

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Soviet navy. In this sense the Indian Ocean presence does for the USSR some of the same things as does its presence in the Mediterranean and in the Caribbean. Broadly speaking, it supports the USSR's image of itself as a global power. The urge to foster this image has caused the USSR to seek something like equality with the US across the whole spectrum of international power. Moscow probably envisages a future, not too distant, when the Soviet navy can maintain a naval presence in the world's principal seas.

7. Events of recent years have undoubtedly hastened the maturing of this ambition. The Soviet-American confrontation over Cuba and US intervention in Vietnam revealed that the US by virtue of its conventional military capabilities, had options not available to the USSR. The Arab-Israeli war in 1967 found the Russians without a credible capacity for local military intervention to put onto the scales and, thereby, in a weakened diplomatic position. And these experiences apart, the Soviets became convinced that their competition with the West and China for influence in the Third World at large would be more effective if it had some military backing.

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8. The kind of easily exploited opportunity which the Arab-Israeli conflict has given the Russians in the Mediterranean is not available to them in the Indian Ocean. The evident Soviet preference for preserving some freedom of maneuver in the Indo-Pakistan dispute means that even that festering problem does not offer them such an opportunity. There is, however, a considerable potential for turbulence at many points along the long littoral of the Indian Ocean and its contiguous waterways, the Arabian Sea, the Persian Gulf, and the Red Sea. It is not difficult to conceive of circumstances arising in which the Russians would consider a show of force and even a threat of intervention to be politically expedient and low in risk. They showed off the coast of Ghana in 1969 that they do not disdain the practice of gun-boat diplomacy. There are possible trouble spots in some corners of the Indian Ocean where even a small number of naval units might be able to tip the balance in a local conflict -- within a state or between states, whether they actually intervened physically or not.

9. Any such use or threat of force might, of course, carry the risk of deeper involvement, locally or with outside powers. By and large, the Soviets have been cautious about accepting such

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risks. We think they will continue to be cautious, but all the possible contingencies are not foreseeable, and they no doubt wish to have wider options than in the past. At all events, the Russians evidently expect to derive political profits from their increased visibility. This show-the-flag policy seems intended to accomplish several aims: to make clients and potential clients aware of the USSR's might; to demonstrate that the USSR has interests in the area; and, to warn its antagonists -- in this case both the Western powers and the Chinese -- that it does not lack military means to support its interests on the spot.

10. This instrument of influence supplements but does not displace other instruments. Moscow will undoubtedly continue efforts to expand its diplomatic and trade relations throughout the area. Military assistance to selected states remains a prime tool of Soviet policy in the Third World. And it will not be surprising if the Russians repeat the indication given by Brezhnev last year of interest in supporting some kind of collective security system for Asia. Such a proposal, no matter how vague, may seem to Moscow a useful way, together with its other efforts, of reminding the nations of the area that the USSR is a power to

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be reckoned with and of getting them to begin to think of friendship with the USSR as an alternative to accommodation with the Chinese or alignment with the West. The all but total withdrawal of British military power from East of Suez and uncertainty about the future role of the US have, indeed, already given this line of thought some appeal.

11. Even now, the notion that the advent of the Russians may not represent a threat but might, instead, be desirable as a counterweight to the Chinese (some would add the Japanese) has some currency in Southeast Asia. Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew has said, for instance, that the Soviets would be doing him a favor if they were able to win any recruits among Singapore's pro-Peking Communists. This thinking may have something to do with his willingness to talk to the Russians about letting Soviet warships use Singapore's dockyards. Malaysia, also, in pondering alternatives to exclusive reliance on alignment with the West, has begun to think of the Soviets as a potentially useful element in an evolving regional power balance. This notion is not entirely rejected in some Australian political quarters, though the prevalent Australian attitude is one of concern about the growing Soviet presence.

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12. In the western reaches of the Indian Ocean, the political objectives to which the Soviet naval presence lends some support lack a single focus. The show of the Soviet flag in East Africa may give the Russians some added measure of prestige relative to both the West and the Chinese. The USSR's interest in the Red Sea area seems to be more a function of its Middle East policy than of Indian Ocean policy. It is not clear what kind of overall position the Soviets hope to stake out in the Persian Gulf. Any effort to develop major influence in the Gulf area would not only run up against Arab nationalism, but if it seemed to threaten Western access to oil, would bring on a sharp deterioration of relations with the West and Japan. It would be provocative to Iran, with which Moscow has a serious interest in good relations. But because of the uncertain political future of the area and the possibility that unforeseen opportunities will appear, Moscow will at least continue to show the flag there.

The Question of Facilities

13. In all of these areas, Soviet naval operations have, of course, been greatly hampered by the closure of the Suez Canal. The Russians might be able to reduce this handicap

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by obtaining shore facilities at, for instance, Aden, or at Hodeida in Yemen or Berbera in Somalia, where they have helped with the construction of deep-water ports.\* While there is no evidence that they have applied for permanent facilities at these places, such a step would be a logical development of Soviet policy in the area. They have sought rights to unrestricted access to certain shore facilities in India and been refused, though some elements in the Indian government apparently favored granting the request. The Soviets were also turned down by the previous government of Ceylon and they may renew their request to Mrs. Bandaranaike's government, though the result may be the same.

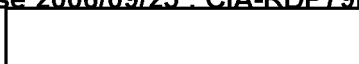
Possible Future Developments

14. The Soviets' interest in obtaining port facilities in the area indicates that they want at least to ease some of the operational problems they now face. It might also mean that they are looking ahead to some augmentation of their

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\* The Soviets have, in addition, been involved -- to what extent is not as yet precisely known -- in improving an aircraft runway on the island of Socotra at the entrance to the Gulf of Aden, controlled by the government of South Yemen; this could prove useful in aerial reconnaissance -- for which the Soviets now have negligible capability in the Indian Ocean.

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naval presence. Indeed, some expansion in the next few years seems probable, partly because deployment once begun, tends to acquire a momentum of its own. The reopening of Suez, by greatly facilitating the movement of Soviet vessels into and across the Indian Ocean, would probably result in a substantial increase in transit operations, if nothing else. This would, in turn, make the acquisition of shore facilities on the coasts of the Red Sea and East Africa or at Aden all the more desirable from an operational point of view.

15. Despite the growth of its interest in the area, the USSR clearly has more vital concerns in Europe, on the Sino-Soviet frontier, and in the Mediterranean, which will have a higher claim on the USSR's economic and military resources. It does not need to undertake a substantially larger deployment in order to keep pace with its competitors so long as the Western naval presence remains negligible and the Chinese one non-existent. But the Chinese might become more active in the area as an outgrowth of their interest in East Africa and possibly in connection with missile test firings. This

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would be an added incentive for Soviet naval activity in the area but in itself would hardly warrant a greatly increased force.\*

16. The response in the area to Soviet deployments so far has been fairly equable, but resistance to the expansion of their military presence, on the part of some of the littoral states as well as of the Western powers, persists. This resistance would intensify if the Russians were thought to be embarking on a sizable build-up. There would be considerable alarm in Australia. Expiring concern about Soviet intentions among the Southeast Asian states would probably revive, especially if Chinese policy does not appear to be threatening these states. A major Soviet naval presence would not be welcomed by either Pakistan or India, in part out of concern that it would attract competing powers to the scene. India, for all its concern about the Chinese and the value it places

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\* Despite an active construction program, the Soviets are not now building naval surface ships, particularly support ships, sufficiently rapidly to permit a large increase in distant deployed forces. Higher priority requirements in the four Fleet areas, the already sizable commitment in the Mediterranean, and the need to maintain forces for contingencies limit what is available for sustained deployments in distant waters.

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on its relations with the USSR, does not face a Chinese naval threat. If it had its way there would be no outside naval forces, Western or Soviet, in the Indian Ocean. Unless the Russians succeed in obtaining shore facilities, they will be obliged to depend mainly on at-sea support of their vessels, and this will impede the expansion and improvement of their operational capabilities. Some concern for the hazards of reliance on the hospitality of local states and a residual regard for their anti-imperialist image would probably, in any case, incline the Russians to keep the use of shore facilities to a minimum.

17. The Soviets would probably increase their operations in the Indian Ocean if it became, or they suspected it was about to become, an area of regular deployment of large US forces. They would be particularly sensitive to deployment of missile submarines and would probably undertake an ASW effort on an appropriate scale. But the Russians probably do not regard the Indian Ocean as a likely theater of major naval combat. In case of hostilities with the West, other naval theaters nearer to Europe would be of far greater strategic importance. In the event of such hostilities, moreover, the Soviets would face formidable problems of support and reinforcement in the Indian Ocean.

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STANDARD FORM NO. 64

*Office Memorandum* • UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT

TO : Mr. Sonnenfeldt, White House

DATE: 16 December 1970

FROM :  DD/NE, CIA

SUBJECT: The Soviet Naval Presence in the Indian Ocean

Attached is a paper on the Soviets in the Indian Ocean which you recently asked the DCI to have prepared. It makes no particularly new or penetrating observations and its judgments are close to those contained in the intelligence input to the recent NSSM.

The forthcoming NIE  will deal with the subject more fully, and perhaps more profoundly.

Attachment

STANDARD FORM NO. 64

*Office Memorandum* • UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT

TO : DCI

DATE: 16 December 1970

FROM : DD

SUBJECT:

This is the memorandum Sonnenfeldt asked for. I will hold it until you signal approval to send it, but if you do not find time to read it before leaving, I'll send it over on Friday. Actually, the argument is close to that contained in the recent NSSM.

As for other distribution, we normally refrain from memorandum issuances too close in time to NIE's treating the same subject matter. The forthcoming NIE

[redacted] will treat the subject.

Obviously, if you think the paper would interest others, there would be no great harm in bending custom in this case.

[redacted]

*Please send it to Sonnenfeldt only. M*