



The Concept of Peace Zone in The Indian Ocean: Past, Present And Future

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KEYWORDS :

Historical legacy

The Indian Ocean had been the scene of maritime activities from ancient times. Though the maritime activities started long ago, the expedition in the Indian Ocean region started around 3000 B.C. Asian and European had explored the Indian Ocean area sometime beginning of the Christian era. Till the 13th century, India played a dominant role in all the naval activities going in the Indian Ocean.

In the 15th Century, Vasco-da-Gama, a traveler from Portugal touched India in May 1498, marked the beginning of 'Modern Age' by replacing the exploratory phase in the history of the Indian Ocean. The entry of Vasco-di-Gama marked the beginning of an era of European domination of the eastern seas. Less than a decade Portuguese took control of all the sea routes and strategic points and imposed a virtual monopoly over the spice trade. It is interesting to note that the naval power which appeared on the scene after Portuguese, including the super powers of today have more or less, followed the strategies as initiated by the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean.

When the Portuguese established their hegemony and explored the Ocean as far as Japan, the militarization of the Oceans became an invariable feature of Oceanic trade. The Dutch contested with Portuguese to control the Asian spice trade and able to annex Malacca, Colombo and cochin (1641-63)

Dutch pressure began dissembling Portuguese overseas possession. But by the defeat of Napoleon, England required hegemony in the Indian Ocean. In the fight for eastern seas' control, Britain ousted Portuguese and Dutch from the region. Britain succeeded in controlling the region till 1971.

Indian Ocean Politics: Pre-Globalization period

During WWII, the fall of Singapore in 1942 provided that Britain could no longer wage full-scale war on the two fronts on opposite sides of the world. After the end of that war, the Dissolution of British Indian Empire, the evacuation of Sue canal and the loss of control over the canal undermined the Britain position in the East. During 1947-49 the independence of Pakistan, Ceylon and Burma, followed by the communist victory on the mainland of china reshaped the British policy in the Indian Ocean region. Consequently, Britain decision to withdraw from the region became evident.

Beginning of the Super Powers rivalry in the region

In the post war period, division of the world into the blocs got deeper, both blocs began to evolve their own strategic system of security through political alignments, for which actual possession of the territory became a secondary consideration. Both of them planned globally and the Indian Ocean area was not an exception. Since 1950, both the powers had been pursuing policies which were aimed at securing influences in the region. conflictual relations among the littoral and hinterland states provided the opportunity for super powers to gain influence and made this region an area for their cold war rivalry. The basic tenants of the interests of the Super powers may be clarified as: Political, Economic and strategic.

Us interest in the Indian Ocean region were

- 1) To ensure access to secure oil supplies at reasonable price;
- 2) To balance soviet presence and if possible reduce soviet influence;
- 3) To promote stability and peaceful change on the domestic, political and regional level;

- 4) To Pursue regional security and advance the Middle East peace process while generating the security of Israel; and
- 5) The preservation and improvement where possible of a local geopolitical balance that minimizes the risk of direct super powers' confrontation or escalation of a crisis to war, especially nuclear war.

Political Interests: These stemmed from the soviet diplomacy in the third world aiming to weaken the influence that was maintained by the western powers. Historically, Indian ocean had been under western influence and soviet union was trying to expand its leadership in the Indian ocean region which Us took as a treat to its interests.

Economic Interests: The Indian Ocean is a vital transit zone for her commercial shipping. The US wanted an uninterrupted oil supply from the Persian Gulf region. It wanted to pose itself as west's policeman in the region.

Strategic Interests: One of the principal interests of the US in acquiring a foothold in the Indian Ocean was strategic. The majority of targets on the mainland of the Soviet Union would come under easy reach of the American aircraft carrier based bombers and SLBMs. According to some military analysts the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean in the context of nuclear weapons was enhanced with the introduction of the SLBMs. The Polaris A-3 with a range of 2500 nautical miles, if deployed in the area, could cover a vital position of the Soviet central Asia. Thus the perfection of a particular weapon system enhanced the strategic importance of the region.

Soviet Interests in Indian Ocean

The Soviet naval policy in the Indian Ocean region reflected a combination of political, economic and strategic interests. The politics of competitive interests in the middle East western moves in the "arc of crisis", instability in the gulf and quest for a strategic parity determined soviet calculation of her interests in the Indian Ocean region.

Political Interests: The post Stalin policies of the Soviet Union brought third world nearer to it. The Soviet Support to non-aligned movement was central theme for her Afro-Asian policy. Furthermore, the Soviet quest for warm waters brought her into the politics of Indian Ocean region. One of the most irritating factors in the Indian Ocean politics, after US was, the Chinese expansionism so its most immediate object was to contain china.

The ideological thrust of the Soviet Union too played significant role directing its policy towards Indian Ocean region. To meet it political and ideological objectives, it concluded a number of treaties of friendship and cooperation in order to make this area less vulnerable to west.

Economic Interests: The Soviet Union had considerable economic interests in the Indian Ocean region. It was a major maritime route that linked West and East Soviet Union for almost eight months of a year. The shortest and strategically safest route between Europe and Asiatic Russia were Via Suez Canal and in the Indian Ocean. The Indian Ocean was the safest route for the Soviet Union for protecting military and other material going to Ethiopia, Angola, Vietnam and Mozambique etc, where the Soviet Union was acting in support of her friendly regimes. Fishing in the Indian Ocean was one of the most important non military maritime interests of the Soviet Union. For this purpose, it used the ports and facilities of various Indian Ocean littoral states. Oil was not much important for the Soviet Union as it was

for the western world.

Strategic Interests: Indian Ocean is more important and crucial for the Soviet Union than the US because Soviet warheads could not reach the target of the US through Indian Ocean. US military base in Diego- Garcia created havoc for the Soviet Union. Therefore, the Soviet quest for deterrence in the Indian Ocean necessitated a credible naval presence to counter the American threat to the political and security interest in the area. Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 was considered as a thrust to gain access to warm waters coveted since the days of Peter the Great.

Indian Ocean Peace Zone Proposal: Super Power Response.

The stand of both the superpowers on the Indian Ocean issue remained diverse. The US in a clear cut stance opposed the Indian Ocean Peace Zone proposal and the Soviet Union had shown some sympathy to this issue.

There were two major issues on which both the superpowers had objections. The first was that the UN resolution on the Indian Ocean was not in accordance with the international law, as far as freedom of navigation on high seas was concerned. The Second was that the Peace Zone concept was not clear in itself and was meant only for Great Power presence in the Indian Ocean. It did not say anything about the limitation of littoral without naval forces in the region.

Post Globalization Phase

With the demise of the Soviet Union, superpowers rivalry has vanished. The cold war ended in Aug 1991 and Indian Ocean region too witnessed drastic political and strategic changes. The naval competition between US and the Soviet Union declined in this region and the US being the only superpower, has increased its naval ships to respond quickly in case of any immediate crisis in the region. The action taken by the US and 36 other nations against Iraq's aggression against Kuwait (1991) showed the supremacy of the United States which was set on the ashes of erstwhile Soviet Union. Russia no longer had the capability to establish any bases in the region because it was politically pre-occupied with serious economic problems at home. Therefore, it could not be a countervailing power against the west.

In the post cold war period, the US policy is to ensure that no rival superpower is allowed to emerge in western Europe, Asia or in the territories of the former Soviet Union.

The Soviet Union's and American missiles are no longer targeted on each other's territories. The US and Soviet naval competition has declined all over the Indian Oceans region although the US presence in still prominent.

The perceived threat of any interruption in oil supply from west Asia compels the US to keep a regular vigilance in the area. It is unlikely that there will be any reduction in the US naval presence in the Diego Garcia facilities in the Indian Ocean region.

Other Powers rising interests in the Indian Ocean region.

Indian Ocean and its rim is becoming more crowded and volatile due to the ever growing interest of china, US, Japan, Australia, and other EU member states. The other powers (though small in size) like Malaysia, Pakistan, Singapore and South Korea are also expanding their activities in the region.

China's engagement in the Indian Ocean region is through its naval task and since 2008, it has deployed 25 warships. Other diplomatic maneuver shown by china is offer of Maritime silk route with neighboring countries in order to expand co-operation in tourism, trade and infrastructure and enhance Maritime co-operation. It is concluded on the Indian part that the MSR is nothing but a Chinese plot to get a naval foot hold in the Indian Ocean region. Furthermore, china is offering help in developing Maritime infrastructure in friendly countries that are willing to develop such structures.

Issues currently disturbing the Indian Ocean area

Globalization, today dominates strategic consideration. This has led to enhanced marry time security concerns, since most regional trade

is sea-borne. Indian Ocean in current scenario is characterized by insecurity and instability. The Indian Ocean is not only facing the traditional threats of influence and power but also faced with non traditional threats. These can be summarized as under.

1. Maritime Piracy: With incidents of piracy in the Indian Ocean, peaceful navigation of vessels is threatened. Somalian pirates have expanded themselves from the territorial waters to the high seas. Poverty and unemployment have led to piracy as it is seen as an alternative source of income for the coastal fishing communities.

2. Maritime Terrorism : The issue which causing great tension is terrorist and militant groups using Indian Ocean to illegally transport weapons and conduct acts of terrorism along maritime routes. Maritime Security has assumed a new dimension in the post 9-11 era. The fight against this issue received a momentum by the backing of international community.

3. Illegal Fishing: Another important challenge is illegal fishing. Sri Lankan and Pakistani fishermen are often apprehended in the territorial waters of India and Maldives and taken in to custody.

4. Human Trafficking: The Ocean route is being used for human smuggling. The disturbances in one state produces a great number of refugees that affects the other countries with population rise and results in creating tensions among many states.

5. Narco- Smuggling: Drug trafficking is an important adjunct to maritime terrorism. It is far more lucrative means of generating funds for terrorists and insurgents in the region than any other mean.

Conclusion

Since the UN resolution on Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace proposal was passed, forty four years have elapsed. The superpowers struggle for global supremacy and their competition for arms acquisition and making world vulnerable to nuclear holocaust were considered main reasons for this Endeavour. The security architecture in the Indian Ocean region has undergone fundamental transformation.

From Indian perception, the US might in region is meant to counter balance the rising might of china. India's joint ventures with US in Ocean matters can be seen as containing China's increasing influence among the littoral states of the ocean.

The thing which is concerning India the most is Beijing's strengthening of links with most of India's neighbors- Pakistan, Nepal, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri-Lanka and Maldives. China is considered to be a major competitor and threat to India's maritime interests. To prevent china from dominating the region and creating friendly regimes, India needs to improve its ties with United States and other European Union powers. India has to compete China in all aspects of Maritime concerns ranging from ship building to maritime defense.

Regional Co-operation needs to be supported by financial help to small neighboring countries. The regional associations should be converted into fund supplying associations to poor countries on the line of historical Marshall Plan and Molotov Plan.

Joint ventures in the field of fisheries by South Asian countries will not only help the poor to feed themselves and to earn money to buy other essential commodities. It will also help in reducing illegal fishing activities (Most of the time this causes Jail sentence). A consortium under the leadership of India should be created for food exploration and exploitation in the distant waters. Indian should provide naval defense umbrella to South Asian Countries so that they are not diverting they scarce funds to acquire minimum maritime defense and so that they are using this money to other developmental plans.

As countries involve themselves in other means short of war in resolving their problems, the day is not far when they don't need the UN resolution on Indian Ocean as a Zone of peace passed and this will be created automatically.

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