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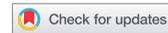
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Whither Non-Alignment? Indian Ocean Zone of Peace and New Delhi's Selective Alignment with Great Powers during the Cold War, 1964–1979

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ABSTRACT

First proposed in 1964 by the Sri Lankan prime minister, the Indian Ocean Zone of Peace [IOZP] entailed eradication of foreign military bases from the Indian Ocean region as well its denuclearisation. During the Cold War, India was one of the most vehement supporters of IOZP. If some saw India's interests in the IOZP as another manifestation of Nehruvian idealism, others viewed it as a part of its non-aligned foreign policy. This analysis argues otherwise. India's record on IOZP reveals a policy of selective alignment with Great Powers and its adaptation to the principles of power politics in international relations. India's support for the presence of one or the other Great Powers in the Indian Ocean region found premise on balancing those it considered hostile to its national security interests. In public, India supported the call for IOZP as dictated by its non-aligned foreign policy; privately, New Delhi remained highly sceptical and often worked to IOZP's detriment. Under the cloak of IOZP, India not only pursued diplomatic alignment with Great Powers but also ensured that its own regional ambitions remain unchecked. In this picture, India's role was not only supportive of the Cold War but to the extent it could use the opportunities provided by super-power rivalry in the region to further its own ends, even determinative of the process.

In a highly acclaimed essay written a couple of years before India's independence, the academic and diplomat K.M. Panikkar underlined the relevance of the Indian Ocean for its future leadership. Drawing on India's colonial experiences, Panikkar opined, "whoever controls the Indian Ocean has India at its mercy."¹ For the future prosperity of the Indian state, the Indian Ocean was a "vital sea" since no "industrial development, no commercial growth, no stable political structure" was possible "unless the Indian Ocean is free and her own shores fully protected."² One of the most consequential factors that would dominate the future politics of the Indian Ocean Region [IOR] was the global competition between the United States and the Soviet Union. As Panikkar prognosticated, "rivalry that is likely to

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transform the Indian Ocean again into a major strategic theatre is, in fact, inherent in the world situation that has developed after the war.”³ For the leadership of independent India, managing Great Power rivalry and securing the Indian Ocean was “one of the major problems of the future.”⁴

How then did India navigate the Great Power rivalry in the IOR during the Cold War? For Panikkar, India had to either develop a strong navy or ensure through diplomatic means that no hostile Great Power established its naval supremacy in the region.⁵ The former was an impossible task given India’s limited resources.⁶ New Delhi’s non-aligned foreign policy, on the other hand, made it extremely difficult to align openly with the Great Powers. The existing literature, therefore, argues that India’s support for a “Zone of Peace” in the Indian Ocean was a diplomatic strategy to counter the negative impact of the Cold War in the region.⁷ First proposed in 1964 by Sirimavo Bandaranaike, the Sri Lankan prime minister, the Indian Ocean Zone of Peace [IOZP] entailed eradication of foreign military bases from the region as well its denuclearisation.⁸ During the Cold War, India was one of the most vehement supporters of IOZP. India’s peace diplomacy in the IOR was a natural extension of its “strident moral opposition” towards Great Power politics during the Cold War.⁹ Therefore, if some view India’s interests in the IOZP as another manifestation of Nehruvian *Moralpolitik*, others identify its support for IOZP as part of its non-aligned foreign policy.¹⁰

However, neither Nehruvian idealism nor the precepts of non-alignment dictated India’s approach on the IOZP. From the beginning, a policy of selective alignment with Great Powers guided India’s behaviour. India’s support for the presence of one or the other Great Powers in the IOR found premise on balancing those it considered hostile to its national security interests. Such selective alignment in fact reveals India’s remarkable adaptation to the principles of power politics in international relations. In public, India supported the call for the IOZP as dictated by its non-aligned foreign policy; privately, New Delhi remained highly sceptical and often worked to its detriment. Under the cloak of IOZP, India not only pursued diplomatic alignment with Great Powers but also ensured that its regional ambitions remained unchecked.¹¹ In this picture, India’s role was not only supportive of the conduct of the Cold War but to the extent that it could use the opportunities provided by superpower rivalry to further its own ends, even determinative of the process.

Investigating India’s diplomatic record on the IOZP is important for a number of reasons. The Indian Ocean was a “critical geography” in which the Cold War played out in the region.¹² Yet, most historiography on the influence of the Cold War in South Asia has focused on its continental borders rather than maritime spaces.¹³ Investigating India’s role in the Cold War between the two superpowers in the Indian Ocean provides an avenue to correct this spatial bias in the scholarship. Second, India’s strategic

behaviour in the Indian Ocean is central to understanding India's foreign policy during the Cold War. Irrespective of the problems associated with operationalising the concept of non-alignment, India's foreign policy appeared either one of equidistance from Great Powers or pursuing neutrality.¹⁴ As Pratap Bhanu Mehta, a noted scholar of Indian politics, has argued, "India's engagement with other countries has seldom been driven by the imperative of balancing other powers."¹⁵ Even supposed realist scholarship considers India's foreign policy during the first 50 years of independence as heavily influenced by Jawaharlal Nehru's, its first prime minister's, "liberal internationalism, morality and normative approaches to international politics."¹⁶ Recent scholarship has challenged this narrative by exposing the kaleidoscopic nature of India's strategic thought in the public sphere.¹⁷ The need is to show how these alternatives played out in policy. A granular reading of India's strategic behaviour in the Indian Ocean reveals a completely different picture: from the beginning, New Delhi's approach found basis on the principles of power politics. By balancing one Great Power against the other, India not only practiced *Realpolitik* but also furthered its regional hegemony. Lastly, it is important to understand how locally powerful actors navigated the pulls and pressures of Great Power politics in their regional spheres of influence. Much of the literature on the Indian Ocean has focused exclusively on the behaviour of Great Powers.¹⁸ Even the larger historiography on the conduct of the Cold War in India and South Asia has found it difficult to move beyond the "Cold War binary."¹⁹ India's record on the IOZP indicates that regional Powers often used the Cold War to their advantage. In this narrative, superpowers were not the only Cold War protagonists; local actors could be substantively influential. Rather than being "at the periphery of the Cold War," India played an important role in its regional conduct.²⁰

The idea of IOZP was first floated by Bandaranaike during the September 1964 Non-aligned Summit at Cairo.²¹ The resolution moved by him condemned the establishment of foreign military bases in the IOR; it also called for regional denuclearisation. As a leading non-aligned state, India supported the resolution; its national security interests, however, demanded otherwise.

One dominant factor shaped India's perceptions of superpower presence in the Indian Ocean in the 1960s: the Chinese threat. India suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of China in October 1962.²² In the wake of the 1962 Sino-Indian war, Nehru openly sought military assistance from the United States, even when it went against his professed policy of non-alignment.²³ For the first time since independence, New Delhi welcomed American intervention in the region. By late 1963, the United States and India were involved in joint defence plans against further Chinese aggression in the Himalayas.²⁴ In December 1963, when Washington announced its

decision to “extend the operational area of the Seventh Fleet to the Indian Ocean,” Nehru welcomed American ships to Indian ports.²⁵ Under Secretary of State George Ball explained to the Indian ambassador at Washington that the Fleet was “to demonstrate that the US was interested in the defence of the area and American armed might would be available if aggression takes place.”²⁶

If China’s conventional threat made Nehru compromise with non-alignment and welcome the American presence in the Indian Ocean, China’s foray into nuclear weapons further complicated India’s approach. Within a month of the Cairo resolution—16 October 1964—China conducted its first nuclear weapons test. For New Delhi, China’s nuclear capability now compounded the conventional threat on the Himalayan border.²⁷ Notwithstanding the cacophony of the public debate on exercising India’s nuclear option, the political leadership headed by Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri resorted to a diplomatic strategy to deter China.²⁸ Following President Lyndon Johnson’s offer “to respond to requests from the Asian nations to help in dealing with communist China’s aggression” a couple of days after the Chinese test, Shastri sought formal security guarantees from the Great Powers.²⁹ During a December 1964 trip to Britain, he argued that it was “important for the nuclear powers to consider how to guarantee the security of the non-nuclear state.”³⁰ Shastri’s request raised suspicion both in India and abroad. Nehruvians in India’s domestic political scene saw Shastri’s entreaties as a major deviation from the precepts of non-alignment, accusing him of pandering to nuclear Powers, accepting the philosophy of nuclear deterrence, and sidelining the agenda on nuclear disarmament.³¹ The right-wing domestic opposition, on the other hand, viewed it as a diversionary tactic from the more pressing demands of national security: the need to build the bomb.³²

Domestic uproar notwithstanding, the idea of a nuclear umbrella from the Great Powers created huge complications for India’s foreign policy. Extended deterrence, where dominant nuclear Powers provided their nuclear arsenals to protect their allies from nuclear threats, was by then a norm of Cold War politics.³³ Yet, it was also highly problematic. The issue affected credibility: would the established nuclear Powers risk self-destruction for the sake of their lesser allies?³⁴ For India, the fact that it was a non-aligned country rather than an ally of any of the superpowers exacerbated the problem. Moreover, security guarantees impinged upon its policy of maintaining equidistance from the two camps and its credibility as a non-aligned state. As the Indian foreign secretary argued in a memorandum for the prime minister’s office in late December 1964, “We may be regarded as having abrogated our independence and our sovereign responsibility for defense by placing ourselves under the guardianship of *certain big powers* [emphasis added].”³⁵ Given that Shastri’s call for nuclear guarantees in London did not specify

whom exactly the Great Powers offering such extended deterrence would be, it created an impression that India was primarily looking towards a Western nuclear guarantee. The Indian prime minister also did not consult Moscow before approaching the British. The Soviet Union saw in Shastri's statements an invitation for the Western Powers to entrench their military presence in the Indian Ocean. In fact, Moscow warned New Delhi that any "subscription to this idea [of nuclear guarantees]" would strengthen "the case for US to consolidate its nuclear presence in the Indian ocean area on the pretext of offering nuclear protection to India [and other countries]."³⁶ The Indian foreign minister received these concerns during his visit to the Soviet Union in December 1964 and in subsequent discussions between New Delhi and Moscow. Indian decision-makers were also concerned that any tensions between the Americans and Soviets would only bring China and the Soviet Union closer together "as a matter of necessity though not of choice."³⁷ Supporting *détente* between the two superpowers, insofar as helping to isolate China on the world stage, reflected India's *Realpolitik*.

As these contradictions became apparent by early 1965, New Delhi now insisted that the security guarantees needed provision either jointly by the two superpowers or not at all. An increasing realisation existed within the prime minister's office that nuclear security guarantees would be hard to secure, and India's insistence for them would only accentuate Great Power differences. By March 1965, the prime minister's office reached a consensus that India should not invest further diplomatic effort in extracting nuclear security guarantees from the Great Powers. As the prime minister's principal secretary, L.K. Jha, instructed the Ministry of External Affairs [MEA] in March 1965, "our Ambassadors in Washington and Moscow should be told not to have any further discussions on this subject."³⁸ Even when New Delhi realised the futility of formal guarantees, it still looked towards the Great Powers to assist in case China resorted to nuclear blackmail. Great Power presence in the region, insofar as it posed a nuclear risk to China, was therefore welcomed, something apparent in India's approach towards the establishment of an American naval base on the Indian Ocean.

Just a few months after the Cairo Declaration, the MEA discussed the issue of British Indian Ocean Territory and on-going negotiations between the United States and Britain over setting up a communications facility on the island of Diego Garcia.³⁹ The Anglo-American understanding had pushed India into a diplomatic corner. First, by supporting the Cairo Declaration, India had taken a public stand against any foreign military bases in the region. Moreover, the communications facility could create a diplomatic storm amongst the Afro-Asian countries that were against increasing any foreign military presence in the region. India considered itself a leader of this group. Reticence on India's part could also give China a diplomatic opportunity to increase its influence over the Afro-Asian countries. Therefore, for

some in the MEA, India's interests "in retaining some influence in Afro-Asian countries would point to the need for us to take the lead in opposing this base."⁴⁰ On the other hand, the American presence appeared as a deterrent against China. The consequential factor, as the head of the MEA's disarmament division argued, was the "strategic and political implications" of this military base for India's security.⁴¹ The Afro-Asian response to the Chinese nuclear tests disappointed India: the general impression in New Delhi was that the "Afro-Asian countries have, for reasons of their own, sought to underplay or ignore the implications of the Chinese nuclear threat in what may be called the Indian Ocean zone." For New Delhi, the "Chinese nuclear menace" existed in any "strategic appreciation of the region." A consensus therefore emerged not to make "undue noise" about the proposed facility on Diego Garcia. There was also a realisation about the limits of Indian influence: "in any case, our condemnation of the proposed base or our failure to do so is unlikely to produce any marked change in the attitude of the Afro-Asian powers to us." One factor could have tilted the scales in favour of those arguing for a more robust position on IOZP: its linkage to the establishment of a Nuclear Weapons Free Zone [NWFZ] in the Indian Ocean. The mitigating factor, however, was China: to New Delhi, "China will not do so [denuclearise] and until China agrees to such a proposition, the possibility of the Indian Ocean being declared a nuclear-free zone simply does not exist." The Indian foreign secretary summed up the discussion:

It is true that we have subscribed to the nonaligned nations declaration, which opposed the establishment of a western base in the Indian Ocean. But I would submit that, for reasons stated in the notes on earlier pages, we have to associate this question, as far as India is concerned, with the Chinese nuclear explosions at Lop Nor. We cannot ever talk about these matters without a direct reference to Lop Nor. As I have repeatedly said in the notes on the subject, at various stages, Lop Nor is nearer the Indian Border than any of the British Colonial islands on the Indian Ocean. If Mrs. Bhandaranaike shouts about Chagos [Diego Garcia], because it is nearer to Ceylon than Lop Nor; the same argument must apply, in reverse, to Lop Nor, which is a slap across our northern borders. We cannot talk about islands in the Indian Ocean, without condemning Chinese Nuclear land bases, nearer to our borders; and if our friends want us to join in the howl against Indian Ocean bases, we must expect them to not remain silent on the Chinese nuclear bases, much closer to us. A nuclear free Indian ocean is today a PLATITUDE [in original], when we are faced with the reality of Lop Nor, and we have to tell our Asian-African friends this quite clearly.

Consequently, India's position on the IOZP remained highly generalised and eschewed any vociferous campaign against the Anglo-American understanding on Diego Garcia. For many in India, the Diego Garcia base and consequent stationing of Polaris submarines in the Indian Ocean was reflective of the joint Western understanding of providing a nuclear umbrella against the Chinese.⁴² When the two Great Powers declined formally to include

positive security guarantees for non-nuclear weapon states within the 1968 Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty, assessments by the prime minister's office argued, "since neither the USA nor the USSR can afford to let India go under the communist domination," their "political compulsions" offered a political guarantee against any Chinese nuclear threat or blackmail.⁴³ Foreign military presence in the Indian Ocean was therefore advantageous. When India's Parliament saw questions raised over the increasing American presence and its deleterious effect on regional security, the government argued that the possibility of "any conflicts breaking out in the foreseeable future" was negligible.⁴⁴ In fact, influential Indian strategists saw America's growing involvement in the Indian Ocean in the aftermath of the British decision to withdraw its naval forces from the East of Suez in 1968 and Soviet forays into the Indian Ocean at the same time as a positive trend. Even when "the projection of US naval power and the Soviet naval power into the Indian Ocean is of great political significance," as a Ministry of Defence official argued, "strategically, they are likely to be mutually deterrent."⁴⁵ Instead, the concern was whether the vacuum left by the British would allow China to "extend her influence" by co-operating with Pakistan.⁴⁶ Clearly, the threat was not from superpowers but the locals. Regional insecurity through Great Power rivalry, a constant theme of 1970s Indian diplomacy on the IOR, was yet to arrive.

The quest to balance China's conventional and nuclear threat primarily dominated India's approach to the IOZP between 1964 and 1970. Non-alignment did not allow New Delhi to seek overt Great Power protection. Indian interests aligned with the Western naval and nuclear presence in the Indian Ocean as it created a perceptual deterrence in Chinese strategic calculations. Yet to avoid Sino-Soviet reconciliation, India worked actively to support the process of *détente* between the two Great Powers. If China dominated India's policies on the Indian Ocean during the 1960s, the next decade would see a drastic shift in India's behaviour due to change in the American strategic attitude towards Beijing. In the face of Sino-American nexus, India's policy of selective alignment veered towards the Soviets. Its policies on the IOZP shifted accordingly.

By 1970, two significant changes occurred in India's security environment. First was Sino-American rapprochement. New Delhi keenly observed President Richard Nixon's initial overtures to Beijing. Talks between the two sides rattled India, which viewed them as a part of American strategy to profit by the "Sino-Soviet rift." As a top-secret MEA report in February 1970 stated, "establishment of a working relationship between USA and China is likely to work to our detriment, politically and economically."⁴⁷ The second was India's growing strategic closeness to Moscow.⁴⁸ Beginning in the mid-1960s, the Soviet Union slowly replaced the West as India's leading defence and economic partner. Soviet willingness

to equip the Indian military with modern weapons contrasted starkly to Western reticence in upsetting the delicate Indo–Pakistani balance. After the 1965 war between the two sub-continental rivals, both Britain and the United States imposed an arms embargo. Moscow then came to India’s aid. By August 1971, with the signing of the Treaty of Friendship and Co-operation, the Indian and Soviet strategic embrace tightened further.⁴⁹ The treaty created considerable anxiety in Washington. The under-secretary of State, Roger Williams, enquired of Jha, now the ambassador at Washington, “how can you [India] describe the treaty as consistent with non-alignment.”⁵⁰ For India, Jha explained, non-alignment did not mean “that in facing aggression or threats of aggression, we should be alone and single-handed.” Sino–American rapprochement constituted a fundamental change in India’s security environment mainly because Nixon’s Administration had impressed upon New Delhi, “that if the Chinese were to come to Pakistan’s assistance in an attack on India, the US would not find it possible to help us.” For India, therefore, the Soviets offered a “deterrent” to a future possibility of conflict in South Asia. For Indian decision-makers, non-alignment created ample scope for selective alignment in support of New Delhi’s strategic requirements.

The inflection point, however, was Nixon’s one-sided support of Islamabad on the issue of Bangladeshi independence. For India, the result of the 1971 war where Bangladesh, the former East Pakistan, separated from Pakistan was very encouraging. Unlike previous conflicts with Pakistan in 1948 and 1965, India triumphed absolutely on both east and west—Pakistan had been a country of two parts, East and West Pakistan, separated by Indian territory. In the IOR, its eminence was now an established fact. Yet, the role of the American Seventh Fleet towards the end of the war left a distinct impression of vulnerability on the Indian psyche. As Gandhi wrote in an article for *Foreign Affairs* in February 1972: “It is necessary to take note of the dispatch of the warship Enterprise to support a ruthless military dictatorship and to intimidate a democracy, and the extraordinary similarity of the attitudes adopted by the United States and China. Imagine our feelings.”⁵¹ The “appearance of the 7th fleet,” India’s Ministry of Defence noted, had “inevitably given rise to some misgivings.”⁵² To use Jha’s words, it was a “deliberate plant” to “intimidate” India.⁵³

Subsequent developments in the region further accentuated India’s threat perceptions. New Delhi read Henry Kissinger’s, Nixon’s national security advisor’s, visits to China in the early 1970s with alarm: an attempt to divide Asia into spheres of influence.⁵⁴ Supply of American arms to Middle Eastern countries such as Saudi Arabia and Iran bothered India as Washington could challenge its dominant position in the Indian Ocean as well as provide a circuitous route for American arms to end up in Pakistani possession.⁵⁵ Nixon’s re-election in late 1972 suggested that the tilt towards Pakistan and China would continue. In a note then prepared for Indira Gandhi, the Indian

premier, her principal secretary argued, “India is a blind spot in Nixon’s vision of the world. The main ideological and political justification for aid [under presidents John F. Kennedy and Johnson] was to build up democratic India as a counter-balance against China. With Sino-US rapprochement, this justification is no longer there.”⁵⁶ The note cautioned Gandhi that the Indian Ocean had now become an “area of sea power rivalry” between the superpowers. Further, given the American perception that “the Soviet Union has acquired great influence in India,” America was bound to increase its naval activity in the region. With the Arab–Israeli war of 1973, these anxieties took a more concrete shape, especially because New Delhi saw in the United States’ increased naval presence in the Indian Ocean both a capability and intent to interfere in the domestic politics of the littoral states. As a secret report prepared by the Indian Embassy at Washington argued, American naval power is a “means of influencing events and intervening in the region.”⁵⁷ Nevertheless, the 1971 war had also entrenched a belief of regional supremacy in New Delhi. The policy henceforth would be staving off any superpower influence in the region. As India’s ambassador to the Soviet Union argued, “the aim of our diplomacy would be to somehow implement ‘hands-off the sub-continent’ policy. Something of this kind has been in our minds for a long time but I think we became more conscious of it in the aftermath of the Bangladesh war.”⁵⁸

It was this combined feeling of regional supremacy and continued vulnerability against extra-regional interventions that drove India’s policies on IOZP. In the twenty-seventh session of the United Nations [UN] General Assembly in September 1972, under Resolution 2992, an Ad Hoc Committee [ADC] of 15 littoral states emerged to carry on consultations for the establishment of a “Zone of Peace” in the Indian Ocean.⁵⁹ India was a member. The ADC made little progress. One of the reasons was that all Great Powers, with the exception of China, remained impervious to UN efforts; they continuously abstained from voting on the General Assembly resolutions. The consultations within the ADC notwithstanding, a subsequent General Assembly resolution—3080—in 1973 also saw no positive reaction from the Great Powers.⁶⁰ For India, ADC efforts were unfruitful because only “close consultations with Great Powers and the major maritime powers alone” would “enable the Ad Hoc Committee to achieve any worthwhile results.”⁶¹ Without Great Power participation, IOZP negotiations were an unrewarding enterprise.

India’s assessment of Great Power involvement in the Indian Ocean was hardly objective. After the 1971 war, there was a considerable tilt towards Moscow. In November 1973, on the eve of Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev’s visit to New Delhi, Gandhi received a note from one of her trusted advisors arguing that as far as superpower presence in the Indian Ocean was concerned, India should not treat the Soviet Union and

the United States on a similar plane. India had to be concerned over those “quarters from which a threat is posed to our territorial integrity”; the Soviet Union posed no such threat. The note then went on to narrate the crucial role that the Soviet Navy played in the 1971 war: “it is a matter of history that in 1971 when the Seventh fleet moved into the Bay of Bengal from its Pacific base, it was the Soviet Union which helped us. Marshal Grechko [the Soviet minister of defence] told me that the Soviet Navy was tailing the Seventh Fleet and that a Soviet submarine had twice got below the aircraft carrier without Americans getting to know anything about it.”⁶² “The lesson of recent history,” the note argued, needed careful consideration before formulating India’s policy on superpower presence in the Indian Ocean. The MEA also appeared to be highly prejudiced towards the Soviets. Perceptions existed of Western arguments regarding increasing Soviet presence in the Indian Ocean as a “deliberate exaggeration.”⁶³ Internal MEA reports absolved Moscow from charges of maintaining military bases in the Indian Ocean: “Western reports from time to time have alleged that the Soviet Union has secured base facilities in various littoral states of the Indian Ocean in fact, there is no evidence whatsoever to show that Soviet Union has base facilities in any of the littoral states.”⁶⁴ For New Delhi, the Soviet Union posed “no threat to any country in the region.”⁶⁵ New Delhi also perceived the Soviet Navy’s presence in the Indian Ocean as “defensive in nature”: a counter to American strategic forces there that threatened Central Soviet Asia with nuclear weapons.⁶⁶ If America’s presence in the Indian Ocean in the 1960s reassured Indian security, the USSR had taken over that role in 1970s:

Politically, it must be admitted that the Soviet naval presence, however relatively small it may be, could act as a reassurance to the littoral states against the threat of the US or western “gun-boat” diplomacy and Chinese moves to extend her area of influence.⁶⁷

India had reasons to worry about the Western and Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean. By early 1974, Washington and London reached an understanding over the expansion of the Diego Garcia base. For one, the move was, as the Indian foreign secretary argued, “manifestly inconsistent with [the UN General Assembly] declaration.”⁶⁸ Even when it considered a direct military confrontation with the Americans unlikely, New Delhi assessed that Diego Garcia “could be utilized in the event the US sees the need for an exercise of ‘gun-boat’ diplomacy to be directed against India.”⁶⁹ A similar perception existed amongst India’s military commanders. As the chief of naval staff commented on the setting up of the Diego Garcia base: “it gives the United States a capability to exert pressure at a time of its own choosing on the littoral states in the area.”⁷⁰

More worrisome for India was the Chinese and Pakistani reactions. China was publicly protesting against the Anglo–American understanding. However, as the Indian Embassy in Beijing reported to the MEA, “whatever be her outward posture, China was quite pleased about the US decision to strengthen the Diego Garcia base in the Indian Ocean as a countervailing move to the Soviet presence.”⁷¹ For New Delhi, it was important to extend the spirit of *détente* to the Indian Ocean to counter China’s influence. The developments on Diego Garcia shattered that hope. For the Soviets, on the other hand, the expansion of Diego Garcia showed once again how the “aspirations of American soldiery [sic] and Chinese hegemonists go hand in hand.”⁷² Pakistan was equally enthusiastic over Diego Garcia. For Pakistani Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the American presence helped alleviate the “apparent imbalances [of military strength] in the subcontinent,” a clear indication that Islamabad was looking forward to an increase in United States military aid.⁷³ By late 1974, major naval exercises by Central Treaty Organisation allies in the Arabian Sea further confirmed a fear of “increased coordination between Pakistan, USA, and Iran in Naval and Defence matters.”⁷⁴

India’s insistence on “Great Power rivalry” in the Indian Ocean during the UN’s IOZP negotiations ruffled some feathers with the Soviets. Moscow detested inclusion with the United States and other western Powers, which it considered the real threat to the littoral states.⁷⁵ It also led to an impression that the Soviet presence in the Indian Ocean was equally problematic for those states even when Moscow lacked any military bases in the region. Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister N.P Firyubin categorically conveyed to India’s foreign secretary, Kewal Singh, Moscow’s “total disagreement with the efforts of some non-aligned countries to bracket it with the imperialist states and with the talk about so-called “rivalry” between the two sides.”⁷⁶ Rather than the Soviet naval presence in the Indian Ocean, “the closed ring of powerful US bases from South Africa and the Persian Gulf to Guam, Philippines, and Australia ... was the real cause of tension in the area.” To keep the façade of objectivity in dealing with Great Powers in the Ocean, India’s non-aligned foreign policy by necessity had to focus on their rivalry in those waters. However, in private, the distinction between friends and hostile Powers was well established. An internal MEA memorandum on IOZP in preparation for Firyubin’s visit in March 1976 suggested,

India has confidence in the peaceful intentions of the USSR and considers much of the naval activity [of the Soviet Union] as linked to the intercourse between the eastern and the western ports of the Soviet Union. However, for tactical purposes, with the objective of eliminating western naval presence in the Indian Ocean and building up the world public opinion against US bases, the Non-Aligned have to speak in terms of “great powers.”⁷⁷

Restricting IOZP negotiations to the Great Powers served another of India's interests: maintaining its regional supremacy in the Indian Ocean region. The September 1973 UN General Assembly Resolution 3080 requested the organisation's secretary general to provide a factual report on the status of the foreign military presence in the Indian Ocean. Submitted to the General Assembly in May 1974, the report concentrated on the Great Power presence in the region, a fact the MEA considered "useful" from the Indian point of view, as it did not go "into the question of the build-up of littoral states navies and activities."⁷⁸ However, an event in May 1974 led to some serious discomfort for New Delhi: India's "Peaceful Nuclear Explosion." On 8 August 1974 in the ADC, Pakistan requested that the UN secretary general add an agenda item entitled "Declaration and Establishment of a Nuclear Weapons Free Zone in South Asia."⁷⁹ For New Delhi, it was a mere "propaganda exercise."⁸⁰ First, Pakistan had neither signed the Partial Test Ban Treaty nor condemned China's nuclear weapons programme. Pakistani credentials in calling for regional nuclear disarmament were, therefore, highly suspect. Second, any meaningful denuclearisation of South Asia must include China and the whole Indian Ocean. As an internal MEA assessment of the Pakistani proposal noted, "Unless China abandons its nuclear ambitions and experiments with nuclear weapons, it would be futile to dream of Asia or South Asia being de-nuclearized." Third, given the precedent set by other NWFZs, any proposal for a South Asian one required discussion by regional states. By directly going to the UN, Pakistan violated the established norm of regional consultations. Last, in India's assessment, by bringing in the extraneous factor of NWFZ to South Asia, Islamabad's proposal could "jeopardize whatever slow progress had been made on the implementation of this [IOZP] declaration."⁸¹ New Delhi's interest in the IOZP negotiations was restricted to the Great Powers' conventional military presence rather than that of their nuclear arsenals. It was only the Great Power rivalry "to control surface shipping and to exert influence on the countries of the region" through conventional naval power that was of "direct relevance to the littoral countries."⁸² India, for one, did not see the two superpowers as nuclear threats. Moreover, denuclearisation would have also hindered India's future nuclear ambitions. Indian policy, therefore, sought the "delinking" of the conventional naval presence in the region from that of nuclear weapons.⁸³

More worrisome for India were the developments in 1975. UN General Assembly Resolution 3259 of December 1974 called on littoral and hinterland states to enter into consultations for convening a conference on the Indian Ocean.⁸⁴ In March 1975, the ADC convened preparatory meetings to consult these states over the purpose and priorities of the proposed conference.⁸⁵ In these meetings, India's neighbouring states like Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh argued for inclusion of both the "acquisition of nuclear weapons by regional states in the Indian Ocean" and the naval arms

race in the regional context in the conference's provisional agenda.⁸⁶ New Delhi sternly resisted such linkages. Both denuclearisation and the regional naval arms race were unrelated to IOZP's original mandate, which should have been otherwise limited to questions surrounding Great Power rivalry and their military presence in the Indian Ocean. In the MEA view, "Pakistan and Sri Lanka feel that with the exit of the great powers, India shall emerge as the dominant naval power in the Indian Ocean."⁸⁷ Even when India resisted such moves, the Great Powers remained adamant in their opposition to participation in IOZP negotiations. By mid-1975, the general MEA assessment was highly pessimistic: "we now have to accept the reality of a conference without great power participation."⁸⁸ It also concluded that such a conference "may not be practical and it may be postponed until 1977." Henceforth, Indian strategy in ADC meetings was "to insist that the conference should concentrate on discussing the developing a strategy of Littoral and Hinterland states on how to secure the participation of great powers in the implementation of the declaration of 1971 and not go for intra-regional, particularly bilateral issues which have no direct bearing on the Declaration."⁸⁹ By 1976, differences over the agenda of the proposed conference amongst the littoral and the hinterland states led to ADC "deadlock."⁹⁰ If Great Powers stalled the IOZP, so did India.

Between 1970 and 1976, therefore, India's selective alignment with the Soviet Union primarily drove its IOZP policy. Even when its diplomacy remained concerned about growing Great Power rivalry in the Indian Ocean, New Delhi's primary target was the Western naval Powers and their allies. Yet, also driving India and its support for the IOZP was the quest to remove itself from any arms control regime in the Indian Ocean. Holding the Great Powers responsible solely for IOR's militarisation and restricting the IOZP from addressing any local imbalances of power assured that India's regional primacy, achieved in the aftermath of the 1971 war, would remain intact. IOZP therefore became a diplomatic instrument for Indian IOR hegemony. The policy of selective alignment with the Soviet Union underwent some major changes in the period between late 1976 and 1979 largely because of changes in India's domestic politics.

Indo-Soviet relations suffered some setbacks in the period between 1977 and 1979, primarily due to a change in India's domestic political milieu. As Gandhi exited office in early 1977, the Soviets were apprehensive of the policies of the new Janata Party government that Moscow considered as "rightist" reactionaries. The new premier, Morarji Desai, wanted to realign India towards "genuine nonalignment" from what he perceived as Gandhi's pro-Soviet bias.⁹¹ Moscow's concern about the new government's policies was evident from the Desai's first meeting with the Soviet leadership in April 1977. Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko was not only apprehensive about whether "the [1971] Indo-Soviet Treaty will be fully respected

by the new government,” but also expressed a fear that “India will now lurch towards the United States at the cost of the Soviet Union.”⁹² For Desai, it was an ideological conflict: as he told Gromyko, “you need not accept my ideology nor will I accept yours.”⁹³ The stage was set for Indo–Soviet relations to worsen. On the other hand, Indo–American relations improved considerably with the visit of the new American president, Jimmy Carter, in March 1978. Desai also tried to balance India’s dependence on Soviet defence equipment, something clearly motivated by his policy of steering India away from the Moscow’s ambit and practicing “genuine nonalignment.”⁹⁴

This constituted the domestic political context in which India’s policies on IOZP and Great Power involvement in the Indian Ocean underwent a balancing act. Desai’s New Delhi welcomed Carter’s declaration in March 1977 to undertake negotiations with the Soviet Union on demilitarising the Indian Ocean. As the Embassy at Washington told the MEA, the Carter Administration is “not interested in a cosmetic agreement but in achieving very substantive progress in Indian Ocean demilitarization.”⁹⁵ Equally welcome was Carter’s approach to delink talks on the Indian Ocean with other disarmament initiatives like the on-going Soviet–American Strategic Arms Limitation Talks and Naval Arms Limitation Talks [NALT]. Lastly, the Embassy opined that if the Soviet Union reciprocated positively to American overtures, the “eventual dismantling of the Diego Garcia base is more than a theoretical possibility.”

The change in Indian attitude was now in the offing. Desai reversed India’s policy on not acknowledging Soviet military bases in the Indian Ocean. Until now, New Delhi had always desisted from openly questioning the Soviet naval presence in the Indian Ocean, considered largely a reaction to American naval activity. In a briefing prepared for the foreign minister in June 1977, the MEA for the first time acknowledged that India’s approach to the American versus Soviet naval presence had been less than impartial in the past. As an internal memorandum stated, “We have generally viewed USSR’s increasing naval presence in the Indian Ocean as a reaction to the Western presence, symbolised by Diego Garcia. To some extent our continuous criticism of Diego Garcia while ignoring the availability of exclusive facilities to the USSR in some littoral states of the Indian Ocean has created the impression that we have been less than impartial on this question.”⁹⁶ Soon after, Desai openly questioned the Soviet military presence in the Indian Ocean. While responding to an assertion by an Indian Member of Parliament that the Soviet Union had no bases in the Indian Ocean, Desai argued, “The Hon’ble member is wrong in stating that the Soviet Union has no base whatsoever. It has its own sphere of influence. That cannot be denied. It is a race between the two powerful nations. It is from that we have to save Asia.

That is what we are engaged in.”⁹⁷ It was indeed a major change in India’s policy on the IOZP.

NALT began in earnest in June 1977. Even when the beginning of these negotiations indicated progress on IOZP, difficulties persisted. During the first round of negotiations, as India’s UN permanent representative reported to the MEA, Soviet–American differences were apparent in a number of areas: territorial limits of the Indian Ocean; the issue of adjacent forces in the Mediterranean; the military presence of American allies like France and Britain; and most important, disagreement on what constituted military bases.⁹⁸ Nevertheless, for New Delhi, this was a positive development. It indicated the extension of the spirit of *détente* to the IOR.⁹⁹ It also shifted focus back to the Great Powers, providing a much-needed reprieve for Indian diplomacy at the UN.¹⁰⁰ Soon after the first round of talks were completed, the Embassy at Moscow reported on their content to the MEA.¹⁰¹ Two observations were particularly relevant in terms of India’s negotiating position. First, as the Embassy argued, the negotiations were strictly bilateral: “both sides seemed to have confined it to the two superpowers.” Second, rather than complete demilitarisation of the IOR, the talks had concentrated on the “freezing” and “stabilization” of their respective naval presence in the Indian Ocean and restricted discussion to strategic weapons rather than a conventional naval presence. The Embassy, therefore, suggested that India should consult the Soviets and Americans on “participation by locals and take a policy decision on it.”¹⁰² New Delhi should “also suggest that agenda be broadened to include both strategic and tactical presence of the non-littoral states.” The MEA’s opinion, however, differed. Local participation appeared unproductive largely because “some countries might make a demand on the larger littoral states like India or Indonesia to consider limiting or reducing their own naval presence in the Indian Ocean.”¹⁰³ Not only would it be inconsistent with earlier declarations on IOZP, it could cause India “a lot of embarrassment.” The MEA agreed with the Embassy on the issue of “demilitarization” *vis-à-vis* a mere “stabilization” of the Great Power naval presence. However, it considered Moscow talks as the first step towards the eventual elimination of a foreign military presence in the region, now unworthy of interference.¹⁰⁴

The MEA was also concerned that unlike Washington, Moscow was reluctant to keep New Delhi in the loop over the on-going negotiations. As the head of MEA’s East European Division told the Soviet *chargé d’affaires* in New Delhi, the “US had tried to explain its position” but had also “substantively given more information about the Moscow talks” compared to the Soviet Union.¹⁰⁵ However, it was only after the third round of talks between the United States and the Soviet Union in December 1977 that Moscow decided to send its chief negotiator L.I. Mendelevitich to India. A number of factors influenced this decision. As Somalia attacked Ethiopia, the Soviet

Union along with Cuba came to the aid of Addis Ababa. As this territorial dispute intensified in late 1977, Somalia decided to evict the Soviets from their naval facility in Berbera for supporting the Ethiopians. As Moscow lost its only naval base on the Indian Ocean, its desire to come to an early settlement on the Ocean increased considerably. In this respect, the littoral and the non-aligned countries were an important pressure group.

Yet, the Indian and Soviet positions over NALT negotiations differed substantially, evident in an MEA memorandum prepared to co-ordinate its position during talks with Mendelevitch.¹⁰⁶ First, the Soviets wanted a precise definition of military activity in terms of ship-days and tonnage of naval forces, but New Delhi considered it an unnecessary complication: it was impossible to measure naval activity “with precision.” Second, Moscow desired that the definition of the Indian Ocean should include waters adjacent to Australia and Tanzania. The MEA considered this stipulation inimical to an early agreement between the two Great Powers. Third, if the Soviet Union wanted American allies and their naval presence included in the agreement, India’s position was that “tactically it may be advantageous to reach an agreement on US and USSR presence” first. The Indian and Soviet views also differed over NALT about the inclusion of adjacent waters like the Mediterranean Sea. Moscow wanted inclusion; New Delhi considered it a subject of separate arms limitation negotiations. The most important difference, however, was Soviet insistence on including the naval presence of the littoral states within the scope of the agreement. Moscow insisted on considering the naval strength of littoral states allied to the United States, such as Iran, Pakistan, and Thailand, in the arms limitation negotiations. This ploy was unacceptable to India as it could possibly restrict its naval expansion. Therefore, for New Delhi, “even if a littoral state was an ally of a foreign power or has a military assistance programme, its own naval strength is not relevant to an agreement between USA and USSR.”¹⁰⁷ These differences continued to persist after Mendelevitch’s visit to New Delhi in January 1978. If Moscow’s intention was to gain India’s diplomatic support for its position, the new government in New Delhi was in no mood to revert to the pro-Soviet stance of its predecessor. In fact, even as the Americans increased their naval presence in the Indian Ocean in light of the Somali–Ethiopian conflict, the Indian foreign minister desisted from making any outright criticism in Parliament and instead pointed to the “naval presence of other great powers in the area,” that is the Soviet Union.¹⁰⁸

As the crisis in the Horn of Africa worsened, NALT came to a grinding halt.¹⁰⁹ Both Great Powers increased their naval presence considerably.¹¹⁰ Notwithstanding NALT’s eventual failure, Desai’s government endeavoured to flip India’s policy of “selective alignment” in the Indian Ocean towards the West. The steady progress in bilateral Indo–American relations, especially with Carter’s visit to India, decreased New Delhi’s threat perception of

American intervention in the region against India's geopolitical interests. Conversely, New Delhi's insistence on equating the two Great Powers led to serious differences with the Soviet Union. With Desai, Moscow lost the diplomatic support it had hitherto enjoyed from New Delhi concerning its IOZP policies. The Indian foreign minister's visit to Beijing in February 1979 and New Delhi's hesitance in recognising communist Kampuchea further distanced the two erstwhile strategic partners. Moscow's disappointment with India's foreign policy and specifically New Delhi's approach to IOZP was evident in a June 1979 meeting between Desai and Brezhnev. On Desai's insistence that Moscow reopen the talks on the Indian Ocean with the Americans, Brezhnev's irritation was palpable:

the necessary condition [for IOZP] is that all the old military bases should be destroyed and there should be no new bases created there. The Soviet Union does not have any bases in this region and does not organize the movement of strategic forces. Therefore, it is not responsible for tension in this region. It is the USA and their allies who have their bases as on Diego Garcia and they continue to indulge in the movement of big naval forces... . [we] cannot accept the thesis of great power rivalry in this region which attempts to place on the same footing the USSR and USA.¹¹¹

Yet, India's support for NALT also helped it avoid constant attempts by smaller littoral states to limit its naval expansion. As the burden of the IOZP fell on Great Power shoulders, India could pursue ambitions of naval superiority without inviting unnecessary scrutiny. In the 1970s, therefore, the IOZP involved a diplomatic strategy to pursue an Indian version of the Monroe Doctrine in South Asia. These ambitions became more concrete in the 1980s when the Indian Navy underwent a massive expansion in its capabilities.¹¹²

India's engagement with the IOZP is neither a tale of Nehru's *Moralpolitik* nor an example of a non-aligned foreign policy. In its essence, it symbolises India's adaptation to *Realpolitik* in an anarchic international system. Notwithstanding the rhetoric of India's disavowal of the balance of power, India's engagement with the Great Powers in the Indian Ocean reflects a classic example of how a materially deficient state could use Great Power competition to not only secure its national interests but also advance its regional ambitions. India avowed a distaste for power politics; nonetheless, its material incapacity and quest for security forced New Delhi to align selectively with the Great Powers during the Cold War. If India first held the hands of the West to balance the Chinese threat, it swiftly aligned with the Soviet Union to grapple with a fluid strategic environment in the early 1970s. Alignment with the Soviet Union was much stronger because, for the first time since independence, New Delhi faced hostility from a Great Power, the United States. Moreover, this policy of selective alignment also helped India retain its strategic autonomy as well as advance its regional ambitions

because Great Powers also required regional Powers like India to advance their diplomatic and strategic influence outside their dominant spheres of influence, that is the non-aligned countries and the littoral of the Indian Ocean. Whilst supporting the IOZP, India retained its ambitions both to be a future nuclear and a regional naval Power in the Indian Ocean. As an instrument of peace, IOZP was India's tool for hegemony in the region. Lastly, Nehru's shadow over the Indian foreign policy in terms of its idealist streak has both been overstated and under-researched. India's IOZP record busts the myth that Indian foreign policy has remained relatively immune to a foreign policy framework based on balance of power politics. Rather, it shows New Delhi's remarkable adaptation to the same.

This historical analysis also has some relevance for the current debate on the strategic churning of the IOR. First, with China's rise and expanding naval strength, a new Great Power rivalry in the Indian Ocean now exists.¹¹³ Once again, India has developed a close strategic partnership with the Americans, this time against creeping Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean.¹¹⁴ This Indo-American strategic alignment is often argued as a distinctly post-Cold War phenomenon, a result of a realist turn in Indian foreign policy after the Cold War. Yet, as this historical analysis reveals, it is a repetition of India's Cold War playbook. *Realpolitik* impulses in Indian foreign policy have a much older pedigree than usually acknowledged in the literature.

Second, a major debate is now taking place on the Indian Ocean littoral about the Ocean's denuclearisation. In February 2017, the Pakistani foreign minister, Sartaz Aziz, expressed fears over the Indian Ocean's growing nuclearisation and appealed for the establishment of the IOZP.¹¹⁵ Seven months later, the Sri Lankan president reiterated a similar desire.¹¹⁶ Pakistan's renewed interest in the IOZP emanates from a strategic concern: India's submarine-based nuclear deterrent.¹¹⁷ Islamabad's strategy is to highlight the dangers of a nuclear arms race in the Indian Ocean as the two South Asian Powers expand their nuclear forces and develop new delivery capabilities. For Sri Lanka, on the other hand, IOZP may help balance the growing strategic rivalry in the Indian Ocean between New Delhi and Beijing. As both these Asian Powers jostle for regional influence, smaller littoral states find themselves in a diplomatic tight spot. India's record on the IOZP negotiations during the Cold War, however, leaves very little optimism for any denuclearisation of the Indian Ocean. Even during the heyday of India's nuclear disarmament diplomacy, New Delhi resisted any attempts to denuclearise the Indian Ocean lest it mean forfeiting its nuclear weapons programme. Having braved the pressures of its own foreign policy ideas as well as international pressure for more than one-half century, India's participation in denuclearising the Indian Ocean in the current strategic scenario is nothing more than a dream.

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