CHAPTER IV

INDIA AND THE INDIAN OCEAN
The present Chapter seeks to examine India's responses and reactions to the developments and dynamics in the Indian Ocean in terms of strategic importance and security perceptions from 1972 to 1979. The present effort is to trace the evolution of India's security perspectives on the Indian Ocean as a strategic arena and the relevant priority this region was accorded in its security considerations.

As mentioned earlier, the Indian victory in the 1971 war provided a new security perception of the surrounding geo-political environment among the Indian policy makers. The victory considerably elevated the status and position of India as a dominant power in South Asia. But the new found position also compelled India to consider a broadened security scenario and a widened strategic spectrum. One of the major dimensions in this context is the Indian ocean region and the volatile dynamics in this area from 1972 to 1979.

By the turn of the seventies, the Indian ocean acquired a vital focus in the major powers' strategies, particularly those of the United States and the Soviet Union. The British withdrawal from East of Suez in 1968, the United States naval fleet movements in this region, the creation of the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT), the Diego Garcia issue, the Soviet naval build up to counter the moves of the United States - all these indicated
the growing importance of the Indian in International Politics in Politico-strategic terms. 1

The 1973 Arab-Israeli war and the subsequent oil embargo flared up the tensions in the crucial Persian Gulf and led to the inexorable involvement of Great Powers in this region. The United States had been increasingly involved, particularly since 1973, in the affairs of the Indian ocean region and of the littoral states. The involvement of one super power automatically provided opportunities for the other thereby making the region a focal point of international attention. 2

The growing relevance of the Indian ocean in international politics drew inexorably the littoral and hinterland nations into the whirlwind

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of Great Power politics. India, one of the largest of littoral countries, having 7,500 Kms of coastline, had genuine reasons to be concerned about these developments that were taking place in this strategic arena. In the initial years as mentioned earlier India had paid minimal attention towards the Indian ocean. But the situation changed quite substantially by the advent of seventies, for India, not only because of the aforementioned international developments but also due to the 1971 war in which the Indian navy played a very crucial role. After 1971, the newly found strength of India reflected itself to some extent in its widening security perspective. The favourable balance of power after 1971 war made it both necessary and expedient for India to focus more on the Indian ocean and the related developments.3

The 1974 atomic test also furthered India's security concerns over the Indian ocean region. While nuclear capability substantiated India's status already raised in the wake of victory in the 1971 war, it also enhanced considerably India's

stake in its wider surroundings which obviously included the Indian ocean. For the first time, India achieved a transitory, if not permanent stability on its borders—landwise, with the obsessive Pakistani threat cut to size and China's relaxed response to India's overtures for reconciliation of relations. India increasingly perceived the need for consolidation of its overall position and strengthen its maritime front. 4

In the new scenario, two weak points of India were its navy and its vulnerability on the sea-front. Strategic analysts projected that in the new circumstances, the threat to India, as one of the major littoral countries, could come mostly from the sea-lanes and an impending maritime conflict. Alternatively there could be Great Power conflict and the fall-out effects of this conflict would have to be borne by the littoral countries. 5 Given


5. For this projection, see Geoffrey Kemp, "Threats from Sea: Sources for Asian Maritime Conflict", Orbis, vol. 19, no. 3, Fall 1975, pp. 1037-57.
this projections by strategic analysts, it was quite natural that India should have reformulated its policy towards the Indian ocean as a strategic arena.

As mentioned earlier, the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, oil crisis and the 1974 nuclear test by India— all these events clearly indicated that the region was the potential arena for power politics. The new found wealth of oil, minerals, sea-bed resources in this region added to the existing strategic importance of the Indian ocean. Thus both in terms of geo-politics and socio-economic factors, this region was fast emerging as centre of impending crises of power politics.6

Ever since the development of sub-marine Launched Ballistic Missiles (SLBMs), the mobility and attack-range of the Great Powers depended on

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their control of sea-lanes and oceanic power.

The strategic location of the "Choke points" in the world waterways further added significance to the control of oceanic waterways. The Indian Ocean region was increasingly plagued by Great Power involvement mainly due to three major factors: (a) the prevailing instabilities within the region which themselves were a product of complex forces, (b) the crucial importance attached to the Persian Gulf and surrounding strategic locations by the United States and the Soviet Union in their efforts to gain mastery over these vital areas and (c) the intra-regional elites' perceptual divergences, matched by extra-regional interests leading to external forces' involvement and intervention.7

For the purposes of the present analysis, it may be pointed out that only the Super Powers i.e. the USA and the USSR, have an capability of severe security threats to some or all of the littoral

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countries' combined strength. So India's responses and policies need to be examined in the context of the naval build-up of these two powers, rather than by relating it to that of the whole other Eastern powers like the U.K., France or West Germany or a country like China who have so far had only marginal naval strength compared to that of the two Super Powers. More important is the fact that by the sheer wide range of interests and capacities, it is the Super Powers alone which play a vital role in this region.8

Whatever may be the rational explanation for the naval build-up in this region of the two Powers, two things are unassailably acceptable: (a) the naval build-up of the two Powers in the period understudy was on ascending level, (b) As a consequence of this, the region was increasingly becoming a hotbed of Super Power politics and a possible theatre of confrontations, major and minor.9

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The Super Powers' naval build-up in this region was not a sudden product of seventies. But in the seventies, the naval rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union peaked up in the Indian Ocean region. By the end of 1970s, the United States had 32 combat and support vessels. Importantly, this figure is in exclusion of NATO ships in the region. 10 The United States has vital naval bases at subic bay, Cdark air base in philippines, Diego Garcia in the Indian ocean and stretches its range of activities from the tip of South Africa across Bahrain and Masira in the Persian Gulf upto New Zealand coast in the east. 11

The Soviet Union has also maintained a consistent and increasingly felt presence in the Indian ocean since 1968. By the end of seventies, the strength of Soviet naval forces was estimated to be around 21 ships consisting of wide variety


of naval forces till 1977, the Soviet Union had its base at Berbera. It has also acquired the naval installation at Socotra in the Arabian sea, the Ethiopia Dahlak archipelago and perim, the Aden Port of South Yemen. In 1979, the Soviet Union is reported to have the Camranh Bay from Vietnam. The Soviet Union also reportedly tried to acquire the Gan base from Maldives and the Diego Suarez from Madagascar, but could not succeed.

The setting up of the U.S. Rapid Deployment Force (R.D.F.) resulted in increased tensions in the region. The slim chances of success of the 1977-78 Naval Arms Limitation talks (NALT) faded away in the wake of the developments in the form of Ethiopia - Somalia conflict, the fall of Shah of Iran and the Soviet entry into Afghanistan.

II

India put up a stiff resistance to the introduction of Super Power politics and regionalization


of global rivalry in the Indian Ocean region. Particularly India very sharply reacted to the U.S. role in the proliferation of insecurity and destabilization in the region. Repeatedly India issued appeals and declarations to the United States to keep away from the Indian Ocean region, in terms of naval forces' concentration and presence.\(^\text{15}\)

During the period under study, India voiced its concern at the Super Power rivalry, the resultant tensions and instabilities affecting the peace and security of the region. India's apprehensions mainly lay in the interventionist postures of the two Super Powers. India was not merely concerned about its own security per se; instead, it considered any threat to its surroundings as potential dangers to its own position as these would ultimately percolate deeply influencing its strategic environment.\(^\text{16}\)

To counter the super power politics in this region India's approach was two-pronged: (a) On the
one hand, to tackle the issue on the political front by issuing statements and raising voice at all the available fora - national, regional and international. In this context, Indian moves for declaring the Indian Ocean as a zone of Peace (IOZOP) can be mentioned as a significant example. 

(b) Second, India tried to strengthen its own naval forces from time to time by augmenting its naval strength through relevant technology - thereby developing the hitherto neglected and ignored Navy as a self-reliant and strong fighting force. 

India's policy towards the region was underlined by the basic assumption that it had a vital stake in and around its neighbourhood and to keep it free and away from cold or hot wars and power politics of the Great Powers. It consistently maintained that the military presence or build-up of major Powers around its shores was quite against its basic core of national interests. Following the same lines of argument, India advocated strongly for the implementation of the peace zone proposal in the Indian Ocean.

17. For an analysis of India's responses and policy posture, see P.K.S. Namboodri, J.P. Anand and Sreedar, n. 20, particularly the Chapter titled "India's Response", pp. 221-48.
Proceeding further it is necessary to grasp the fundamental implications of the Zone of Peace proposal. By the implementation of the Zone of Peace proposal, the following elements would come into force: (a) Warding off of external attempts to influence or to gain control over the affairs of the hinterland and littoral countries, (b) establishment of a demilitarised region with no outside military or nuclear vessels stationing or passing through the waters of the Indian Ocean, (c) denial of naval bases or port call facilities for military or related purposes to any external Power, particularly to the Two Super Powers and (d) evolution of an infra-oceanic community to protect the peace, stability and maritime interests of the region vis-a-vis the external forces.

Even though it was Sri Lanka which moved the United Nations General Assembly resolution calling

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18. Here, the attention is mainly centered on the security implications and interests of India, in Supporting IOZOP proposal. Hence, the legal and related proceedings at the U.N. are not elaborated.

for the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace (vide U.N. General Assembly Resolution 2832 (XXVI), 16 December 1971), it was India that staunchly spearheaded the initiatives for such a concept.

By the turn of the seventies, India viewed with greater concern the naval build-up and military bases establishment by major Powers. India's opposition to military and naval bases had been expressed even earlier when the British Indian Ocean territory (BIOT) was created at the fag end of the sixties. Speaking at the Lusaka Summit of Non-Aligned Movement, Mrs. Gandhi commented, "we would like the Indian Ocean to be an area of peace and cooperation. Military bases of outside powers would create tensions and great power rivalry". 20

When the United Kingdom allowed some of its former colonial territories to be used for military purposes, India strongly protested against this. Speaking in this regard, in the U.N. General Assembly, India's chief representative, Samar Sen, said "the action of British Government detaching certain islands from its colonial territories to form the so-called British Indian Ocean territory for

military purposes cannot promote peace but only tension."21

Y.B. Chavan, the then External Affairs Minister, speaking at the Lima Conference of Non-Aligned Foreign Ministers on 21 August 1975 demanded the big Powers "to leave the Indian Ocean in peace and not to introduce an arms race in the area to serve their narrow, national or strategic interests and ambitions."22

Even when the Janata Government came into power in 1977, India's stand continued to remain same regarding the issue of the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace. In a Statement, Samerendra Kendu, the then Minister of State for External Affairs declared on 30 October 1978 that "India is keen to ensure that the Indian Ocean which is of potential tensions, is kept free from and of great powers."23

A.B. Vajpayee, the then External Affairs Minister, clearly put forward the Indian view, when he stated, in March 1979 that "the increased military and

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22. Ibid.
23. Indian Express (New Delhi), 31 October 1978.
naval presence in the area (the Indian Ocean) and fear of involvement of great Powers can have adverse political and economic consequences which would not ease but only add to the tensions in this vital region, which has already seen dramatic upheavals is still seething with tensions and uncertainty."24

India also opposed the construction of the U.S. Base on Diego Garcia in this regard. It was felt in some circles in India that the U.S. presence posed a potential security threat which could act as an interventionary source in any future conflict situation following the precedent set by the United States 7th Fleet U.S.S. Enterprise entry into Bay of Bengal in the Indo-Pak war of 1971.25


Expressing concern over the Diego Garcia base and the implications of militarization of the Indian Ocean Region, Mrs. Gandhi put forward the Indian viewpoint candidly, "We feel that one presence attracts another and that military build-up by some single power sets in motion a vicious circle." 26

Even at the United Nations, India took a leading role in pleading and arguing for the concept of the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace. 27 The Indian representative at the First Committee of the United Nations on the Indian Ocean spelled out the Indian viewpoint that "India, together with all the Non-Aligned countries has subscribed to the concept of Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace. My delegation will look forward to holding consultations and negotiations with various parties.


27. For an account of the United Nations efforts to convert the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace, see "United Nations initiatives in Making the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace" NEU PERSPECTIVES, vol. 10, No. 1, January 1980 pp. 34-35.
to achieve the objective that would eventually result in the Indian Ocean being constituted into a zone of peace.\textsuperscript{28}

India as a Member of the United Nations Ad-hoc Committee to observe the progress of achievement of the Indian Ocean as a zone of peace repeatedly voiced its views for the elimination of Big Power presence and bases. But in the process, it had to face divergent opinions also, within the South Asian region itself.\textsuperscript{29} Even though Pakistan and Sri Lanka voted in favour of the United Nations proposal for zone of peace in the Indian Ocean, there was not any unanimity in terms of threat perceptions among India, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan. Those differing perceptions certainly did not strengthen the Indian campaign for the speedy realization of the United Nations proposal.\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{28} Quoted by K.S. Sidhu, \textit{The Indian Ocean, A Zone of Peace: A Study of Indian Viewpoint} (New Delhi, 1983), p. 81.


As far as the Western Powers' reaction is concerned, it was mostly negative. Whenever any international initiative was moved for the Indian ocean as a zone of peace, the west led by the United States opposed it. Particularly, the United States did not like the Indian complacency in condoning the Soviet Naval presence in the region, while at the same time virulently attacking the western naval build-up. (31) Only the Soviet Union showed sympathetic albeit partial support for the Indian moves. (32) Thus India faced strong opposition, in its objective of making the Indian ocean as a Zone of Peace, from the Great Powers because of the latter's vested geo-politico-economic interests.

It is not difficult to assess the dismal progress of the proposal of zone of peace in the Indian Ocean. But if IOZOP is even partially realised, it would imply definitely cutting the size of major Powers in the Indian Ocean. That is why, the negotiations on the successful realisation of the IOZOP never came through

as all the major powers one way or other side diluted
the substance of the proposal or complicated it so
that no implementation would be possible in the near
future. As the strategic-politico-security interests
of major powers would be deeply hurt by this proposal
they were not willing to see through the proposal for
IOZOP. India many a time criticized the "obstructionist"
forces and "Conservative and Colonial" tendencies that
came in the way of the Indian Ocean being a zone of
peace. (33)

India also tried for alternative ways of
reaching the ideal of zone of peace. For example,
India also voiced its support for the Indian Ocean
Community both for the purposes of (a) cooperation
and (b) as a conciliatory machinery. This was at
the Belgrade Conference of NAM in 1978. This is
just an indication of India's commitment for an
establishment of region which could be insulated
from the influences of major powers.

(33) For the limitations of regional powers, see
G.S. Bhargava, "Indian Ocean: A Role for
Regional Powers", Far Eastern Economic
30-34; for accounts of the stalled Indian
Ocean as a Zone of Peace Proposal, see Robert
J. Hanks, "Indian Ocean Negotiations: Rocks
and Shoals", Strategic Digest, Vol. 8, No. 9
September 1978, pp. 29-38; C.S.R. Murthy,
"India and the Dead-locked Zone of Peace in
the Indian Ocean", IDSA Journal, Vol. 17,
No. 1, July-September 1984, pp. 87-100.
India being virtually part of the Indian ocean, having a lengthy coast-line exposed from three sides on the maritime front, its economic development and security are defined by the politics prevailing on the maritime front. The Indian view of concept of peace Zone is a blend of the idealism of its anti-colonial struggle, and the pragmatism of protecting its national interests. India remained alive to the maritime threats to its economy, territorial security stability and peace - on the whole its very survival - because of its peninsular geo-political location and stood committed to the elimination of the external presence which posed a serious threat to India's security. (34)

III

As has been pointed out earlier, after the 1971 war, India started paying increasing attention to the status and development of its naval forces.

By the end of the sixties itself, India had felt the need to take a fresh look at, for the long time

neglected naval wing of the Indian Armed Forces. Perhaps the sixties can be termed as the decade of increasing awareness on the part of India about the dimensions of its naval expansion. It was during this period only, there began an open discussion about strengthening the maritime component in the Indian Military strategy.

Before the 1971 War, India was not very much concerned about the naval build-up and its expansion. It can also be argued that because of the economic and resource constraints, India could be hardly be overly concerned about its naval forces. India's obsession with land based threats from Pakistan and China coupled by the assumption that the Indian ocean was the "British Lake"—had made India's approach towards its naval forces complacent.

As a keen analyst had put it, "India's own maritime heritage ... has never been one of the

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domination of international oceanic highways. Indian Naval strategy has always been strictly coastal and shore based. What is required today, is an objective analysis of the overall threat to India — not an isolated single service appreciation of putative sea-borne threat or one heavily influenced by an exaggerated concept of our maritime responsibilities in the Indian Ocean. (37) (emphasis added).

But the role of navy in the 1971 war had brought about anew perception of naval forces' role in India's defence calculations. The need for a stronger navy commensurate with and suiting the growing needs of a rising Power like India, was keenly felt in India around this time. A former high-ranked military official has commented that in wake of 1971 war, "India's navy shot into the limelight with success so spectacular that they leave one gasping. Inclined to be treated as the Cinderella of the Armed Forces, the Navy has virtually overnight dispelled doubts about the justifiability of the money that has been on her. She has proved that she is not just the show-piece that people were inclined to believe she

was. She has demonstrated in no uncertain terms and manner that she is capable of inflicting serious damage to ships and harbour installations when required to do so."(38)

After this important turning point, the allocation for navy in the defence budget shot up automatically. (39) From 8 percent of Defence capital budget in 1965-66, the Navy's share had dramatically risen to almost 49 per cent in 1973-74. So by the end of 1974, Navy was no more a lingering appendage to the Indian War Machinery, often left ignored. Since the seventies, it has grown a long way and became an indispensable aspect of India's defence policy and strategic postures following a deliberate re-evaluation of the Indian Navy. In the context of changing Strategic scenario in the Persian Gulf, South China sea and the Indian Ocean region. (40)


To illustrate the growing importance of the Navy in India's strategic perspectives, particularly in the period from 1972 to 1979, the reliable indicators to be observed are the level of defence expenditure on the Navy, the relative and comparative share of navy in the defence budget of India. In the years 1972 to 1979, the Navy's share was consistently on the rise and there were minimal fluctuations in the hike-up of its share in the budgetary allocations compared to that of the Army and Airforce. From a mere 69 crores of rupees in 1971-72, Navy's share in the defence went up to a whopping size of 206 crores of rupees by the end of 1979, representing nearly a three times increase over a period of ten years. It may be noted here that by comparison in the same period both Army and Air Force registered a two times increase only. (Vide Appendix III).

In terms of manpower commitment, another important indicator, Indian Navy strength increased greatly from a mere 28,000 in 1971-72 to 47,000 by the year 1979. In the Army and Air Force by comparison during the same period, the rate of increase has been marginal. (Vide Appendix IV).
Despite its low profile policy vis-a-vis the Indian ocean in the early years of independence, India consistently evinced a policy of protecting its interests in the region. It was fully alive to the fact that India has inalienable and inherent interests and rights in this region as the Indian ocean provided not only a life-line to the bulk of India's external trade but also gave completeness to the strategic location of India in international politics. That way India kept the Indian ocean in its strategic priorities albeit at a low level, in view of contextual immediacy and security expediency. (41)

The complacency of India towards the maritime strategy was gradually shattered first with the conflict with Pakistan in 1965, wherein Indian Navy participated in actual war proceedings, the 1968 British declaration of withdrawal of East of Suez, the Soviet naval fleets' movements, the Indo-Pak war of 1971, the U.S. 7th fleet movement (with the U.S.S. Enterprise) into Bay of Bengal, the 1973 oil-crisis, Arab-Israel conflict, the 1974 India's atomic

test, the base building exercises of the United States and the Soviet Union in this region - all clearly showed that India had to play a more active role in the Indian Ocean and in the strategic region that it constitutes.

An analytical study observes in this context in a very succinct manner, "since 1971 substantial funds have been dedicated to the Indian Navy, resulting in its emergence as a blue water fleet. This force expansion is intended to increase New Delhi's ability to (a) defend its coasts, sea-lanes of communication and island possessions, (b) project military power throughout the Indian Ocean, (c) influence the policies of the states along the Indian Ocean littoral, (d) inhibit the activities of extra-regional Powers in waters adjacent to the sub-continent", (42) coupling all these in concert with the the diplomatic initiatives like IOZOP, supporting the move for the resprocession of Diego Garcia base from the United States to Mauritius and so on.

Throughout the period under study, India remained alive to the changing trends in the security environment in and around the Indian Ocean and made concerted efforts to revitalize its naval forces as also worked assiduously for the elimination of the external power presence and rivalry in the region.