



# Where Giants once sailed: Soviet Navy presence in the IOR

**D**uring height of the Cold War in the '60s, strategic importance of the Indian Ocean, and its littoral states grew for both the US and USSR. Asia had emerged as a 'hotbed' for proxy wars, with directly participating in conflicts, the focus increasingly on the third world.

Before the mid-60s, USN SSBNs were equipped with Polaris A1 and A2 missiles, which had a max range of 2600 and 2800 km respectively. Because of this limited range, the Indian Ocean was not considered an effective patrolling area, but following the deployment of A3s in 1964, the SSBNs could hit their targets (primarily Soviet) even from the Arabian Sea. This coupled with the US constructing a low frequency communication station in North West Cape, Western Australia to contact their patrolling subs, convinced the Soviet Union that USN deployment in Indian Ocean was imminent.

In 1968, the British Prime Minister Harold Wilson announced the decision to withdraw from Britain's major military bases East of the Suez, owing to a multitude of

reasons. This pull-out, although announced in 1968, was to happen by 1971. The Soviet deployment in the region quickly followed this announcement.

Soviet Naval presence in the Indian Ocean region first began when Moscow dispatched a 4-ship flotilla from Vladivostok on a goodwill visit to six Indian Ocean littoral states, being India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Kenya, South Yemen and Somalia in March 1968. The flotilla was or would become the 8th Operational (Indian Ocean) Squadron.

USN deployment in the region had started much earlier, with Seventh Fleet deployment in the Indian Ocean by April 1964 as the *Concord Squadron*. Still, by 1969, the Soviets had gained access to several port facilities in the region and the flotilla spent most of its time in the north-western portion of the ocean. After that, the Soviets steadily increased their ship-days in the region from about 1000 in 1968, reaching 9000 by 1974 and about 11,800 by 1980.

Numerous reasons have been given as to why the Soviets finally decided to deploy in the region, the most apparent being to counter US influence there. Other reasons that can be argued include keeping Chinese threat at bay. The Sino Soviet split had happened in the 60s, and by 1972 Nixon had visited China, alarming the Soviets to a serious Chinese threat to the Russian Far East. An Indian Ocean deployment gave another area to respond from in case of hostilities and to ensure connection with Siberia.

Yet another could be that the Soviets simply wanted to exploit the power vacuum left after the British pullout or a simple logistical one: protecting shipping lanes in the region and disrupting the enemies.

The exploitation of such a power vacuum was surely on the minds of Soviet planners', even if primary motivation would have been any one of those mentioned above. Any such deployment would certainly allow them to exert some power over littoral states, through goodwill visits and if need