Abstract: This paper consists of two parts: first, a historical summary of a broader project being pursued; second, a specific thread of involving the development of the Indian Ocean Task Force (IOTF) during the early 1960s by the US State and Defence Departments. While specific arguments will be made during the presentation, a general intention of this paper is to assert the role of US foreign and military policies in compromising the Third World “project” in the decade following the 1955 Asian-African Conference in Bandung, Indonesia. Understanding this history—and the role Afro-Asian leaders had in enabling this long-term American intervention—provides a critical means addressing the role of American “empire” in the Indian Ocean region, in addition to complicating more simplistic histories of the Third World/Global South that largely rest on a refurbished colonial Manichaeism.

I. Historical Backdrop, 1955-1979

In December 1971, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly passed Resolution 2832 declaring the Indian Ocean region as a “zone of peace.” This resolution followed a call made approximately a year earlier in September 1970 at a meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) held in Lusaka, Zambia. The UN resolution – supported by sixty-one countries primarily, though not exclusively, from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East – stated that the Indian Ocean be “a zone of peace from which great power rivalries and competition as well as bases conceived in the context of such rivalries and competition should be excluded… the area should also be free of nuclear weapons.” These twin positions taken at the height of the Cold War indicate the level of intercontinental cooperation between Asia and Africa that had developed since the beginning of post-Second World War period. The wave of global decolonization that had occurred set the stage for a new set of international politics centered on the nation-state paradigm, a shift that de-legitimated imperialism to generate new forms of political community. The UN and NAM reflected this context of transition, defining and playing by these rules to create collective senses of respect and responsibility for sovereignty. Yet, challenges remained that highlighted the nascent

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independence of many former colonies, as well as the continued importance of Asian and African
countries to defining and maintaining global power.²

Though these mutual declarations bore the imprint of the Cold War, the idea of a zone of
peace equally reflected deeper legacies of Western imperialism, extending as far back as the
fifteenth century. These resolutions carried certain historical burdens, with the Indian Ocean still a
crucial crossroads of global trade and political interaction. This section consequently uses this Cold
War episode to make several methodological points. First, the Indian Ocean provides a critical
geography for rethinking the dimensions of the global Cold War. More specifically, it presents a
historical space and vantage point for challenging the Euro-centrism that has often inhabited
academic and popular understandings of this period.³ But the Cold War also underlines a limitation
of the current historical literature on the Indian Ocean world. Recent work has rarely ventured into
the decades following the Second World War – a shortcoming that artificially abbreviates the
long-term legacies of imperialism, trade, and other forms of interaction across its expansive territory.
While different factors, including the rise of global governance through the UN and the threat of
nuclear armament, introduced a new set of political variables, a useful set of historical continuities
can be drawn by examining the emergence and character of Cold War rivalries in the Indian Ocean.
This later period underscores ongoing patterns of history in the longue durée, as well as outlining

² On the zone of peace idea, see, inter alia, Raymond W. Copson, ‘East Africa and the Indian Ocean – A “Zone
of Peace”?’. African Affairs, 76, 304 (1977): 339-358; B. Vivekanandam, ‘The Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace:
Crisis or Zone of Peace?’ International Affairs, 60, 2 (1984): 233-246; The Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace: A
[1985]); George W. Shepherd, Jr., The Trampled Grass: Tributary States and Self-Reliance in the Indian Ocean
Zone of Peace (New York: Greenwood, 1987); Kamal Kumar, Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace: Problems and

³ This condition has often been the outcome of histories concerning the origins of the Cold War. See, inter alia,
John Lewis Gaddis, The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1941-1947 (New York: Columbia
University Press, 1972); John Lewis Gaddis, Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar
American National Security Policy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); Melvyn P. Leffler, The Specter of
Communism: The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1917-1953 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994);
work that has challenged this approach, see Robert J. McMahon, Colonialism and the Cold War: The United
States and the Struggle for Indonesian Independence, 1945-49 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981); Robert
J. McMahon, The Cold War on the Periphery: The United States, India, and Pakistan (New York: Columbia
University Press, 1994); Matthew Connelly, A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria’s Fight for Independence and the
Origins of the Post-Cold War Era (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Mark Atwood Lawrence, Assuming
the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam (Berkeley: University of California Press,
2005); Odd Arne Westad, The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times
(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Vijay Prashad, The Darker Nations: A People’s History of the
Third World (New York: The New Press, 2007); Heonik Kwon, The Other Cold War (New York: Columbia
University Press, 2010).
crucial antecedents for understanding our political present—a point to which I shall return.4

The stated desire for a postcolonial peace in the region occurred prior to the 1970s, at least as early as the mid-1950s. The Asian-African Conference held in April 1955 in Bandung, Indonesia was sponsored by Indonesia, Burma, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), India, and Pakistan against a regional backdrop of Cold War tensions in the Taiwan Strait, Vietnam, and Southeast Asia generally. Prime Minister Ali Sastroamidjojo of Indonesia, a vocal critic of Western intervention in Asia, proposed the idea of an international conference as a response to the 1954 founding of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) by the United States. Delegations were to be drawn from the existing Afro-Asian group within the UN. Twenty-nine official delegations from countries in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East attended the week-long meeting, exhibiting individual opportunism and group solidarity in equal measure. For leaders such as Indonesian host Sukarno and Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru of India, the Bandung meeting offered an exceptional occasion to consolidate their positions as recognized leaders of the postcolonial world, marking their transition from anti-colonial activists to governing statesmen. For Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt, it enabled him to ascend to a position of parallel, if not entirely equal, status at the youthful age of thirty-seven in April 1955. Zhou En-Lai, the premier of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and its foreign minister, perceived the conference as a moment of legitimation for the PRC in the purview of its regional neighbors, launching a foreign policy initiative seeking recognition and normalization for the PRC that would last until the early 1970s, culminating with Nixon’s 1972 visit to China. The speeches given at the meeting identified a range of issues, reflecting on a recent history of Western imperialism and speculating on possible futures. The final communiqué consisted of specific proposals to enhance relations between countries in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East through economic trade, technological exchange, and cultural diplomacy. But broader positions were also stated, with the ideal of world peace as a principle also found in the communiqué’s concluding aims.5

This appeal specifically referred to nuclear disarmament in the wake of the first decade of

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the nuclear age. Japan had advocated this measure at Bandung, though the Pacific and Indian Ocean regions had generally served as settings for a series of well-known nuclear tests. Sukarno and Nehru both made the advent of the atomic age a key theme of their opening addresses, concurrent with more widely acknowledged issues of decolonization and threats of neo-colonialism. After the United States dropped two atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, to end World War II, the Soviet Union detonated its first weapon on August 29, 1949 in Central Asia (contemporary Kazakhstan), with Great Britain following three years later, detonating its first nuclear bomb on October 3, 1952 in the Montebello Islands off the western coast of Australia in the Indian Ocean. The Montebello Islands witnessed two more detonations by Great Britain in 1956 after the Bandung meeting, named Mosaic G1 (tested May 16) and Mosaic G2 (tested June 19). The occurrence of both in the Indian Ocean not only met subjective environmental considerations—ones that did not account for local communities, only metropole ones—but these tests also announced Britain’s nuclear status to a region that had been crucial to its modern empire and still remained so along coastal East Africa, despite its waning influence with its loss of India in 1947. The US had relocated its testing from New Mexico to the Marshall Islands, a group of atolls in Micronesia taken from Japan during World War II, with the Pacific Proving Grounds witnessing tests from 1946 to 1958 through at least sixty-seven nuclear weapons. Operation Castle (1954) in particular led to widespread fallout from one hydrogen bomb explosion, code-named Castle Bravo, which is still the largest nuclear weapon tested by the US. Although this sequence of testing over the course of twelve years occurred after the defeat of Japan, it reflected a tactical audacity on the part of the US in the Pacific region.⁶

As a consequence, the Pacific and Indian Ocean regions and the continents of Asia and Africa that shaped their coastal outlines were hardly zones of peace during the first two decades of the nuclear age. They were decisive settings for the origins and adolescence of this new period of global insecurity. The proposal of the Indian Ocean as a zone of peace was initially made by Sirimavo Bandaranaike, the prime minister of Sri Lanka, at the 1970 NAM conference in Lusaka as a response to a coordinated British-US effort to transform the small atoll of Diego Garcia—named after sixteenth-century Spanish explorer Diego García de Moguer—into a military base. Located 1200 nautical miles south of India and 1800 nautical miles east of Africa, Diego Garcia is essentially

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in the middle of the Indian Ocean, and the US military base there has remained strategically important up to the present with Operation Enduring Freedom. During her first term as prime minister (1960-1965), Bandaranaik had cultivated Sri Lankan relations with China and the Soviet Union. The growing presence of US military interests in the Indian Ocean region consequently motivated this later declaration on her part. But East African, South Asian, and Southeast Asian countries also shared a set of interests in designating the Indian Ocean as a zone of peace as indicated by the 1971 UN vote, a key factor being the desire for economic stability and growth in the region. These countries particularly depended on oil from the Middle East. The presence of great power rivalry, which also sought oil, within the Indian Ocean region posed a distinct threat to trade with this and other resources.

The growing role that the US and Soviet Union had in Indian Ocean affairs by the late 1960s paralleled the declining influence of former imperial powers, especially Great Britain. In 1968 British Prime Minister Harold Wilson declared that the British naval presence in the Indian Ocean would recede, with the exception of an ongoing commitment to Hong Kong. Bases in Singapore, Malaysia, and Aden were part of this strategy of reduced commitment. This transition was coordinated with the US, with a complex chain of regional events prior to 1968 encouraging this handover of power including the 1955 Baghdad Pact, the 1962 Sino-Indian War, the 1964 Zanzibar Revolution, and the decolonization of East Africa more generally—events that increasingly involved US interests and direct participation. In 1963 the Lyndon Johnson administration formally moved to establish a naval group for the region, resulting in the deployment of the Concord Squadron in 1964. These escalation was matched by growing Soviet interest. Similar to the US, the Soviet Union had not had an influential presence in the Indian Ocean, but its interests equally centered on resources coupled with Cold War diplomatic competition. In 1967, the Soviet government publication *Military Strategy* included the Indian Ocean region within Soviet strategic interests. In 1968, a flotilla of Soviet naval ships circumnavigated the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf regions, stopping in India, Sri Lanka, Iraq, South Yemen, and Somalia. In January 1971, a Soviet naval force passed the city-state of Singapore while a British Commonwealth meeting was being held. As B. Vivekanandan has written, these increasingly bold moves generated concern, leading Great Britain to seek a security arrangement in the region through India in 1972, an effort that

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8 Vivekanandan, ‘The Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace’, 1237; Kumar, ‘The Indian Ocean: Arc of Crisis or Zone of Peace?’ 233.
ultimately failed.\textsuperscript{9} Chinese relations with African countries spurred additional attention by both the US and Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{10} China supported the “zone of peace” proposal since it would enhance its abilities to engage with African countries. By 1973, the US Navy formally announced that it would expand operations in the Indian Ocean, with the enhanced importance of Diego Garcia. The airbase there would soon lengthen its runway, opening the possibility of long-range B-52 bombers to use the atoll as a strategic base for operations covering South Asia, East Africa, and the Middle East.\textsuperscript{11}

Overall, the Soviet Union and the United States had either constructed or access to naval facilities across the Indian Ocean region by 1980: from Diego Garcia, to Berbera in Somalia, to Mombasa, Kenya for the US, while the USSR had a presence in the southern reaches of the Red Sea through Aden (then in South Yemen) and the Dahlak Archipelago.\textsuperscript{12} The close proximity of Aden, Berbera, and the Dahlak Archipelago from one another signaled the particular importance of the Red Sea and Persian Gulf regions within the broader context of the Indian Ocean. But equally important to routes and petroleum was the nuclear threat. US submarines armed with nuclear-tipped Trident-I ballistic missiles (introduced in 1979) could strike southern Soviet cities from Indian Ocean waters.\textsuperscript{13} The 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan guaranteed that a US naval presence would remain in the Indian Ocean for the foreseeable future. Yet, Indian Ocean states also played a crucial role in the failure of the “zone of peace” principle. In addition to Sri Lanka, India was the most prominent in promoting the idea, though each had differing views on this concept by the end of the 1970s. Sri Lanka continued to express concern over Diego Garcia in addition to apprehension over an unabated Soviet naval presence, which only served to further militarize the region. On the other hand, India charted a different path, informed by its first atomic test (Pokhran-I, code-named “Smiling Buddha”) in 1974. Perhaps more dramatic, however, than India’s weapons program was the 1979 nuclear test known as the Vela Incident, a joint venture sponsored by South Africa and Israel amid two isolated islands, Prince Edward and Marion, in the south Indian Ocean. South African interest in nuclear technology went as far back as 1944, when the US and Great Britain consulted the South African government regarding uranium sources that could be utilized for nuclear weapons development. Moreover, this test was only one aspect of a broader set of military relations

\textsuperscript{9} Vivekanandan, ‘The Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace’, 1238.
\textsuperscript{10} On China’s relations with postcolonial Africa, see especially Deborah Brautigam, \textit{The Dragon’s Gift: The Real Story of China in Africa} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).
\textsuperscript{11} Kumar, ‘The Indian Ocean: Arc of Crisis or Zone of Peace?’ 237.
\textsuperscript{12} Kumar, ‘The Indian Ocean: Arc of Crisis or Zone of Peace?’ 237, 238.
\textsuperscript{13} Vivekanandan, ‘The Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace’, 1245.
between Israel and South Africa. But its meaning can quickly be drawn: by 1980, nuclear weapons technology had not only been acquired by an Indian Ocean state supportive of NAM interests, but it had been acquired by two states considered enemies of many NAM members. The NAM’s 1970 resolution had effectively failed by the end of the decade.

The Indian Ocean as a theater of the Cold War must therefore be understood as the result of regional actions as well as global ones. It offers a vital context for examining the contours and regional meanings of the global Cold War as argued by Arne Westad and others. At the same time, the history of the Indian Ocean from the 1950s through the 1980s—from decolonization to the end of the Cold War—must viewed within a deeper pattern of history that originated during the premodern era. The idea of the Indian Ocean as a zone of peace genuflected toward the presence of Cold War rivalries in the region, but also a long history of competition and conflict that had animated the region’s history for centuries. To consider the use of the Indian Ocean as historical context requires attention to the similarities and differences between these cycles of tension and cooperation in the past and present, to understand how the Indian Ocean region could become a place of contestation once more. Indeed, it bears stating that the central continuity between the premodern and modern eras has been the rich set of resources found across the region and the environmental factors that seasonal weather patterns and enabling waterways—the Persian Gulf and Red Sea, as well as the Indian Ocean itself—had for facilitating migration and commerce. While the technology of modern transport has circumvented remaining environmental limitations, these elements continue to be significant, providing wealth and ongoing incentives for political control.

But regional spaces and their dynamics are not simply the result of geographic contingencies. They are historically constructed—culturally, economically, and politically. This essay has proposed a need to layer histories of social movement and trade that have characterized oceanic histories thus far with the politics of foreign diplomacy, the deployment of military strategy, and the defining of regional political imaginations as described here. The emergence of new nation-states along the

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16 Westad, The Global Cold War; Prashad, The Darker Nations; Kwon, The Other Cold War.
17 On methodologies for oceanic history in the Indian Ocean and elsewhere, see, for example, K. N. Chaudhuri, Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Jerry H. Bentley, et. al., eds., Seascapes: Maritime Histories, Littoral Cultures, and Transoceanic Exchanges (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2007); Jack P. Greene and Philip
Indian Ocean littoral demands not only transnational methods of comparison and connection, but the examination of specific techniques of sovereignty and power developed and shared by individual countries and broader political coalitions like the NAM.\(^{18}\) Despite their ubiquitous acceptance and use, methods of socio-cultural history are not always adequate in addressing patterns of history that work a scale from the local to the inter-continental.\(^{19}\) Consideration of how states viewed oceans as strategic security zones opens an alternative horizon, indicating different forms of political community and new historical narratives as a result. Indeed, reaching such a perspective regarding maritime territories and their tactical uses is indispensable for understanding the present, whether addressing the continued importance of the Persian Gulf and its petroleum resources to the global economy or the incongruous role of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)—another oceanic formation in principle—in Afghanistan. The Indian Ocean is particularly pertinent, given its status as a contact zone between the rising economies of China, India, and Africa, in addition to its contextual role for conflicts ranging from hit-and-run piracy off the Horn of Africa to the Global “War on Terror” that has included Indonesia, Pakistan, Yemen, Kenya, and other littoral countries.\(^{20}\) The Indian Ocean continues to generate a surprising geography of contact, exchange, and politics both regional and ultimately global in scope—a phenomenon of the past and present that equally portends of the future.

II. The Formation of the Indian Ocean Task Force, 1963

On November 12, 1963, the U.S. embassy in Delhi sent a classified telegram to the office of the U.S. secretary of state welcoming a proposal to establish an Indian Ocean task force (IOTF). It encouraged General Maxwell D. Taylor, then chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, to move ahead, that he could “appropriately and effectively expose senior GOI [Government of India] officials” to the “rationale” of this plan. Taylor could “assist in laying groundwork for efforts to establish an


\(^{19}\) For discussion, see Christopher J. Lee, ‘Between a Moment and an Era: The Origins and Afterlives of Bandung’, in Christopher J. Lee (ed.), Making a World After Empire: The Bandung Moment and Its Political Afterlives (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2010), 1-42.

acceptable balance of forces in [the] subcontinent and bring Indians into closer association with us in regard to China (i.e. Taiwan) and to the CHICOM (i.e. the People’s Republic of China or the PRC) threat in Asia.” “Specifically,” the telegram noted, “General Taylor’s presentation can help advance Indian thinking on the relevance of US power (as represented by [the] IOTF) to subcontinental and Indian security and thus on the importance of [a] cooperative, confident [sic.] relationship between [the] US and India in security matters.” The telegram further noted the recent success of Operation Shiksha, a joint military exercise, just a few weeks prior in November 1963, organized by Jawaharlal Nehru that involved a squadron of US Air Force (USAF) F-100s from the 354 Tactical Fighter Wing based in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. This American squadron alongside units from the Australian Air Force and the Indian Air Force intended to test the effectiveness of the latter, with a series of mock battles out of the Palam airbase located near Delhi. Nehru’s concern was immediate, with the Sino-Indian War having ended a year prior in November 1962—a war that resulted in little territorial gain for the PRC which started the conflict, but ended what remained of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (known as the Panchsheel Treaty) agreed to in 1954. These principles of non-aggression, non-interference, mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, and peace defined India-China relations during the 1950s and informed the ambitious program at the 1955 Asian-African Conference in Bandung, Indonesia. The Sino-Indian War consequently signaled a final unraveling of this solidarity that had weathered a sequence of episodes that frayed relations between 1955 and 1962—namely, India’s provision of political exile for the Dalai Lama from Tibet, which the PRC occupied in 1952, and the founding of the Non-Aligned Movement in Belgrade, which excluded the PRC unlike at Bandung in 1955.

But other efforts were also afoot as indicated. While the influence of the United States never departed South, Southeast, and East Asia after the Second World War—indeed, the American “liberation” of these regions during the war had far deeper political implications than any in the parallel theater of Europe—the US continued to solidify such “gains” in the wake of decolonization. The November 12 telegram from New Delhi to DC viewed the IOTF as a long-term plan that could contribute to “Indian security and defense build-up,” aid the modernization and expansion of the Indian navy, provide “psychological assurance” should the PRC test a nuclear weapon, and, overall, serve the “mutual interest of India and [the] US as a deterrent to CHICOM threats in third areas in Asia.” The plan for an IOTF was consequently soon shared with other diplomatic missions under the supervision of the US State Department, with the understanding that such a task force would encompass a political geography extending far beyond India. “Having in mind the entire panorama of
countries from Iran and the East Coast of Africa to Indonesia and the spectrum of contingencies that confront us, or may in the future confront us, in this area, we are of the opinion that a decided increase in our military presence is desirable as a politically versatile and visible means to help deter potential aggressors, reassure our allies, and stabilize the situation among our friends. We consider a naval presence on as nearly permanent basis as possible to be the means best suited for forestalling some of the troubles now foreseeable and preventing others from rising to the surface.”

The formation of the IOTF was consequently not without its benefits to U.S. foreign policy. Structured around a single aircraft carrier, it was viewed as having “immediate and long range advantages for our national security policy.” It would provide “additional credence to our intent to support friendly nations in the Middle East and South Asia” and “therefore have a beneficial effect on our security arrangements in the area, both from the viewpoint of the external as well as the internal threat.” It was particularly envisioned that such a force would enable a “reduced reaction time… possibly in a matter of hours” that could “support friendly forces” and would “greatly enhance the credibility of our assurances to Iran, Pakistan and India.” Overall, the IOTF could provide greater flexibility and avoid issues of withdrawal that land-based forces faced, though it would not preclude the uses of the latter or air force strategy either. The initial plan being formulated by US Departments of the State and Defense would be to deploy the IOTF intermittently for “a period of about two months out of every six” with initial exercises beginning as early as late 1963. A key ally in this plan was Great Britain, and it was further conveyed that the intention was “to increase Western military presence.” The purpose of the IOTF was not “to supplant in any way British influence or provide the British with an opportunity to reduce some of their commitments in the area.” Indeed, plans for transforming the atoll of Diego Garcia, a British possession, into a “communications station” were already underway. This initial outline for the IOTF was sent to a wide set of US diplomatic missions around the Indian Ocean littoral, among them Hong Kong, New Delhi, Karachi, Tehran, Singapore, Jakarta, Nairobi, Dar es Salaam, Lourenco Marques (contemporary Maputo), and Pretoria. US embassies in Moscow, London, and Paris were also informed.

A key question with the viability of the IOTF remained, however, with the response of the government of India. The US embassy in New Delhi anticipated a generally positive reaction, though likely one that would be divided. Undoubtedly the Soviet Union would be averse to this plan, and those in the support of the USSR would criticize any Indian agreement to cooperate with the US. On the other hand, Indian animosity toward the PRC was perceived as a more productive angle to
work. Positioning the IOTF as a measure against the regional influence of the PRC could blunt any negative reaction from the Soviet Union toward India’s cooperation with the US. By December 1963, a better sense of anticipated Soviet impressions was outlined. The US embassy in Moscow sent a telegram to the state department on December 6 stating that the USSR would see the establishment of the IOTF as a “threat to the non-aligned policy of India and thus to their own long-range designs for the sub-continent.” It would enhance “US pressure generally in South and Southeast Asia.” Beyond these specific regional concerns, it was also asserted that the Soviets would “regard [the] Indian Ocean deployment [of] US nuclear weapons and delivery capability as posing [a] serious problem in terms [of] Soviet defense capabilities against strategic attack.” The US embassy consequently believed that the USSR would call the IOTF a “further dangerous step in proliferating nuclear weapons” and an “effort [to] apply pressure on non-aligned states” with the intention of crushing “national-liberation” movements. As a result, it was anticipated that the Soviet Union would position itself as “protection against ‘neo-colonialism.’” It was unclear how India and countries in Southeast Asia might respond. Moreover, it was debated whether the Soviet Union should be notified of US intentions prior to any public leak or developments—a diplomatic consideration in the wake of the recent Cuban missile crisis (October 1962). Indeed, an anxiety was expressed by American officials in Moscow that the Soviet Union “might well read more significance into [the] establishment of [the] IOTF as one of [the] first acts of [the] new President than is intended – notwithstanding all assurances to the contrary.” President Lyndon Johnson had only been in office just over two weeks, since the assassination of John F. Kennedy on November 22 in Dallas.

An ideal scenario in the purview of state and defense department officials would consequently be for the government of India to support the IOTF, but would approach the Soviets “on their own (or with [the] US) to reassure [the] Soviets that [their] non-aligned policy [remained] unimpaired and that they regard [the IOTF] measure as useful in discouraging further Chinese Communist aggression.” By “strengthening their independent status they might get [a] softer answer.” However, it was fully recognized that Indian support for the IOTF would confirm the Soviet Union’s “worst fears of Indian re-orientation toward [the] west.” It would represent a “major set-back to Soviet policy.” Stressing the “threat” of “Chinese communist aggression” in the region of South and Southeast Asia would be crucial for the IOTF to take shape. But US planning also experienced debate, and the IOTF plan underwent continued revision. Concerns were expressed that the Indian Ocean designation was too limited. It was “unduly restrictive in that it might link our military
presence to [a] specific geographic region.” This concern reflected the fact that the envisioned task force—consisting of an aircraft carrier, three destroyers, and one fleet oiler—would draw from the Seventh Fleet, based in Honolulu with the mandate of covering the Pacific region. Two cruises of thirty days each were proposed for the next six months, with a specific proposal that the first occur after mid-February to “avoid conflict with Muslim religious observances during Ramadan.” The schedule would include an initial stop in Jakarta, with subsequent stops in Malaysia, India, and Pakistan. A cruise in the Gulf of Oman was also suggested, with a “weapons demonstration for [the] Shah [of Iran] if this can be arranged.” “Our new military presence in [the] general area of [the] Indian Ocean should convey assurance and increased American interest without being ostentatious,” a State Department circular from December 9, 1963, noted. “Our purpose… is to stabilize, deter, and take action at this time designed to minimize possible adverse shifts of balance of power at [a] later date, especially in [the] event CHICOMs should attain nuclear capability.”

Additional principles and concerns were outlined, including the intention to establish a “continuing military presence” even if at this stage it would be intermittent, that port calls should be balanced between “allied and receptive non-allied countries,” that such visits would be within a “framework of informal visits/good will missions,” that such missions could aid in disaster relief, and that coordination should be reached with British and Australian interests, as well as South Atlantic operations that involved visits to African ports. Questions circulated to US embassies in the Indian Ocean littoral regarding what times of year might be appropriate for visits, what local responses might be, and what problems might be encountered more generally. For Pretoria there was particular concern for the racial discrimination American sailors might face.

Though an announcement of the IOTF plan was tentatively set for December 20, 1963, information leaked earlier, with the Washington Post reporting the place on December 9. The article outlined the basic intentions of the plan, with deterring the PRC being a primary motivation, though the injecting a “sense of stability into [the] area” more generally also providing a rationale. This news story was further carried in India, with a front-page article published in The Times of India on December 12 titled “Seventh Fleet to Guard Indian Ocean Area, US Bid to Confront Peking with Deterrent Force. Discussion Proposed with South Asian Countries.” An article in The Hindu (Madras) made the same claims with the US seeking to extend the operational sphere of the Seventh Fleet “to fill the power vacuum from Indonesia to South Arabia.” It also reported that US officials were “bewildered over the leakage,” though this information may have been purposefully released in this fashion through media outlets in order to blunt any sharp response from the USSR or
the PRC. The articles further noted that no separate command for the IOTF was planned, that it would be equipped with “conventional and nuclear weapons of [the] latest type,” that an American existing naval presence in the China Sea had had “a salutary effect on the Peking regime all these years,” and that the purpose of the IOTF was to “safeguard the independence of South Asian countries which are open to Chinese pressures and threats of aggression.” Moreover, it was cited that the US had “no intention of utilizing the presence of this force to interfere in any way in the internal affairs of these countries.”

While these initial reports put a positive spin on the plan, internal criticism and external anxieties emerged. For example, while US naval visits to Madagascar had generated some good will in the past, coordination was needed with the French, given Franco-Malagasy defense agreements as well as French military interests over much of the western Indian Ocean, including the Comoros and Reunion in addition to Madagascar. Speculation also focused on the perception that the government of Madagascar would resist frequent visits, given likely criticism by other African states that it was becoming “too closely aligned with [the] west.” The IOTF’s association with apartheid South Africa could also create opposition among the Malagasy and, by extension, other independent African countries. Indian Ambassador Braj Kumar Nehru (a first cousin of Jawaharlal Nehru), who was ambassador to the US from 1961 to 1968, also expressed to American officials that the media reports on the plan “bothered him.” While technical assistance was fine, he disliked how the task force was being justified on a “political basis.” B. K. Nehru said that Soviet officials had been “after him to explain what [was] behind [the] press reports.” They had created the impression that “India would be protected by [the] Seventh Fleet.” As a consequence, if public diplomacy were not handled differently, “something very desirable may get interfered with,” Nehru remarked. Indonesia was also expected to take a “dim view [on] US naval deployment [in the] Indian Ocean, interpreting it as pressure on them in [their] dispute with Malaysia.” To work against any misimpressions, US State Department officials recommended that Admiral Claude V. Ricketts in his upcoming visit to Jakarta stress that a US naval visit to Indonesia would pay respect to a “friendly country of great importance in [the] area” and would “give expression to[the] close ties between our navies.” It could also be stressed that the IOTF was based on the “long considered” working belief that the “area between [the] Southeast Asian mainland and East Africa [is] high on [the] list [of] ChiCom objectives.” The area has “already been subject both [to] direct ChiCom aggression ([the] occupation [of] Tibet, and [the] assault on India) as well as indirect pressures.” “To discourage further ChiCom intrusions and reassure both our allies and noncommitted nations in [the] area,” it
was argued, the IOTF could “demonstrate the far-ranging flexible capability of [a] US naval force to contribute to [the] defense of [the] free world.” No reference was to made to either the Indonesia-Malaysia dispute or tensions between India and Pakistan.

Despite these efforts at heading off diplomatic resistance, the emerging publicity of this plan continued to generate debate and dissent, particularly in India. An editorial in the *Times of India* on December 13, 1963, said that the Indian government needed to reassure “public opinion in one way or another, that it is not associated, however obliquely, with this thoroughly objectionable project.” The editorial went further to argue that the Indian government would be “unable to evade some definition of its attitude towards what is unmistakably uninvited Western interference.” Though India and nation-states in Southeast Asia were well aware of the “Chinese challenge,” there was not a consensus that a “Western presence” in the area was “necessary or desirable.” If the PRC is to be contained, this aim “cannot be achieved by what is merely a latter twentieth-century version of gun-boat tactics.” The editorial stressed that India must declare it has no intention of endorsing the “introduction of Western military power into [the] Indian Ocean area” and that it was not worth repeating that the “presence of [the] Seventh Fleet will not involve interference in [the] internal affairs of sea countries.” The potential presence and threat of American nuclear weapons in particular was viewed as “infinitely more provocative” and “this crude expression of so-called deterrent is something which New Delhi must strenuously resist if non-alignment is to remain meaningful.” Indeed, the editorial asserted that the US perceived the Sino-Indian War as destroying non-alignment “in all but name” and that Western military assistance through air exercises and other means has “firmly committed India to [the] Western camp.”