Indian Ocean as Zone of Peace: Indian Perspective

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History witnesses the day when United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) adopted the resolution 2832(XXVI) which declares ‘Indian Ocean as Zone of Peace’. This resolution was adopted on 16 December, 1971 by UNGA.¹ This proposal was presented by Sri Lanka along with Tanzania at the 26th session of UNGA in 1971. The proposal was firstly introduced in the annual meeting of Non-Alignment nations of Cairo in 1964 as well as of Lusaka (Zambia) conference in 1970.² Also this issue was raised by nations in 1970, Conference of Commonwealth. This proposal was introduced to maintain peace and stability in the Indian Ocean. This proposal also opposes any super power rivalry in the Indian Ocean during the Cold War period. In this proposal we can see the shadow of Non-Alignment Policy. We can see the nations, those who were supporting this proposal, were the part of Non-Alignment Moment and were seeking for decolonization in Asia and Africa Region. Behalf of this resolution UNGA setup a committee to study the effects of that proposal. Proposal was leaded by the group of nations, in particular some littoral countries of Indian Ocean Region, whose interests were effecting by the dynamic change in the power politics of the Indian Ocean. These nations were newly independent and were afraid of neo-colonialism. They were afraid of rivalry between USA and Soviet Union. This rivalry wasn’t limited up to Indian Ocean but these two super powers were intervening in the bilateral issues of the nations. India-Pakistan wars 1965 & 1971 are most relevant example from our perspective.

Before going in the deep we need to understand that, what were the factors which pull the Indian Ocean littoral countries to doorsteps of the United Nations?

Before or up to Second World War the Indian Ocean was known as the ‘British Lake’ but after the war situations gone changed. Britain was not good enough to control over their colonies due to her weak economic structure. But weak economy was not only single factor also; the rise of nationalism in these colonies was an effective reason that pulls back Britain from their colonies. In 1960’s Britain decided to end their bases in east of the Suez. This declaration created a ‘Power Vacuum’ in the Indian Ocean. This power vacuum was the main attraction for USA who became leading power at that time. Soon USA keeps trying to fill that power vacuum. In this manner taking Diego-Garcia on lease from Britain was the mile stone for USA. During Cold War USA was seeking to establish military facilities over the globe to enhance its strategic radius and Diego-Garcia was an

¹ Declaration of the Indian Ocean as a zone of peace | United Nations iLibrary (un-ilibrary.org)
² https://southasianvoices.org/troubled-water-indian-ocean-zone-of-peace/
instrument that enhance the strength of USA in Indian Ocean Region. Soon, to counter USA, USSR entered in this region. Then the rivalry took place in Indian Ocean Region. This rivalry was promoting violence, aggression, neo-colonialism, expansion of weapons and mutual disparity in Indian Ocean Region. The presence of two super powers with nuclear capability wasn’t a good sign for stability of Indian Ocean.

Littoral states were very concerned about this power rivalry in Indian Ocean. So these littoral States went to UNGA so that they can maintain peace in the region.

But here we need to understand one thing i.e. there is difference between theory and practice. In the same manner we can see, UNGA has announced Indian Ocean as Zone of peace but reality is different. With end of Cold War there was a hope that after the disintegration of USSR Indian Ocean will be free from any strategic competition. But with the end of Cold War USA emerged as hegemonic power. USA starts replacing USSR at every theater. Also we can see rise of China in the Indian Ocean which is, now a days, main cause of instability in this region. Chinese navy is rapidly increasing her military bases, developing port facilities in littoral States, and taking participation in different military exercises. China is trying to encircle Indian Ocean Region with its One Belt and One Road i.e. OBOR policy. Not only China but also France, UK, Japan and Australia are involved deeply in this ocean.

Now here we need to understand that ‘Is it possible to keep Indian Ocean as Zone of Peace?’ My answer is “No’. The reason behind this is given below-

We can see most of the maritime trade passes through Indian Ocean because it is warm water ocean and navigable for whole year. Major states like China, India, Japan, Australia etc. using Indian Ocean for their petroleum import and export. China and India are deeply dependent on Indian Ocean because about 70% petroleum import of China and 90% petroleum trade of India passes through Indian Ocean. And just to secure their interests China is working on develop blue water capability, increasing its presence in the Gulf region and established a military base in Djibouti.\(^3\)

Here I want to draw attention on the Indian perspective. India has always been the supporter of Indian Ocean Zone of Peace. India was the part of the group of nations who present the proposal in UNGA. Also, then the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi played major role and calls major powers to suspend their military bases and activities in the ocean. India has a unique position in the Indian Ocean. Recently in 2015 India recall for Zone of Peace in Galle Dialogue, Sri Lanka 2015. Also, in Jakarta Concord of 2017, Indian Ocean Rim Associations (IORA) demand for maintaining peace and stability in the Indian Ocean Region.\(^4\)

Here I would like to draw attention why India is strongly promoting for Indian Ocean as Zone of Peace. India is surrounded by Indian Ocean from its three sides i.e. East, West and South. India has 7516 km coast line which passes through many states and Islands of Indian Territory. India has more than 1000 islands in her jurisdictions. There are many factors because of which India want to keep Indian Ocean peaceful.

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3. China’s Djibouti Naval Base Increasing its Power., Jean pierre Cabestan., East Asia Forum., 16 May 2020
   https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2020/05/16/chinas-djibouti-naval-base-increasing-its-power/

Firstly, India’s major concern from Indian Ocean is security issue. India long coastline makes it vulnerable from security point of view. It is well known now that, ‘the terrorist entered through sea route in India and attacked on Mumbai in 2008 i.e. 26/11’. India has large coastline along with Indian Ocean and need to be protected to ensure the security. Without securing the surface of Indian Ocean India cannot protect its maritime boundaries. For this India is working on strengthening its naval capacity. Indian Navy, Indian Coast Guards, Sagar Prahari Bal and Territorial Police are responsible for guarding the shores of Indian coastlines. Taking lesions after 26/11 attack Sagar Prahari Bal was established in 2009.

Secondly, as discussed before, approx. 98% by volume and 70% by value of India’s international trade passes through Indian Ocean. Recently India is working for enhance its GDP up to five trillion $ which is not possible without Indian Ocean. This ocean is an opportunity for India to full fill its energy, food, and commercial interests. India’s growth is totally depends on its international trade. India import petroleum from gulf region and export its goods to African and South East Asian countries through this ocean. Another important factor is; huge amount of population of India is connected to Indian Ocean. They are involved in sea activities like fishing, trade, tourism, agriculture, energy production, ship building etc. These activities are important for both people and country.

Thirdly, the major threats to India security come from China. China is continuously increasing its presence in Indian Ocean Region. With the ‘String of Pearls’ policy China is trying to containment of India. By String of Pearl policy China is developing infrastructure on strategically important ports in the Indian Ocean. In accordance with this China is developing port facilities in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Maldives. With the help of this China can keep their eyes on the activities in Indian Ocean Region which is not good for Indian Ocean countries specifically India. As we know that India has boundary disputes with China on land border. Hence China can use these naval facilities at the time of any chaos and can engage India in two front i.e. land and sea. Also, China is providing arms and technical assistance to Pakistan through Gwadar port which isn’t so far from India.\(^5\)

Fourth factor behind supporting of peaceful Indian Ocean is ‘Regional Cooperation’. India is working on the several issues which are the common problem of littoral countries of Indian Ocean. Disaster management, climate change, terrorism, illegal immigration, drug trafficking, human trafficking, hunger, unemployment, piracy etc. are such issues on which India or any other nation cannot work alone. To achieve these goals all nations need to work together and India is working on collecting these on same platforms like BIMSTEC, IOR-ARC, SAARC, QUAD, IONS etc.

Finally one important thing remains to discuss i.e. Does India’s activities in Indian Ocean region follows the principles of Zone of Peace? Some of experts raise the questions about the intention of India about keeping India Ocean Zone of Peace because India is continuously working on modernization and strengthening Indian Navy. Answer isn’t so simple. Here India is using dichotomist approach. On one hand, to keep Indian Ocean peaceful, India is opposing any extra-regional power in the ocean; on other hand India is improving strategic partnership with USA to counter Chinese presence in this region. For example, India has signed LEMOA\(^6\) with USA by which USA can access Indian port facilities as well as India can use American port facilities. If we discuss transparently, this agreement can increase rivalry with China in Indian Ocean which will ultimately

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affects peace in the Indian Ocean. Also, we know India had acquired nuclear triad and Pakistan is working on it. The rivalry between India and Pakistan is also affecting the peace of the ocean. Pakistan is working with China to ensure its vital interests in the Indian Ocean as well as India are working with USA and Russia simultaneously. As we have discussed Indian perspective above; India cannot deny that its destiny is linked with Indian Ocean. Here we can see the principles of declaration of Indian Ocean as zone of Peace and Indian activities are contradicting each other but we have to understand that India cannot be mute spectator in Indian Ocean. India is strategically, commercially, politically, economically, culturally and socially depends on Indian Ocean. Also we know China is increasing its capacity in the Indian Ocean without caring of any resolution or international law. So how can we think that India could sacrifice with her national security? Seeing current situation any one can blame India that India has backed from its proposal but it is clear that whatever is India doing, is just to maintain peace and stability in the India Ocean Region.