

February 28, 1976

**Telegram from S. Shahabuddin, Joint Secretary (S),
South East Asia Division, 'Proposal for
Establishment of Zone of Peace in Indian Ocean'**

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Summary:

Summary of Indian efforts to make the Indian Ocean a "zone of peace."

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Proposal for Establishment of Zone of Peace in Indian Ocean

Despite overwhelming support by the Non-Aligned States and the littoral and hinterland states in particular to the proposal for establishing a zone of peace in the Indian ocean in order to eliminate foreign military presence from the region, the Indian Ocean continues to be the scene of escalation of great-power naval presence, of which the US base in Diego Garcia has become a symbol. Despite budgetary embargo by the US Senate and simmering popular opposition, particularly to the eviction of the local population, US continues with the expansion project. Negotiations are already under way between US and UK on the one hand and Oman on the other, if not already concluded, for the use of facilities at the UK air base in Masirah by the United States. The new government in Australia under Prime Minister Fraser has given full, open and unqualified support to the US strategy in the Indian Ocean and to the Diego Garcia project in particular. Australia has also offered base facilities in Australia to the US and other western powers. The shift in Australian policy represents a substantial gain for the western strategy...

...In the meantime, India has continued with its efforts to mobilize the international public opinion in favor of the establishment of a zone of peace in the Indian Ocean both at an inter-governmental and non-governmental level. India has consistently attacked the Diego Garcia project. This theme has been reiterated in all major foreign policy statements made by Indian leaders as well as in joint communiqués issued at the time of their visits to foreign countries or of foreign statesmen to India.

A new factor has raised its head in the meantime. Instead of concentrating their effort on progressive reduction and eventual elimination of great-power presence from the Indian Ocean, some littoral states, particularly Pakistan and Sri Lanka, have tried to link the idea of the zone of peace with the proposal for a nuclear-weapon-free zone in South Asia. They have also canvassed for a "code of conduct" and a "system of collective security" among the hinterland and littoral States implying reduction of their naval forces to multi-laterally agreed levels. Their motivation is obvious. Presumably, Pakistan and Sri Lanka feel that with the exist of great powers India shall emerge as the dominant naval power in the Indian Ocean. In the words of a Sri Lanka statesmen, they would not like "Indian Ocean to become India's Ocean." Pakistan is skillfully playing upon the natural complexes of smaller littoral States and exploiting them. Objectively speaking, however, this line of argument sidetracks the main issue and provides an alibi for continued US military presence and, thus, delays the establishment of the zone of peace.

India has no territorial ambitions nor the naval capacity to dominate the Indian Ocean. However, India does not believe in the theory of power vacuum and considers that the littoral States can guarantee the security of the sea lanes for international commerce and the legitimate interests of the major maritime users as well as their own defence.

India regards increased USSR naval activity in the region as, by and large, a response to the US strategy and its development of bases in the Indian Ocean which can be used a) to launch long-range bombers against the Asian land mass, b) specifically to supply Israel's defense requirements in the event of a new Arab-Israel conflict and c) to seize the oil rich regions in the Middle East and to protect its investment running in the billions of dollars in littoral States against nationalist upheavals. On the other hand, in opposing the expansion of Diego Garcia and other

manifestations of foreign military power, India's approach is guided by the consideration that these are not bilateral questions but matters affecting equally all littoral and hinterland States. India recognizes that in the ultimate analysis, it is only world public opinion, when mobilized in favor of collective action, that can put a stop to the present phase of escalation.