Great Power Competition in the Indian Ocean:
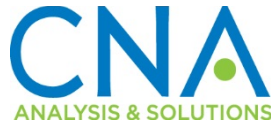## The Past As Prologue?

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Abstract

U.S. Navy planners should assume that the PLA Navy's presence in the western Indian Ocean will grow, and that new bases and places will be organized to support its expanded presence. U.S. authorities can no longer assume unencumbered freedom of action when electing to posture U.S. naval forces offshore of the Horn of Africa and other East African hotspots. If China's interests are involved and differ from Washington's, the Chinese could dispatch their own naval forces to the water offshore of the country in question.

The U.S. Navy faced similar circumstances between 1968 and 1991, when the United States and the Soviet Union competed for friends, political influence, maritime access, and bases in the western Indian Ocean region. This paper briefly discusses this period in order to provide some historical context for what might occur in the future. As Mark Twain purportedly quipped, "History does not repeat, but it often rhymes."

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Introduction

The Chinese flag has become ubiquitous on the high seas around the world, especially in the Indian Ocean where the presence of Chinese warships has become routine. The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has been conducting anti-piracy operations continuously in the Arabian Sea since December 2008. (See Figure 1 for a map of the western Indian Ocean region.)

Figure 1.　Map of the western Indian Ocean
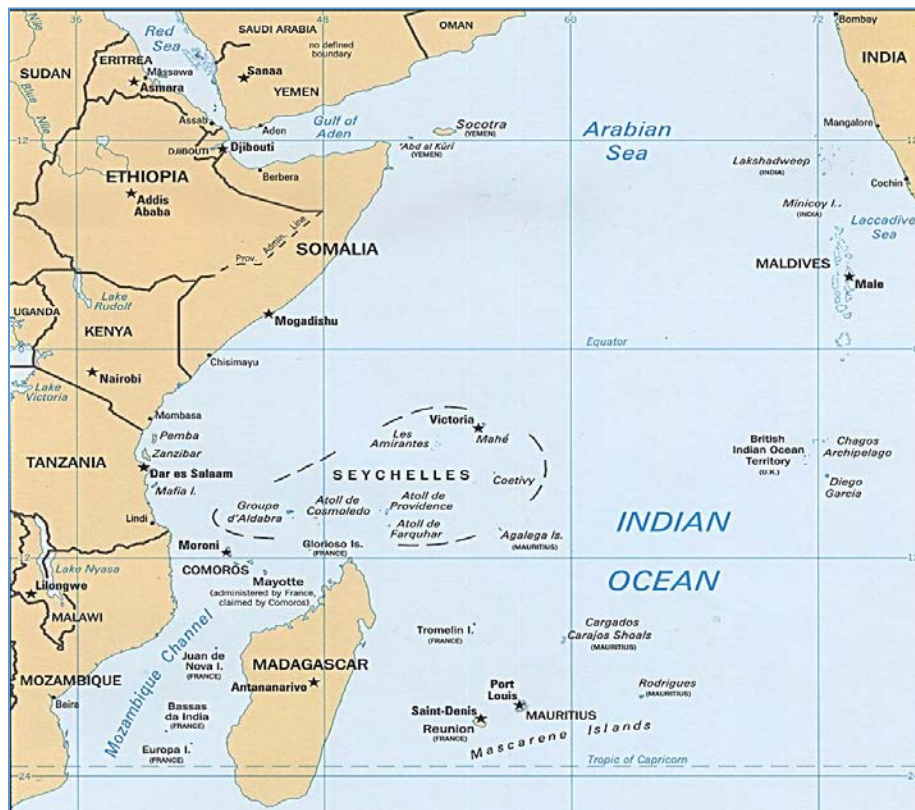
Source: Africa Center for Strategic Studies, "Maritime Security in the Western Indian Ocean," May 26, 2017, http://africacenter.org/spotlight/maritime-security-western-indian-ocean-a-discussion-with-assis-malaquias.

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In the almost nine years since that first deployment, China has adroitly blended its shipping protection mission with traditional naval diplomacy by making certain its warships routinely conduct goodwill visits and naval exercises with most of the Indian Ocean littoral countries. China's growing interest in the Indian Ocean in general and the Arabian Sea in particular is directly tied to its worries about the vulnerability of its tankers as they ply the sea lanes carrying oil from the Persian Gulf to China, as well as the large container ships that travel nearly the same sea lanes to deliver Chinese exports to the Middle East and to Europe via the Red Sea and Suez Canal. Chinese strategists are well aware of the fact that potentially hostile naval forces are present in numbers in these waters. For example, its 2015 defense white paper, entitled *China's Military Strategy,* stated:

> With the growth of China's national interests…the security of overseas interests concerning energy and resources, strategic sea lines of communication (SLOCs), as well as institutions, personnel and assets abroad, has become an imminent issue …

Over the years, official Beijing angst regarding this issue has led to a great deal of scholarly speculation over whether China would create bases along the Indian Ocean littoral in order to protect its sea lines of communication. Xi Jinping's much-ballyhooed "One Belt, One Road (OBOR)" plan to economically connect Eurasia, with all roads leading to Beijing, effectively ended that debate. To support and begin to protect the maritime portion of OBOR, also known as the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, it was necessary for Beijing to back away from its long-standing policy of criticizing other nations' overseas bases as a feature of hegemonic behavior. Beijing has come to appreciate the value of support facilities along the long maritime route across the Indian Ocean.

China is actively engaged in what could be characterized as a "place *and* base" approach for permanent and assured Indian Ocean access for its navy. It now justifies its logistics "outposts" in the western Indian Ocean as a means of contributing to regional security and development.

Construction of a Chinese facility in Djibouti is well underway, and more bases could be in the offing. When asked about Djibouti, China's foreign minister indicated that China's intent was to fulfill international obligations to protect shipping:

> We are willing to, in accordance with objective needs, responding to the wishes of host nations and in regions where China's interests are concentrated, try out the construction of some infrastructure

facilities and support facilities; I believe that this is not only fair and reasonable but also accords with international practice.[1]

According to the Department of Defense, Gwadar, Pakistan, is yet another "place" that could become a base.[2] In 2015, China obtained a 40-year lease to manage the port. Gwadar is the maritime terminus of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), an ambitious economic project that includes highways, dams, hydropower projects, railways, and pipelines. The goal is to connect Gwadar with the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in northwest China. This would provide western China with a route south to the sea and a connection to the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. Figure 2 shows a map of the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) project.

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[1] Ben Blanchard, "China launches charm offensive for overseas naval base," Reuters, March 23, 2016, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-djibouti-idUSKCN0WP300; John Lee, "China Comes to Djibouti: Why Washington Should be Worried," *Foreign Affairs Snapshot,* April 23, 2015, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/east-africa/2015-04-23/china-comes-djibouti. Ben Blanchard, "China hints more bases on way after Djibouti," CANMUA Net, March 8, 2016, http://canmua.net/world/china-hints-more-bases-on-way-514571.html. For a recent official discussion by the U.S. government on the topic of Chinese overseas access, see Department of Defense*, Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2017,* Office of the Secretary of Defense, 20 May 2017, https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2017_China_Military_Power_Report.PDF, p. 5.

[2] Ibid.

Figure 2.   One Belt, One Road (OBOR)
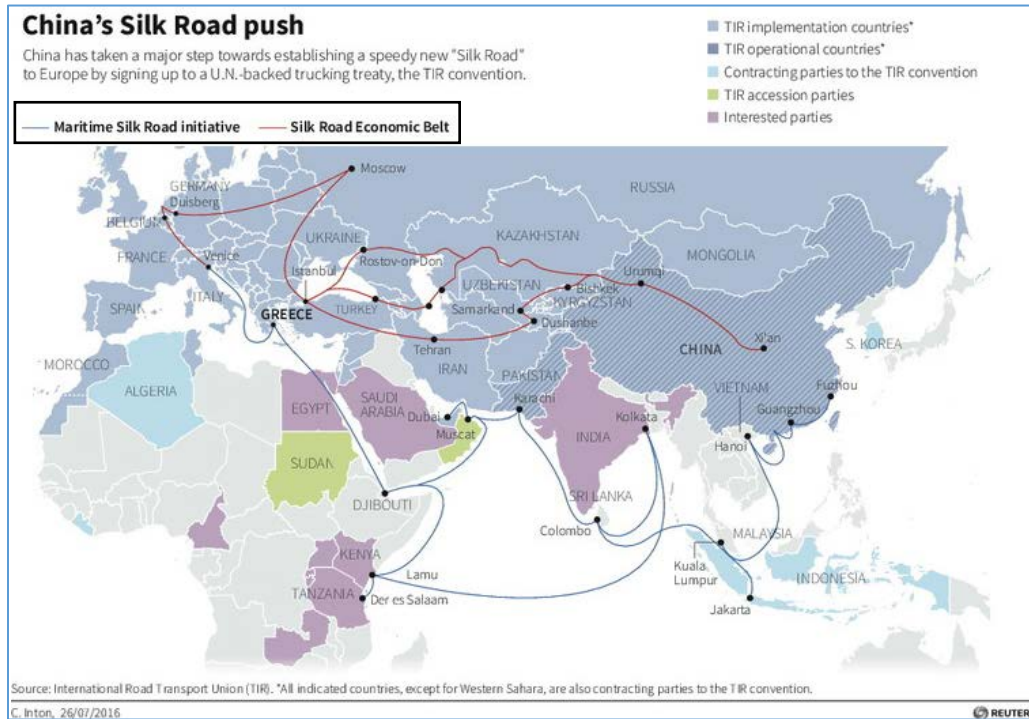
Source: Reuters Photographer/Reuters, "China's Silk Road Push," in Alice de Jonge, Oct. 30, 2017, http://theconversation.com/china-will-need-to-be-more-transparent-to-achieve-its-development-goals-67464.

In actuality, "the maritime silk road" is a series of interrelated sea lanes that run from China's major ports through the Indonesian Straits, and then along the Indian Ocean's northern littoral, grazing East Africa (including Djibouti), before transiting the Red Sea and Suez Canal into the Eastern Mediterranean. This "road" is already heavily traveled by China's (as well as other nations') shipping and is effectively "safe guarded" by predominant maritime forces already present in the Indian Ocean—the U.S. and Indian navies. In the future, as China makes significant investments along its Maritime Silk Road, as it has promised to do, it seems unlikely that Beijing will want to continue to depend upon the U.S. Navy and the Indian Navy as the primary security guarantors of these sea lanes.

This suggests that U.S. Navy (USN) planners should assume that PLA Navy presence in the western Indian Ocean will grow, and that new bases and places will be organized to support an expanded PLAN presence in the region. One long-term implication is that U.S. authorities can no longer assume unencumbered freedom of action when electing to posture U.S. naval forces off the Horn of Africa and other East African hotspots if Chinese interests are involved and differ from Washington's.

It is possible that both governments could elect to dispatch naval forces to the water offshore of the country in question.

The other implication is that the not-too-distant future may include circumstances similar to those that existed between 1968 and 1990 when the United States and the Soviet Union competed for friends, political influence, maritime access, and bases in the western Indian Ocean region.

This paper provides a short discussion of this period in order to provide some historical context for what might occur in the future. As Mark Twain purportedly quipped, "History does not repeat, but it often rhymes."

The Period of U.S.-Soviet Competition in the Indian Ocean: 1968-1991

Setting the Stage

For the first 20-odd years of the Cold War, the United States was not very active in the global competition in the Indian Ocean region. Between 1945 and 1970, the region was seen as a British—and, to a lesser degree, a French—sphere of influence; the United States was not a leading security player there.[3]

But during the final 20-odd years of the Cold War, Washington and Moscow competed for political influence in the Indian Ocean region. Each side attempted to gather "third world" countries into its camp. The Indian Ocean region was not unique in this regard—the competition went on globally—but, given the number of newly independent states that emerged in Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia following the end of World War II, the Indian Ocean littoral was a particularly active arena.

Given the relative remoteness of the Indian Ocean from the traditional areas of interest to both Washington and Moscow, gaining access for naval deployments, and eventually bases in the Indian Ocean, assumed a central role. By the late 1960s, Soviet leaders had come to appreciate the value of establishing a military presence in distant regions as an important instrument of its global third-world diplomacy. This presence was greatly facilitated by generous arms sales and grants to the many newly independent and struggling third-world nations.

The Soviet Union's decision to deploy what came to be a substantial naval presence to the Indian Ocean was also greatly facilitated by the fact that the region was already roiling with anti-Western, anti-imperialism, anti-Israel attitudes buttressed by a type of military strongman "in-your-face" nationalism inspired by Egypt's Gamal Nasser. Soviet arms sales, or outright grants, were sought by new nations that

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[3] Richard B. Remnek, "Soviet Access to Overseas Naval Support Facilities: A military and Political Analysis," in Philip S. Gillette and Willard C. Frank, eds., *The Sources of Soviet Naval Conduct* (Lexington Books, D.C. Heath and Co., 1990), pp. 251-267.

embraced socialism or Marxism as a governing model in order to guarantee their security. Soviet armament largess was also seen as a tangible expression of great power political-military support. In return, many of these countries were quite willing to grant access to the Soviet Navy.

For a time, the Soviets also had a national security objective for establishing naval presence in the Indian Ocean that was different from simply wooing third-world nations. They feared Washington intended to deploy USN SSBNs to the Indian Ocean. As the U.S. Navy began to introduce extended-range SLBMs in the late 1960s, these new iterations of the Polaris missile family and follow-on Poseidon missiles put much of the western Soviet Union within the strike range of SSBNs deployed to the Indian Ocean. As it turned out, such fears were ungrounded. Washington officially claimed it did not make any such deployments, despite putting communications facilities into Western Australia and the islands of Diego Garcia to provide coverage throughout the IO region. Despite Soviet apprehensions, the logistic difficulty of supporting SSBN presence in the Indian Ocean meant that, as a practical matter, deployments to the Indian Ocean region never made any sense to U.S. strategic planners.[4]

Nonetheless, besides naval deployments, Soviet diplomats did their best to alarm India, Sri Lanka, and other littoral states by saying that the Indian Ocean region was on the verge of becoming the latest new venue for super-power nuclear competition. As a result, in 1971 Sri Lanka took the lead in promoting a UN resolution seeking to turn the entire Indian Ocean into a nuclear weapons free zone; echoes of that attempt are still heard today. The SSBN deployment issue eventually became moot, with the introduction of the Trident D-1 missile in 1979: its 6,000-nm range eliminated any requirement for U.S. deterrent patrols in the Indian Ocean, and virtually eliminated the nuclear strategic importance of Indian Ocean for Soviet planners.[5]

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[4] For a short discussion of this issue see Walter K. Anderson, "Emerging Security Issues in the Indian Ocean: An American Perspective," in Selig Harrison and K. Subrahmanyam, eds., *Superpower Rivalry in the Indian Ocean: Indian and American Perspectives* (Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 17.

[5] K. Subrahmanyam, "Arms Limitation in the Indian Ocean: retrospect and Prospect," in Selig Harrison and K. Subrahmanyam, eds., *Superpower Rivalry in the Indian Ocean: Indian and American Perspectives*, (Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 223; for Soviet interest because of potential SSBN patrols, see especially pp. 233-34.

British withdrawal "East of Suez"

The immediate trigger for a surprising and dramatic growth in Soviet presence in and around the Horn of Africa and the adjacent northern Arabian Sea (NAS) was a direct result of decisions made in London. In January 1968, a few weeks after the devaluation of the pound, Prime Minister Harold Wilson announced that starting in 1971, British troops would be withdrawn from major military bases "East of Suez," primarily in Malaysia and Singapore as well as the Persian Gulf and the Maldives.[6] Just two months earlier, in November 1967, the British had precipitously decided to withdraw from the Crown Colony of Aden after unsuccessfully waging a five-year-long insurgency against Yemeni nationalists. Repeated guerrilla attacks by the Yemen National Liberation Front (NLF) caused the British to leave earlier than had been originally planned and without an agreement on a succeeding government. Following the British departure, the NLF seized power, and established a Marxist administration—what came to known as the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) or South Yemen. (Yemen had long been a divided state, as North Yemen had become an independent state in 1918. The two Yemens were later united, in 1990.)

Moscow moved promptly. Barely two months after the announced withdrawal from Aden, a small task force from the Soviet Pacific Fleet at Vladivostok entered the Indian Ocean and embarked on a four-month flag-showing cruise that included port calls at Madras and Bombay, India; Karachi, Pakistan; Colombo, Sri Lanka; Umm Qasr and Basra, Iraq; Bandar Abbas, Iran; Aden; and Mogadishu, Somalia.[7]

Moscow hoped to exploit the looming vacuum occasioned by the British pullout, and the fact the United States—including the USN Seventh Fleet, which had responsibility for all the Indian Ocean "water" except for the Persian Gulf and Red Sea—was heavily engaged in Vietnam. In those days, before the establishment of U.S. Central Command and U.S. Africa Command, the Persian Gulf and Red Sea were the responsibility of European Command, and hence the U.S. Sixth Fleet. But it too was heavily engaged elsewhere—specifically, in the Eastern Mediterranean in support of

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[6] A debate among historians continues over the cause of the British withdrawal, specifically over whether the decision was truly because of a lack of financial resources or because of a lack of political will and popular support. It would be surprising if London was not also influenced by the U.S. experience in Vietnam, the French in Algeria, and its own colonial experiences in Palestine, Aden, and Malaysia, among other places. Michael A. Palmer, *Guardians of the Gulf: A History of America's Expanding Role in the Persian Gulf, 1833-1992* (New York: The Free Press, a division of Macmillan Inc., 1992), p. 86.

[7] The ships involved in this cruise were a light cruiser, a guided missile frigate, a guided missile destroyer, a fleet oiler, and a merchant tanker. Alvin J. Cottrell and R. M. Burrell, "Soviet-U. S. Naval Competition in the Indian Ocean," *Orbis*, Winter 1975, pp. 1111-12.

Israel, because Egypt, Libya, and Syria were firmly in the Soviet camp at the time. Moscow was providing vast quantities of advanced weapons and hundreds of advisors to help these Arab states destroy Israel.

In the entire Indian Ocean region, the only full-time USN presence was the tiny U.S. Middle East Force in the Persian Gulf, which was commanded by a rear admiral and homeported at the British base in Bahrain. The force consisted of a permanently assigned flagship (first, the small 2,700-ton converted seaplane tender USS *Valcour,* and, later, USS *La Salle,* a converted LSD), and two, and later in the decade, four, rotationally assigned destroyers.

A Decade of Soviet Naval Preponderance: 1968-1979

From the spring of 1969 onward, the Soviets maintained a continuous naval presence largely focused on the Gulf of Aden. This was a studied decision on Moscow's part despite a difficult logistic situation created after 5 June 1967, when Egypt closed the Suez Canal at the beginning of the Six Day War. At the end of the war Suez stayed closed while Egyptian and Israeli armies faced each other across the canal. In fact, the canal remained closed until the end of a second conflict—the Yom Kippur War—and subsequent peace negotiations, eight years later in 1975.

The Soviet Navy's Pacific Fleet in Vladivostok became responsible for providing the Soviet Indian Ocean Squadron since it was the Soviet fleet concentration closest to Aden. It was *only* 6,600 nautical miles away, compared to 12,000 nm for the Soviet Northern Fleet and 11,200 nm for the Soviet Black Sea Fleet. (With the canal closed, ships from the two Europe-based Soviet fleets needed to circumnavigate Africa in order to reach the Indian Ocean.) The Soviet Pacific Fleet was up to the time–distance challenge, and Soviet Navy presence in the Indian Ocean region jumped from 200 ship days in 1967 to just under 2,000 ships days in 1968. It doubled again, to slightly over 4,000, in 1969.[8]

By 1971, the Soviet Indian Ocean Squadron presence had increased to 8,900 ship days with a force that was a mix of five to six surface combatants and two to four submarines, plus support ships. From 1968 to 1979, the Soviets maintained a significant numeric advantage. For example, by the end of March 1978 the Soviet Indian Ocean Squadron had reached the unprecedented level of 32 ships: 2 destroyers, 2 submarine, 4 frigates, 4 LSTs, a minesweeper, and 19 auxiliaries (tenders, barracks ships, oilers, etc.).

For much of the 1970s, the Persian Gulf and northern Arabian Sea (NAS) were a relative backwater for the U.S. Navy. USN presence was not welcomed by a majority of the Muslim states in the Gulf or along the NAS littoral, because of Washington's support of Israel from 1948 onward. By 1974, 28 ports in 11 Indian Ocean region

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[8] Cited in Palmer, *Guardians of the Gulf*, p. 87.

countries were closed to the U.S. Navy. Only Manama (Bahrain), Port Louis (Mauritius), Karachi (Pakistan), Colombo (Sri Lanka), and Bandar Abbas and Bandar Shapur (Iran) continued to make available fuel and other supplies to transiting USN ships.[9]

The Soviets were in much better shape. They were relentless in attempting to obtain privileged access to existing naval facilities around the western Indian Ocean littoral, and largely succeeded in doing so. PDRY (aka South Yemen) and, soon thereafter, Somalia were big success stories. The major port of Aden was made available as were anchorages around Socotra Island. Besides Socotra, the Soviet Navy anchored semi-permanent mooring buoys off the Seychelles west of Diego Garcia, along the Cargados Carajos off Mauritius,[10] and east of Madagascar near the Comoros archipelago. Gaining access to the Somali port of Berbera in 1972 was of major benefit to the Soviet Navy since it was a sheltered location that could support pier-side logistics, significant voyage repair, and crew rest. Thanks to having access to Berbera, on-station time for deployed Soviet Pacific Fleet ships increased from five months to almost a year. (It is worth noting that Berbera still plays an important geostrategic role. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) firm DP World just arranged a deal to run Berbera from the de facto independent province now known as Somaliland; this arrangement provides the UAE military with a more permanent facility in its fight across the gulf against Houthi rebels in Yemen.)[11] Figure 3 shows the Horn of Africa region.

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[9] Michael A Palmer, *On Course to Desert Storm: the United States Navy and the Persian Gulf*, Naval Historical Center, Department of the Navy, Washington, D.C., 1992, p. 74.

[10] Cargados Carajos Shoals, also known as St. Brandon, is a group of over 50 islands, coral ridges, and vast sand flats on an extended reef in the Indian Ocean, situated 268 nautical miles northeast of Mauritius. Classified as a dependency of Mauritius, it is part of the Mascarene Islands.

[11] Asa Fitch, "DP World to Manage Somaliland Port of Berbera," *Wall Street Journal*, September 5, 2016, https://www.wsj.com/articles/dp-world-to-manage-somaliland-port-of-berbera-1473086050.

Figure 3.   Horn of Africa region
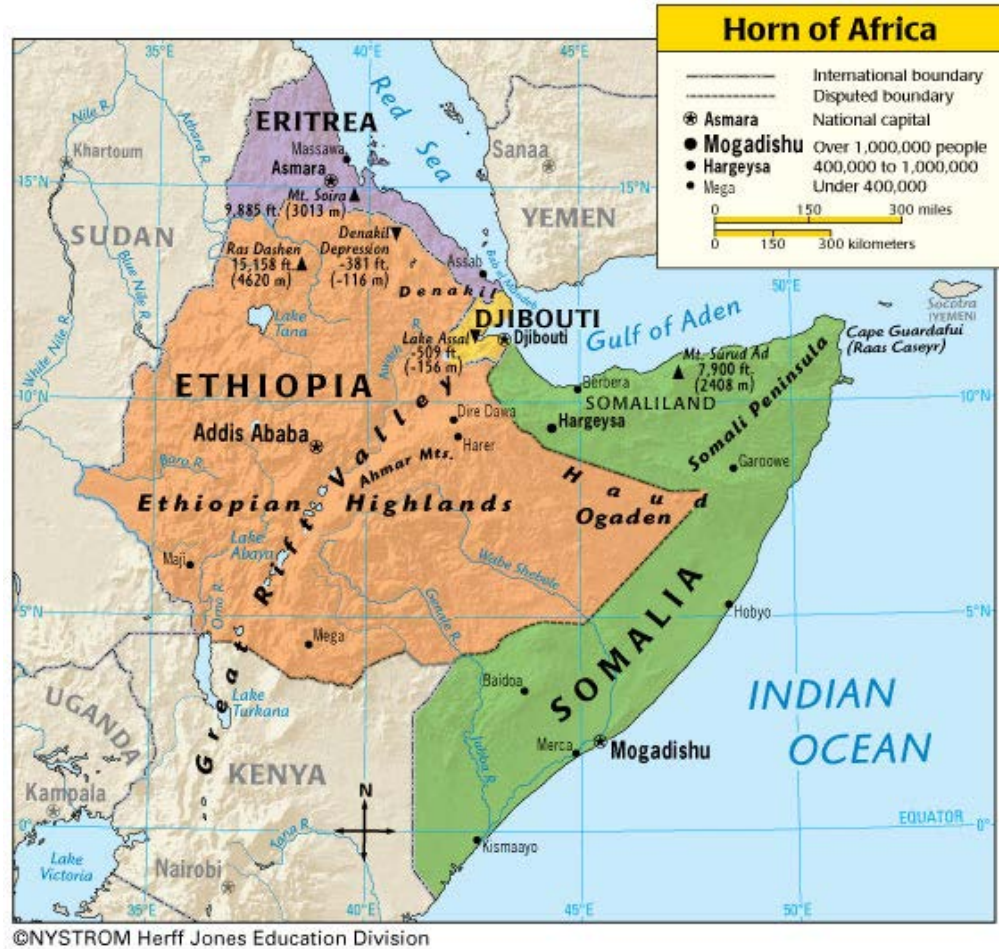
Source: NYSTROM Herff Jones Education Division in "Horn of Africa Map Pictures,"
http://maps-africa.blogspot.com/2012/05/horn-of-africa-map-pictures.html.

The Somali saga

The relationship between the Soviet Union, the United States, and Somalia is an interesting example of the political–military perils associated with investing time, effort, and money in relationships with newly emerging unstable nations. Starting in 1962, the Soviet Union made loans to Somalia seeking to counter United States influence in the Horn of Africa, primarily in Ethiopia. In 1969, following a coup, the new leader of Somalia embraced scientific socialism and the Soviet Union became Somalia's major supplier of military material.

Over the next eight years, the Somali-Soviet military relationship prospered. In 1972 an agreement was reached to improve and modernize the port of Berbera in return for Soviet access to the facility. The Soviet Union eventually built Berbera into a base that included a missile storage facility for the Soviet Navy, an airbase with a 13,500-foot runway and fuel storage that was capable of handling large bombers, and extensive radar and communications facilities. For the Soviets, Berbera acquired additional importance when Egypt expelled all Soviet advisers and cancelled basing rights, including Ras Banas along the Red Sea, in July 1972.[12]

By 1975 the Soviet Navy was flying long-range Il-38 *May* ASW aircraft from Berbera. The ability to operate from Berbera and other Somali airfields provided the Soviets with reconnaissance and ASW capability over much of the Arabian Sea.[13]

Not satisfied with just Aden and Somalia, the Soviets saw an opportunity to replace U.S. influence in neighboring Ethiopia. They established friendly relations with Ethiopia following a 1974 uprising that forced the long-reigning (1930-74) pro-Western emperor Haile Selassie to cede power to a military council.[14] Moscow's public embrace of the neighboring Ethiopian regime made the Somalis both anxious and angry because the Soviets started to rearm and train the Ethiopians, who occupied territory that Somalia considered its own.

Soviet attempts to keep both Mogadishu and Addis Ababa happy failed dramatically: the Somalis decided to invade Ethiopia before Soviet military assistance could tip the military balance against them. The Somali objective was to seize disputed Ethiopian territory—the Ogaden region. Moscow, finding itself supplying both sides of a war, attempted to mediate a ceasefire. When that failed, Moscow effectively abandoned Somalia and threw its support behind Ethiopia. Soviet military aid and advisors flooded into the country along with around 15,000 Cuban combat troops (lifted by the Soviets from Angola via air and sea). This turned the tide, thanks to Soviet operational planning and tough Cuban infantry. The invading Somalis were driven

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[12] Craig Daigle, "The Russian are Going: Sadat, Nixon, and the Soviet Presence in Egypt, 1970-71," *MERIA Journal*, Rubin Center for International Affairs, March 1, 2004, http://www.rubincenter.org/2004/03/daigle-2004-03-01.

[13] Geoffrey Jukes, "Soviet Naval Policy in the Indian Ocean," in Michael MccGwire et al., eds., *Soviet Naval Policy: Objectives and Constraints,* Center for Foreign Policy Studies, Dalhousie University, Halifax, N.S., 1975, pp. 479-485.

[14] In the late 1960s, Ethiopia was the location of the largest U.S. economic and military assistance program and the largest U.S. embassy in Sub-Saharan Africa.

out of Ogaden.[15] Infuriated, Somalia annulled its treaty with the Soviet Union and expelled all Soviet advisors in the country.[16]

Washington moved in, and by 1980 had cut a deal with the Somali government and gained access to both Berbera and the port at Mogadishu. For the next decade, USN P-3s flying from Berbera were employed to keep track of the Soviet Indian Ocean Squadron, especially its submarines. Subsequently, Washington also learned how precarious basing understandings with Somalia were. It was also forced to abandon its facilities in Berbera and Mogadishu when Somalia collapsed into anarchy in 1991.

Soviet bases in Aden and Ethiopia

According to the now-declassified 1983 Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Command (CINCPAC) command history, "The eviction from naval and air facilities at Berbera, which had been developed at considerable expense, was a particularly heavy blow, depriving the Soviet Indian Ocean Squadron of an extensive shore-based facility it has since been unable to duplicate elsewhere."[17]

This was not quite true. Despite this dramatic setback, the Soviets' naval presence did not slacken because they also had facilities available in Ethiopia and Aden—although in the case of Ethiopia, access to facilities continued to diminish over time. The major airfield at Asmara and the major Red Sea port of Massawa are both in the province of Eritrea (now an independent country, leaving Ethiopia landlocked), where an insurgency was raging. In 1978, the Soviet Navy found itself evacuating Massawa along with Ethiopian soldiers because they were besieged by Eritrean guerrillas. In 1984, these insurgents destroyed a number of Soviet Il-38 Mays on the ground at Asmara, and Soviet surveillance flights from that location were suspended thereafter.

The upshot was that the Soviet Indian Ocean Squadron could not count on safe access to Massawa and focused on the Dahlak Archipelago off the coast of what then was still Ethiopia. The Soviets constructed a major naval facility in the islands that included an 8,500-ton floating dry dock, to support its Indian Ocean Squadron.

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[15] Remnek, "Soviet Access to Overseas Naval support facilities," pp. 259-60.

[16] Don Oberdorfer, "The Superpowers and the Ogaden War," *Washington Post*, March 5, 1978, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1978/03/05/the-superpowers-and-the-ogaden-war/00f60ef2-01b4-4cd3-8c5f-e545.

[17] Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Command, *Command History 1983,* p. 123, http://nautilus.org/projects/by-name/foia/command-histories. Declassified.

Meanwhile, in South Yemen (PDRY) the Soviets had relocated most of what they could pack up and take with them from Somalia. The port of Aden provided the Soviets with a protected anchorage and good logistics support by both sea and air; however, there were no berthing facilities for ships with a draft of over 18 feet. (See Figure 4 for a map of area.)

Figure 4.   Yemen and Socotra

Source: Infoplease, "Atlas: Republic of Yemen," https://www.infoplease.com/atlas/atlas-republic-yemen.

As a result, because of its easy access to the Gulf of Oman, the Yemeni island of Socotra became the favored staging base for the Soviet Indian Ocean Squadron, particularly when U.S. naval presence in the Arabian Sea spiked right after the U.S. embassy in Tehran was seized in November 1979.

Competition over the Seychelles

In the early 1960s when the Seychelles were still a British colony, the United States established a satellite tracking station on the main island of Male. The Seychelles are nearly on the equator and are exactly half a world away from Sunnyvale, California,

which was the headquarters of the military satellite tracking program. The station was manned by fewer than a dozen U.S. Air Force personnel and around 120 civilian contractors. The islands were also important because of their location astride sea lanes of traffic entering the Indian Ocean from around the Cape of Good Hope, especially during the seven years that the Suez Canal was closed. The Seychelles were also an important hub for U.S. Navy P-3 patrol aircraft flying to and from Diego Garcia, which was roughly 1,000 miles due east of the Seychelles. It was also roughly 1,000 miles from the airfield at Male north to Masirah Island off of Oman.[18]

London granted the Seychelles independence in 1976, with the two most popular politicians splitting leadership. Pro-West James Mancham became president and socialist France-Albert René became prime minster. Less than a year later, René staged a coup while Mancham was visiting London, and assumed the presidency. Over the next 15 years until the demise of the Soviet Union, he oriented the Seychelles to be one of the most Soviet-leaning countries in the world. U.S. ship visits, which had been routine, were curtailed in the 1980. The tracking station, however, was not closed, because the United States agreed to pay many millions of dollars over the years for rent. The Soviets gave a tremendous amount of financial backing to René and helped assure his security. René was always worried, with good reason, about a counter coup, and managed to survive at least two attempts. He had a personal body guard of 50–150 North Korean soldiers, depending on his level of anxiety. A former U.S. ambassador recalled, "That always reminded me a little of a James Bond movie set with North Koreans doing their various calisthenics and so forth on the lawn of the State House."[19]

The Soviets aided the René regime, including sending an LST to anchor in the capital city of Victoria's harbor with 250 embarked Soviet marines to provide an anti-coup guarantee whenever René travelled abroad (the locals dubbed it the "baby-sitter"). Yet, they were never able to convince René to shut down the U.S. satellite tracking station or to permit the Soviets to establish a permanent base in the islands. He played the Soviets well. In 1983 shortly after the Reagan administration invaded Grenada in the Caribbean, the Soviet ambassador informed his Swedish counterpart that the USSR was prepared to do the same thing, including landing troops, if the René regime was threatened.[20]

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[18] Oral History interview with Gregory L. Mattson, Consul, Victoria, Seychelles, 1973-78, conducted on January 30, 2001, at the Foreign Affairs Training Center, Arlington, Virginia, http://www.adst.org/Readers/Seychelles.pdf.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Command, *Command History 1983*, p. 130, http://nautilus.org/projects/by-name/foia/command-histories Declassified.

René made sure that he never burned his bridges with the United States, France, or the United Kingdom, and, in the end, he remained in charge well into the post-Cold War era. While he was a strong Soviet supporter in the United Nations and other international fora, he argued that he was never a Soviet-style communist but rather was an "Indian Ocean socialist." He was repeatedly reelected president and voluntarily retired in 2004.

The end of Soviet-U.S. détente—1979

For much of the 1970s the overall political relationship between Moscow and Washington was good, and, despite the competition for third-world friends in regions such as the Indian Ocean, Cold War tensions had eased. But the policy of "détente" was losing steam by the time the Ford administration was leaving office in 1976. It came to an abrupt end when Moscow invaded Afghanistan in late December 1979; just six weeks after Iranian zealots had stormed and seized the U.S. embassy in Tehran, taking the staff hostage. The Iranian "students" were inflamed by the fact the Carter administration had agreed to permit the cancer-stricken Shah, who had fled Iran at the beginning of 1979, to enter the United States for special medical treatment.

The combination of the chaos in Iran and the fear that the Soviets might keep going through Afghanistan and invade Iran in order to seize its oil and potentially close the Strait of Hormuz (which sounds incredible today)—transformed the western Indian Ocean from a tertiary theater of interest for the U.S. Navy into the major deployment hub it has become today. The Soviet invasion caused President Carter to specifically commit American military forces to the defense of Persian Gulf oil. In his January 1980 State of the Union Address, the president announced what came to be known as the Carter Doctrine:

> Let our position be absolutely clear: An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.[21]

To make matters worse, in September 1980 war broke out between Iraq and Iran. While the Soviets did not invade Iran, the Iraqis did, trying to take advantage of Iranian revolutionary chaos to settle a long-standing border dispute. As the decade

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[21] Cited in Edward J. Marolda and Robert J. Scheller, Jr., *Shield and Sword: The United States Navy and the Persian Gulf War* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2001), p. 13.

wore on, this conflict spread to the waters of the Persian Gulf, with both countries attacking the oil tankers of the other side. This posed a threat to the freedom of navigation that eventually directly involved the USN in the fight.[22]

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[22] A detailed narrative is beyond the scope of this paper, but the so-called the Iraq-Iran "Tanker War" in the Persian Gulf included several elements: a mistaken but successful cruise missile attack by an Iraqi fighter on USS *Stark* (FFG-31) in May 1987; Operation Ernest Will (July 1987-September 1988), in which USN warships escorted "reflagged" Kuwaiti oil tankers transiting in the Persian Gulf; and *Operation Praying Mantis* on 18 April 1988, in which U.S. naval forces attacked Iranian naval units, within Iranian territorial waters, in retaliation for the Iranian mining of the Persian Gulf and the subsequent damage to USS *Samuel B. Roberts* (FFG-58). See Bradley Peniston, *No Higher Honor: Saving the* USS *Samuel B. Roberts in the Persian Gulf* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2006).

Given contemporary USN interest in international law in the maritime domain, it is worth noting that on 6 November 2003, the International Court of Justice ruled that "the actions of the United States of America against Iranian oil platforms on 19 October 1987 (Operation Nimble Archer) and 18 April 1988 (Operation Praying Mantis) cannot be justified as measures necessary to protect the essential security interests of the United States of America."

USN Preponderance in the Indian Ocean & Soviet Presence: 1979-1991

Even before all the 1979-80 political-diplomatic incidents drew the U.S. Navy into the region in significant numbers, Seventh Fleet naval presence began to improve in the Indian Ocean once America was out of Vietnam. Carrier presence was now possible for short durations. The Seventh Fleet began to show the flag in the western Indian Ocean starting in December 1973. Approximately twice a year, a Seventh Fleet carrier battle group (CVBG) was sent to the western Indian Ocean for a short period, largely to conduct exercises with the Iran under the Shah and with Pakistan, a member of the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO).[23] Interestingly, during this time India was perceived as being firmly in the Soviet camp and was often referred to as a Soviet "client state" during White House discussions on South Asia.[24] Ten years later, however, PACOM was commenting that "eleven years after signing a friendship treaty with India, the Soviets still had no access to any repair facility in that country—not even at the Visakhapatnam naval base, built primarily for the Indian Navy by the Soviets.[25]

It is important to keep in mind that during much of the entire 20-year period under discussion U.S. carriers did not enter the Persian Gulf. They operated in and around the northern Arabian Sea. Aside from the obvious worries about an Iranian military threat after 1979, another major reason was that in the pre-Goldwater-Nichols era the U.S. Pacific Command was unwilling to "chop" a Seventh Fleet carrier resource to European Command, which was traditionally commanded by an Army general who was the combatant commander for the Persian Gulf. By remaining outside the Gulf in the northern Arabian Sea (NAS), the Seventh Fleet commander maintained operational control of its carrier. But, staying out of the Gulf meant that the CVBG

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[23] W. Seth Carus, Barry McCoy, et al., *From MIDEASTFOR to Fifth Fleet: Forward Naval Presence in Southwest Asia,* CNA Research Memorandum 93-219, October 1996.

[24] For instance, "Conversation between President Nixon and his Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Washington, D.C., December 9, 1971," FRUS 1969-1976, Volume E-7, *Documents on South Asia, 1969-1972*, https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/nixon/e7/48539.htm.

[25] Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Command, *Command History 1983*, p. 123.

commander could not ignore the presence of the Soviet Indian Ocean Squadron. Keeping track of Soviet submarines that were operating in the NAS was a preoccupation.

Iran Triggered USN Build-up

The dramatic increase in full-time USN presence began in mid-1978 with the beginning of the Iranian revolution; the Iranian monarchy officially ended in a year later. The Carter administration then doubled down on carrier battle group presence when the U.S. embassy was stormed on November 4, 1979. Washington established a 2.0 CVBG presence requirement. This remained in force for two years.

Meanwhile, the U.S. build-up triggered an increase in the size of the Soviet Indian Ocean Squadron. In May 1979, the Soviet carrier *Minsk*, an accompanying Kara-class cruiser, and a new LST made a show-the-flag visit while on their way to their new Soviet Navy base at Vladivostok. This visit took place when the USS *Midway* battle group was in the region and two Soviet Il-38s flying from Aden buzzed *Midway* while it was recovering aircraft, causing planes in the pattern to take emergency evasive action.[26] Figure 5 shows the Il-38's combat radius from Berbera, which is almost identical to the combat radius from Aden airfields.

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[26] James F. Kelly, Captain, U.S. Navy, "Naval Deployments in the Indian Ocean," *Proceedings of the U.S. Naval Institute* 109/5/963 (May 1983), https://www.usni.org/document/kelly-james-1983-109-5-963pdf?magazine_article=62450.

Figure 5.   Il-38 combat radius from Berbera
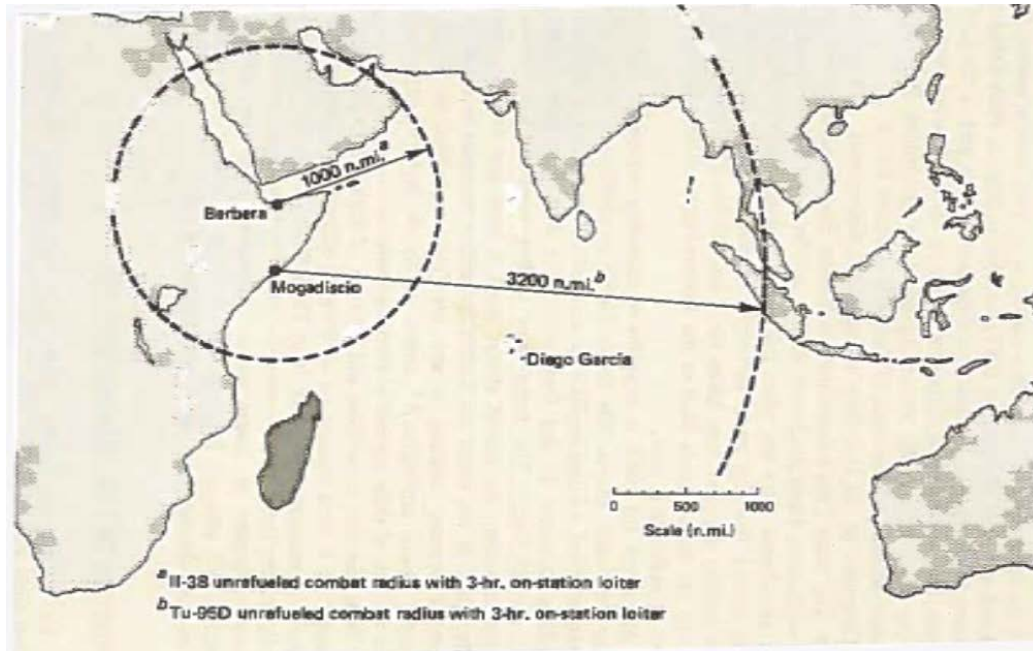
Source: *Soviet Naval Diplomacy*, edited by Bradford Dismukes and James M. McConnell, New York: Pergamon Press, 1979.

Newer classes of Soviet ships began to show up in the Soviet Indian Ocean Squadron, including the new Krivak-class frigates[27] that were often employed along with AGIs (Auxiliary, General, Intelligence) to "join" the battle group formation and act as "tattletales." A tattletale was a ship assigned by the Soviets to maintain radar (often visual) contact with an underway U.S. carrier and periodically report the carrier's position to higher headquarters so it could be targeted if necessary. The tattletales' unofficial mission often seemed to involve deliberately getting in the way of carriers conducting flight operations when maneuverability was limited. Since USN carriers were operationally "tethered" by the Joint Chiefs of Staff to stay within a 200-nm

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[27] Ibid. The Project 1135 Burevestnik (Storm Petrel) class comprised a series of frigates built for the Soviet Navy. These ships are commonly known by their NATO reporting class name of Krivak. A total of 40 ships were built: 32 ships for the Soviet Navy, and 8 modified ships for the KGB Maritime Border Guard. The ship's unique features—the bow missile box, the stack and the angled mast—earned it a rap-like nickname among U. S. sailors that comes from rhyming slang and their foreign ship silhouette identification training: "Hot dog pack, Smokestack, Guns in Back—Krivak."

radius of the position 20-30N and 061-00E, it was difficult to simply "run away" from tattletales.[28]

As annoying as "tattletale" operations were, the factor that was a major consideration for U.S. commanders in the NAS was the large increase in Soviet submarines in 1980. It was marked by a nearly continuous SSN presence along with an increase in conventional "Foxtrot" class diesel/electric boats. A decided change from previous deployment patterns was the presence of two Victor III class SSNs, the Soviet Navy's latest, deployed from the Soviet Northern Fleet. By April 1980, the Soviet Indian Ocean Squadron was 30 ships strong.[29] As illustrated below, Soviet naval force levels peaked in the region in 1980, in response to the Iranian and Afghan crises. Subsequently, Soviet naval activity in the Arabian Sea returned to its mid-1970s level. See Figure 6 which depicts Soviet naval presence in the Indian Ocean from 1978 to 1990.

Figure 6.   Soviet naval presence in the Indian Ocean: 1978 to 1990
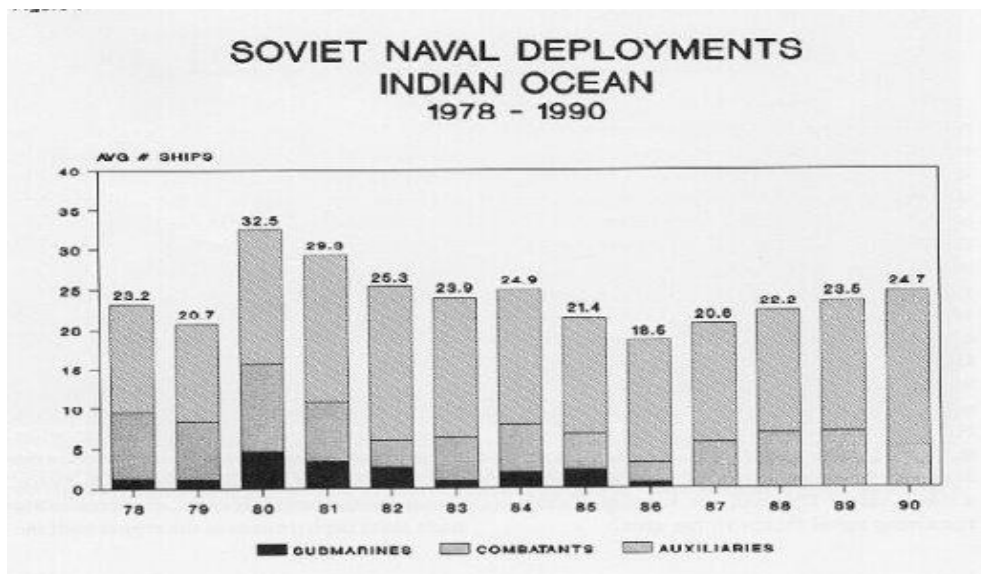
Source: Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, *Understanding Soviet Naval Developments, Sixth Edition,* Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, Washington, D.C., July 1991, p. 40.

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[28] On November 17, 1983, a Soviet Krivak-class FFG collided with USS *Fife,* a Spruance-class destroyer that was in station with the carrier USS *Ranger,* which was conducting flight operations. *PACOM Annual History 1983,* p. 308.

[29] James Kelly, "Naval Deployments in the Indian Ocean," https://www.usni.org/document/kelly-james-1983-109-5-963pdf?magazine_article=62450.

When Iran released the U.S. embassy hostages in January 1981, after 444 days of confinement, the Reagan administration reduced U.S. CVBG presence requirement to 1.0. In addition, the MODLOC tether was eased and the CVBG was now only required to spend a preponderance (70-75%) of its time in the NAS. The rest of its time could be spent elsewhere throughout the Indian Ocean region.

In sum, starting in 1978, events in Iran, Afghanistan, and the Persian Gulf triggered a dramatic change in U.S. Navy posture, and initiated what became more or less permanent CVBG presence in the Indian Ocean. This decidedly shifted the balance of naval power in the Indian Ocean to the United States. During this period, Diego Garcia also came into its own as a logistics hub. It supported a nearly continuous fleet repair capability with either a submarine tender (AS), destroyer tender (AD), or repair ship (AR) in Diego Garcia. It was also a key support facility for ASW operations against Soviet submarines, with 8-11 deployed P-3s, along with 1-2 EP-3s that were earmarked for direct support of NAS CVBGs. To extend on-station time, P-3s often conducted shuttle sorties between Diego Garcia and Berbera.

The wind-down of Soviet naval presence in the Indian Ocean

Once the hostages had come home from Tehran and the Reagan administration had settled into office, the competitive nature of Soviet-U.S. naval presence in the Indian Ocean began to evolve. While the Soviet Indian Ocean Squadron remained on station, and continued to proactively cultivate island nations such as the Seychelles, the prospect of a Soviet move into Iran and a desire to control the Strait of Hormuz became less and less credible to American policymakers. The Soviets were bogged down in Afghanistan, and the Reagan administration began to perceive Iran as the biggest long-term threat to U.S. interests in the region. Starting in 1982, this began to "tilt toward Iraq" as the Iran-Iraq War dragged on.[30]

In retrospect, the event that most influenced Soviet-U.S. naval competition in the Indian Ocean was the election of Mikhail Gorbachev as general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1985. His principal objective was to reform the Soviet economy, and he realized that to do that he had to achieve both international détente and domestic reform. This led to a new look in Soviet foreign policy: Soviet military posture no longer centered on direct military confrontation; it became less menacing, promoting *Glasnost* and *Perestroika* at home and pledging

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[30] Bruce W. Jentleson, *With Friends like These: Reagan, Bush and Saddam, 1982-1990* (W.W. Norton Company, 1994), pp. 42-48.

peace and cooperation abroad. What with the Soviet Union's unilateral force reduction and new defensive doctrine, global perceptions of the Soviet threat changed.[31]

The change in Soviet policy had an impact on Soviet naval posture in the Indian Ocean. After 1986, submarines were no longer deployed to the Ethiopian and South Yemen bases, and the number of surface combatants decreased, averaging five to six for the rest of the decade. The Soviet Indian Ocean Squadron, however, did maintain a steady round of port calls as tangible support for the socialist or authoritarian governments in power in Madagascar, Mozambique, the Comoros, Mauritius, Djibouti, and the Seychelles.[32] In fact, the numbers of ships in the Soviet Indian Ocean Squadron increased in 1988-89, but this was a direct result of the Iraq-Iran "Tanker War" in the Gulf. The bulk of the Soviet squadron shifted its operational focus from Aden/Socotra east to a mobile "sea base" in the Gulf of Oman in order to provide escort services to Soviet merchant ships in the Persian Gulf. It continued to operate from a Gulf of Oman sea base during the 1990-1991 Gulf War (Desert Storm), but it played no part in the conflict and operated with restraint and caution.[33]

The Soviet Naval Air Force operated in the Indian Ocean from 1975 until 1990. As mentioned, it was initially deployed to Somalia until ousted in 1977. Aviation presence was shifted to airfields in Ethiopia and South Yemen and resumed in 1979. Aircraft deployments to Ethiopia ceased in 1984, as did those to South Yemen in 1990.

The Soviets began a final withdrawal from the Red Sea, Indian Ocean, and Persian Gulf in February 1991, and abandoned the facilities at Ethiopia's Dahlak Island and Yemen's Socotra Island. Finally, the Soviet Indian Ocean Squadron sailed home.[34]

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[31] Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, *Understanding Soviet Naval Developments,* Department of the Navy, Washington, D.C., July 1991, p. 115.

[32] Larry W. Bowman, *Competition and Cooperation in the Southwestern Indian Ocean: A View from the Islands,* an Occasional Paper prepared for the Defense Intelligence College, April 1993, http://www.dtic.mil/docs/citations/ADA267625.

[33] Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, *Understanding Soviet Naval Developments, Sixth Edition,* Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, Washington, D.C., July 1991, p. 40.

[34] Ibid., pp. 39-40, and Statement of Rear Admiral Thomas A. Brooks, USN, DNI, before the Seapower, Strategic and Critical Materials Sub-Committee of the House Armed Services Committee on Intelligence, March 7, 1991.

Insights from the Past That Can Inform the Future

When the Soviet Navy decided to create the Soviet Indian Ocean Squadron in the late 1960s, it had already learned how to sustain a naval squadron or flotilla in the East Mediterranean. Therefore, sustaining a reasonably significant naval presence outside of Soviet home waters in order to pursue national political objectives in the Indian Ocean was not a novel experience. What was new was sustaining a presence at such long distances away from home bases and the logistics challenges associated with supporting its ships and sailors at that distance. The Soviets were forced to develop access arrangements and bases with willing—but often unstable—regional nations.

In contrast, China has never created a deployed naval squadron that is expressly assigned broad regional political, economic, and security objectives. Instead, China has benefited from the logistic and operational lessons learned from over nine years of counter-piracy task force deployments. It has also come to appreciate the value of using these deployed units to undertake traditional "naval diplomacy" operations before and after the counter-piracy patrols. The establishment of a base in Djibouti and another likely one in Gwadar, Pakistan, suggests that Beijing has a broader political-diplomatic-security mission in mind for its deployed naval forces that will be closely linked to the "One Belt, One Road" master plan. The PLA is already seized with the necessity to protect its sea lanes in this region, which, after all, is what the counter-piracy deployments are all about.

In the future it seems likely that the counter-piracy mission will become one of a range of missions assigned to deployed PLAN units. If Beijing's anxiety over its sea lane security continues to grow, it seems plausible that protecting sea lanes from threats besides pirates will become the *raison d'etre* for a larger and better balanced in terms of naval capabilities rotational PLAN Indian Ocean Task Force. Recent submarine PLAN deployments suggest as much.

One reason why the Soviets determined that a naval presence in the Indian Ocean was desirable was its anxiety over U.S. Navy SSBN deployments to that region. Today, the issue of SSBN deployments in the Indian Ocean has reemerged, with an entirely different cast of players. In August 2016, India commissioned its first SSBN, the INS *Arihant.* This indigenously built submarine is intended to be the first of a class of five SSBNs. It has not yet been declared operationally ready for deterrence patrols

and, for the time being, will be employed as a "technology demonstrator," to use an Indian naval officers' term. This period is intended to allow the Indian Navy to learn how best to employ a system that will eventually provide New Delhi with an assured second-strike capability against Pakistan and China. This is a new threat for China, and raises the question whether it will respond with ASW efforts aimed at keeping track of India's SSBNs or deploy its own SSBNs to the Indian Ocean in order to provide a different ballistic missile approach azimuth to India.[35]

Just as the Soviets gradually expanded their mix of forces in the region, the PLA Navy is building the capability to deploy a genuine multi-mission strike group to the Indian Ocean. As pictured on the cover, the PLAN has become adroit at supporting deployed task groups using underway replenishment techniques.[36] It has already commissioned all the essential naval components—carrier air, land attack cruise missiles on multi-mission destroyers, sophisticated air defense capable destroyers, ASW frigates, multiproduct replenishment ships, and large amphibious ships—to potentially be a very credible naval task force when assembled. By 2020, China will have the second-largest modern amphibious capability in the world (after the United States), and potentially will be able to embark 5,000-6,000 marines for operations anywhere in the world. When combined with modern destroyers and frigates as escorts and an aircraft carrier to provide air defense and limited strikes at land targets, China will have a distant-seas power-projection capability for the first time since Admiral Zheng He's last voyage (1431–33).

For much of the time covered by this paper, there was a political-military competition for access to ports throughout the Indian Ocean area. The Soviets capitalized on the popularity of socialist or Marxist political-economic systems among emerging nations, as well as a defense industry that could provide massive amounts of military assistance, as a way to gain and sustain "friendships" in the region. China has a similar objective, but is employing a very different set of tools—i.e., infrastructure development and no-questions-asked loans, to gain access. For instance, China's move into Djibouti also has a significant economic component; it is not all just about geopolitics. During the period of 2011-2016, two Chinese companies built the Addis Ababa–Djibouti Railway. It links Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, with the Port of Doraleh near Djibouti, and it provides landlocked Ethiopia with railroad access to the sea. More

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[35] Kyle Mizokami, "Why China and Pakistan should fear India's Arihant class of submarine," *The National Interest*, January 22, 2017, http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/why-china-pakistan-should-fear-indias-arihant-class-19128.

[36] Dmitry Filipoff, "China's Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities," Center for International Maritime Security (CIMSEC), May 19, 2015, http://cimsec.org/chinas-naval-modernization-implications-for-u-s-navy-capabilities/16474.

than 95 percent of Ethiopia's trade passes through Djibouti, accounting for 70 percent of the activity at the Port of Djibouti.[37]

The political stability of Djibouti as a basing facility for the United States, Japan, France, and now China is a useful and attractive contrast to the political turmoil that bedeviled Soviet—and, to a lesser degree, the U.S.—access agreements with Horn of Africa nations. Today, Yemen and Somalia are far worse off than they were during the Cold War, but the rest of the Indian Ocean littoral nations are, in general, better off politically and economically. While some could credibly argue that this generalization does not apply to Pakistan, the fact is that there is not nearly the amount of political risk today for China as it works within the framework of economic and trade relationships, also known as China's "win-win" approach, to gain assured naval access in as many suitable places as possible. Thus, though the Chinese are broadly following the Soviets' desire to establish long-term access understandings; they are nevertheless charting their own course based on the political and economic realities of the 21st century.

During the Cold War, Washington saw itself in a competition for global political alignment which in turn facilitated naval access in distant areas such as the Indian Ocean region. In many ways, this competition was treated by both Moscow and Washington as a zero-sum game. This is obviously not the case today, as the unfolding Djibouti experience illustrates. Today, if there is a game for influence in the Indian Ocean region, it is between New Delhi and Beijing; Washington is not a participant. Washington pursues security engagement, along with access agreements, with Indian Ocean littoral states, based solely on U.S. military needs and does not actively seek to counter Chinese attempts to gain influence. It is likely that even if the administration wished to do so, Congress would not support foreign aid funding for infrastructure improvements along the Indian Ocean littoral in order to "compete" with Beijing's OBOR projects.

In sum, what is the relevance of this look back at a 20-year slice of the Cold War in the western Indian Ocean? The short answer is "it depends." It depends on how one forecasts the evolution of the overall Sino-U.S. relationship. Will it grow increasingly contentious, as many predict, and, if so, will that contention spill into the Indian Ocean? It is entirely possible that the current "live and let live" relationship between the United States and China in this region will continue well into the future. To some degree, that might depend on how the relationship between India and China evolves, and whether Washington elects to tilt toward India if the relationship between New

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[37] "Next Stop the Red Sea: Ethiopia opens Chinese-built railroad to Djibouti," *The Guardian*, 5 October 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/06/next-stop-the-red-sea-ethiopia-opens-chinese-built-railway-to-djibouti.

Delhi and Beijing turns sour. It is also possible that, in its desire to secure its vital sea lanes that cross the Indian Ocean, China will continue to build up its own daily presence in the Indian Ocean, and to do so in a way that makes many of the Indian Ocean littoral states begin to worry about their own security. This has already happened in East Asia; where China's desire to ensure its own security through military modernization has made its neighbors feel less secure.

Since the future is unknown, this look to the past is relevant in that it is a suggestion of what might transpire. In particular, it suggests that maintaining a substantial U.S. naval presence in the region over the long term may have nothing whatsoever to do with Iran or any other Gulf state.

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