

April 1, 1972

**Report by Historical Division, Ministry of External
Relations on the Indian Ocean**

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Summary:

History of control of the Indian Ocean and possible status as a nuclear-free zone.

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NOTE

□The whole of the Indian Ocean area in the past came under western colonial domination because of the superior naval strength of western powers. None of the states bordering the Indian Ocean were strong enough to resist them. After the Second World War colonialism was on the retreat and the Indian Ocean area saw emergence of many independent states. These littoral states are still not strong enough to face the superior naval strength of major naval powers. They are, therefore, apprehensive of the pressures which big powers may put on them by their military presence in the Indian Ocean. India which has a long coastline and has the Indian Ocean on its three sides shares this view.

□India, like many other littoral states is a developing country and is interested in the maritime routes through the Indian Ocean remaining open for all countries. This is an interest shared by the littoral states with the developed countries engaged in trade. Under the circumstances, all trading nations, even though they may be rivals and competitors would not in their own self-interest take any steps to hinder trade. As such India does not feel there is any justification for establishing or strengthening military bases in the Indian Ocean area for the protection of trade routes. The majority of the littoral states who belong to the non-aligned group are opposed to the establishment of military bases in the Indian Ocean. The second non-aligned conference held in Cairo in October 1964 condemned the intention of imperialist powers to establish bases in the Indian Ocean as a calculated attempt to intimidate the emerging countries of Africa and Asia and an unwarranted extension of the policy of neocolonialism and imperialism. At the Lusaka non-aligned conference the participants agreed that they would exert efforts in the United Nations for the adoption of a Declaration calling upon all states to consider and respect the Indian Ocean as a zone of peace, free of nuclear weapons, and free from great power rivalries and competition for bases. India co-sponsored a resolution moved by Ceylon calling for the declaration of the Indian Ocean as a zone of peace. The resolution, adopted 61 to none, had the support of the littoral states. The United States, Soviet Union, and Great Britain were among those who abstained.

□The movement of the Seventh Fleet into the Bay of Bengal in December 1971 created suspicion in India as to the intentions of the United States in deploying its naval military strength in the way she did. The naval facilities acquired by the United States at Bahrain also reflected her desire to strengthen her naval military presence in the region. The United States moves were followed by reports of counter-moves on the part of the Soviet Union by dispatch of Soviet warships. The Soviet Union had suggested as early as June 1971 for an "equal bargain" with the United States on mutual naval curbs in the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. In February 1972, a United States spokesman referred to the Soviet Union being approached about mutually limiting naval strength in the Indian Ocean and elsewhere.

□India is not aware whether any discussions have taken place between the Soviet Union and the United States relating to the Indian Ocean area. India is of the view that the induction of "power game" might transform the Indian Ocean into an arena of great power rivalry and tension much to the detriment of the interest of the littoral states. India would like the great powers to keep out of the Indian Ocean so that the countries of the region could sort out their own problems without undue external interference. Power moves of one side would provoke power moves of the other three generating greater tension. India is in favor of a collective security system through regional cooperation based on the concept of equality and partnership without a military alliances and grant of military bases. The Indo-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Peace and Cooperation and India-Bangladesh Friendship Treaty should be seen in this context. India has not given nor has it any intention of allowing the Soviet Union to

set up bases in the country. Both India and Bangladesh have also declared their opposition to great power rivalry and creation of land, air and naval bases in the Indian Ocean area.

□ India would welcome an international agreement for the maintenance of the Indian Ocean as a zone of peace. As stated in the UN resolution, the littoral states, the major maritime users of the Ocean and the permanent members of the Security Council should hold consultations to ensure that warships and military aircraft may not use the Indian Ocean for any threat or use of force against the sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of any littoral or hinterland state of the Indian Ocean. Further, the vessels of all nations should have free and unimpeded use of the Ocean as a highway.