

# MARITIME STRATEGIC EVALUATION FOR ISRAEL 2021/22

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## Russia and the Indian Ocean

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### The Legacy

On the morning of March 24, 1801, the new Russian Emperor Alexander I, grandson of Catherine the Great, said in his first address to his subjects: "In my time everything is going to be as it was in my grandmother's days". The young Emperor directed these words at the aristocracy, which had regarded the Catherine era to be a golden age. This phrase – to rule as in erstwhile times, when life was better – has come up several times in Russia's history post-Alexander I. The last time this happened was in the 2000's, when Russia's President Vladimir Putin called the breakup of the Soviet Union "the greatest geopolitical disaster of the 20th century", and Russian propaganda began portraying the final decades of the Soviet Union, mostly under Leonid Brezhnev, as an almost golden era. One of the foremost symbols of that period was the Soviet military might, including its navy – which had not only shown its flag all over the vast expanses of the ocean, it had even tried to rival that of the United States.

Sea voyages and presence in the Indian Ocean during that period are portrayed as part of the "symbols of greatness", although in reality the Indian Ocean has, throughout history, played a very minor role in the Russian agenda. Indeed, access to India had interested the Russians and they even attempted to dent Britain's standing there, but all these activities, from the failed attempt to send forces to India in 1800 and culminating in the "Great Game" in the second half of the 19th century, were conducted overland. The Indian Ocean gained importance to the Russians only at the end of the 19th century, when it set up its naval forces in the Far East. The ships that made up the new fleet had been built in Baltic shipyards and their route to Port Arthur and Vladivostok passed through the Indian Ocean.

The Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905 brought attention to the problematic nature of this route during war times. This was one of the main reasons why in the second half of the 1920's the Soviet government attempted to open a route linking the Barents Sea and Russian ports in the Pacific Ocean via the Arctic Ocean and Bering Strait. This route, which was named the Northern Sea Route, had several advantages which outweighed the difficulties of navigating it. The main advantage was the fact that it was completely within waters controlled by the Soviet Union. Although the Soviets also made use of the route passing via the Indian Ocean even after this northern route had been opened, including during the first decade of the Cold War, the Indian Ocean was not important to them.

The Soviet Union began showing renewed interest in the Indian Ocean during the second half of the 1960's, when US Navy nuclear submarines appeared there, equipped with Polaris ballistic missiles.<sup>1</sup> While Soviet diplomatic activity in this region began gaining momentum a decade earlier – following Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's strategic decision to ramp up relations with post-colonial states which had not declared themselves to be socialists<sup>2</sup> – this activity was virtually devoid of a military dimension. The Soviet Union provided weapons to friendly regimes and trained their armies, but it was loth to seek a direct presence in the sphere.

The situation changed once American strategic submarines appeared in the Indian Ocean. The Soviets perceived this development to be a direct and immediate threat which required urgent action. In 1971 the "8th Operational Squadron" was established and designated to operate in the Indian Ocean. The squadron was placed under the command of the Pacific Fleet. When the Squadron began operations, the Soviets were forced to deal with the problem of lack of onshore infrastructures. The arena was far away from the fleet's bases in the Pacific Ocean, which were located in the Soviet Far East, and the "Mobile Rear " method,<sup>3</sup> which had been developed precisely for such cases, failed to provide a full-scale solution for the needs of the squadron. Diplomats were assigned to the attempts to solve the problem. In 1971, the Soviet Union reached an agreement with South Yemen to establish a base for the 8th Squadron on the Sokotra Islands in the Arabian Sea.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, a naval base for a military communications center and facilities for aerial forces was

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<sup>1</sup> G. Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East from World War Two to Gorbachev*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> "The summary report of the Central Committee of the Soviet Union for the Party's 20th convention: Speech by First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the USSR Comrade N. Khrushchev", from: the 20th convention of the Communist Party of the USSR, *14–25 February 1956: transcript*, (Moscow 1956), Vol. A pp. 24 ("Отчётный доклад Центрального Комитета Коммунистической Партии Советского Союза XX Съезду партии: Доклад Первого секретаря ЦК КПСС тов. Н.С. Хрущёва", in: XX Съезд Коммунистической Партии Советского Союза, 14-25 февраля 1956 г.: Стенографический отчёт, (Moscow, 1956), Vol. I, p. 24.

<sup>3</sup> In the Armed Forces' lexicon of the Soviet Union and Russia, the word "rear " encapsulates a set of all of the combat support systems – maintenance, munitions, supplies etc. The "mobile rear" was an attempt to find a solution to the problem of lack of onshore infrastructures in the remote theaters, where the Soviet fleet was operating. Its main thrust was that all of the support for the warships operating in the arena was assigned to the support vessels which were seconded to the squadrons.

<sup>4</sup> A. Usikov, and V. Yeremenko, "Fleet as a Tool of Policy", *Independent Military Coverage*, August 29, 2003 (Усиков, А., Яременко, В. "Флот как инструмент политики", in: Независимое военное обозрение, 29 авг. 2003 года)

being constructed in Berbera, Somalia. These bases quickly became the center of the Soviet naval activities in the Indian Ocean.<sup>5</sup> In 1977, the geographic extension of the Soviet fleet's facilities in the region was expanded to Ethiopia, where a new regime came to power and declared itself to be Marxist. The Soviet Union was given the opportunity to build a naval base on the Dahlak Archipelago in the Red Sea.<sup>6</sup> However, that year, additional changes took place. Following an outbreak of hostilities between two of the Soviet Union's allies, Somalia and Ethiopia, the Soviets chose to back Ethiopia, following which Somalian President Mohammed Siad Barre expelled the Soviet military personnel from his country. The void left with the closure of the Berbera Naval Base was filled by South Yemen, which allowed the Soviets to use the Port of Aden.<sup>7</sup>

These moves solved, even if only partially, the issue of bases within the theatre, however the problem of support for the fleet's vessels en route from Vladivostok to the Indian Ocean still remained, since it passed through regions under the control of the American naval forces stationed in Subic Bay, Philippines. The solution was found in Vietnam, which was in need of Soviet support following its war with China in early 1979. A Soviet base was established in 1980 in the city of Cam Ranh in Vietnam, where warships and auxiliary vessels were stationed. These became the "17<sup>th</sup> Operational Fleet", plus bombers and reconnaissance planes of the Fleet's aerial forces in the Pacific Ocean.<sup>8</sup>

The Soviet naval activity in the Indian Ocean had a very clear strategic purpose, however it had an extra dimension related to the internal machinations within the top Soviet military ranks. For approximately 30 years, from the late 1950's until the late 1980's, the command of the Soviet navy fought for its status within the armed forces. Ever since its establishment at the end of the 17th century, the Russian navy, and later the Soviet navy, was relegated only to a supporting role within the armed forces. According to the analysis of British Admiral Julian Oswald, who in the early 1990's was the head of the British Royal Navy, the main feature of the Soviet navy,

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<sup>5</sup> A. E. Graham, "Soviet Strategy and Policy in the Indian Ocean", in: P. J. Murphy (ed.), *Naval Power in Soviet Policy*, Washington (D.C.: U.S. Government Print Office, 1978), p. 284.

<sup>6</sup> I. Kapitanetz, *In the Service of the Ocean Fleet, 1946–1992: Notes of a Commander of Two Fleets*, (Moscow, 2000), p. 692 (Капитанец, И.М. На службе океанскому флоту, 1946–1992: Записки командующего двумя флотами, (Москва, 2000), p. 692).

<sup>7</sup> A. E. Graham, "Soviet Strategy and Policy in the Indian Ocean", in: Murphy, P.J. (ed.) *Naval Power in Soviet Policy*, (Washington, D.C., 1978), p. 285.

<sup>8</sup> *Soviet Air and Naval Presence at Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam*, July 1984, (CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room, Doc. No. ESDN (CREST): CIA-RDP91T01115R000100190002-3), p. 13.

and later the Russian navy, was the fact of its being a "naval appendage" of the ground forces, managed by ground-force generals in the General Staff.<sup>9</sup> The Indian Ocean (together with the Atlantic Ocean, to a degree) was the theatre in which the navy operated exclusively, a fact which enabled it to "raise its profile" and demand not only to have its status upgraded, but also to increase its share in the budgets and resources allocated to the armed forces.

## The Post-Soviet Era

Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the Russian Navy discontinued its operations in the Indian Ocean. Although the base at Cam Ranh continued operations for a decade longer, until it was finally closed in 2002, sailing into the arena ceased throughout the 1990s. The change, albeit low-key, began in the early 2000's. On March 4, 2000, then Acting President Vladimir Putin<sup>10</sup> signed an order instructing the raising of the level of activity in the maritime domain. Following this order, a first voyage of naval vessels took place into the Indian Ocean between January and March 2001. The force consisted of two frigates and a tanker.<sup>11</sup>

An actual ratcheting up of Russia's naval activity in the Indian Ocean occurred several years later when it joined the international effort to fight piracy around the Horn of Africa. This required the Russians not only to use the Pacific Fleet, but in fact all of their fleets. Ships from the Northern and Baltic fleets were also sent to the region on "operative missions".<sup>12</sup> The reason for that was the desire on the part of the naval high command to provide active practice for as many ships as possible after a long period in which Russian war ships had scarcely ventured into the high seas, but, apparently another reason was the inability of any one of the fleets to accomplish this mission single-handedly following the drastic reduction in the order of battle.

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<sup>9</sup> J. Oswald, "The Soviet Navy – a Western View", *The RUSI Journal*, 141(4) (1996), pp. 45–47.

<sup>10</sup> Putin rose to power in December 31, 1999 following the resignation of his predecessor Boris Yeltsin. However, until he was officially elected to the presidency on March 26, 2000, his status remained "Acting President".

<sup>11</sup> I. Safronov, and A. Chernishov. "The Russian Fleet Returns to the Indian Ocean after a Nine-Year Hiatus", From: *Commercant*, January 16, 2001 (Сафронов, И. Чернышов, А. "Российский флот возвращается в Индийский океан после девятилетнего перерыва", Коммерсант, 16 января 2001 года).

<sup>12</sup> About the activity of the Russian naval forces against the pirates, see "Somalian pirates encounter the Neustrashimy for the first time (*RIAN*, 12 November, 2008) ("Сомалийские пираты впервые столкнулись с "Неустрашимым", РИАИ, 12 ноября 2008 года) and "Pirates Withdraw in the Face of Russian Sailors", (*Interfax*, 3 August, 2010) ("Пираты спасовали перед российскими моряками", Интерфакс, 3 августа 2010 года).

Moscow's interest in the Indian Ocean was rekindled several years later. A trickle of voyages to the region began in 2017, followed by the Russian navy beginning to take part in naval maneuvers with the countries in the region. At the end of 2019 and early 2020, a joint naval maneuver was held in the Gulf of Oman involving Russia, Iran and China. On the Russian side, a task force from the Baltic fleet participated. It consisted of a frigate, a tanker and a tug boat.<sup>13</sup> Another joint Russian-Iranian maneuver took place in February 2021 in the Gulf of Oman and in the northwestern part of the Indian Ocean. The Russians sent a corvette and a tanker from the Baltic fleet.<sup>14</sup>

At the same time, the Russian fleet is conducting joint maneuvers with the Indian Navy. In December 2019, a task force from the Baltic Fleet (in a usual configuration – frigate, tugboat and tanker) took part in an Indian Navy maneuver,<sup>15</sup> and in September 2020 there was another joint Russian-Indian naval maneuver in the Gulf of Bengal.<sup>16</sup>

Attempts are also being made to continue with voyages into the region – thus, in the final months of 2020, a task force of the Baltic Fleet sailed into the Indian Ocean. The force consisted of three vessels – a frigate, a tugboat and a tanker.<sup>17</sup>

The Russian navy's level of activity has been relatively high in recent years, both when compared with the activity in other arenas, and when taking into consideration that this is branch of the military with very limited capabilities, where almost any foray into remote arenas is a significant event. This being said, the Indian Ocean arena has received only brief mention in Russia's "maritime doctrine". This theatre is

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<sup>13</sup> Russia, PRC and Iran hold their first joint maneuver in the Indian Ocean, Deutsche Welle, 27 December, 2019 ("РФ, КНР и Иран впервые проводят совместные учения в Индийском океане", Deutsche Welle, 27 декабря 2019 года).

<sup>14</sup> "A clear signal": Russia and Iran practice defense in the Indian Ocean" ("Ясный сигнал": Россия и Иран отрабатывают оборону в Индийском океане), (*gazeta.ru*, 16 February, 2021).

<sup>15</sup> "In India the maritime part of the Indra 2019 maneuver has begun" ("В Индии началась морская часть учения Индра-2019"), (*RIAN*, 11 December 2019).

<sup>16</sup> "The Indra Navy-2020 maritime maneuver has ended in the Bay of Bengal" ("В Бенгальском заливе завершилось российско-индийское военно-морское учение Индра Нэйви-2020"), *Russian Defense Ministry website*, 6 September 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Formation of Baltic Fleet vessels departs en route to the Indian Ocean", *RIAN*, 1 October 2020 ("Отряд кораблей Балтийского флота отправился в поход в Индийский Океан", *РИАН*, 1 октября 2020 года).

noted there as one of the "main regional directions of the Russian maritime policy",<sup>18</sup> however since all four oceans are mentioned in this list of directions, the mention itself is in fact meaningless. The real importance of the Indian Ocean is apparent also from the length of the reference to it is in the "Doctrine" – its authors devoted half a page to this theatre (whereas, for example, almost two pages are devoted to the Caspian Sea). Besides the general statements (such as "the importance of developing Russian shipping in the Indian Ocean", "aspiration to extract oil from it in collaboration with other countries in the region" and "guaranteeing a presence for the Russian Navy there"), only one clear goal is mentioned – use of the maritime activity in the Indian Ocean to develop friendly relations with India.<sup>19</sup>

The theatre failed to gain any special reference in the ordinance "On the fundamentals of the naval policy", which was signed by President Putin in the summer of 2017. The Indian Ocean is only mentioned there as one of the theatres in which the presence of the Russian Navy is necessary due to the increase in piracy.<sup>20</sup> "Russia's national security strategy", which was approved in July 2021, makes no mention whatsoever of the Indian Ocean theatre (and in general, the reference there to maritime activity is noticeably low-key).<sup>21</sup>

To all appearances, this situation seems to indicate a contradiction between Russia's declared policy in the theatre and its policy in practice. This contradiction became all the more acute in autumn 2020, when Russia announced that it had reached an agreement with the Sudanese government to set up a Russian naval base in that country. According to Russian publications, the number of Russian citizens allowed to be stationed at the base was limited to 300 individuals, and the number of vessels that will be allowed to dock there concurrently is limited to four. It was noted that nuclear-powered vessels would be allowed to dock at the base.<sup>22</sup> On 16 November

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<sup>18</sup> Maritime doctrine of the Russian Federation from 2015, section 50, ([Internet website of the Russian President](#)).

<sup>19</sup> Maritime doctrine of the Russian Federation from 2015, section 68.

<sup>20</sup> "Fundamentals of the Russian Federation's policy in the area of maritime-military activity", approved by decree of the Russian President, 20 July, 2017, chapter 27, section 4, posted on the [official website of the Russian President](#).

<sup>21</sup> "The national security strategy of the Russian Federation", 2 July 2021, posted on the [official website of the Russian President](#).

<sup>22</sup> A. Achtkirko, "Economic assistance in return for a Red Sea base: Sudan details the terms for stationing a Naval base", ([gazeta.ru](#), 12 September 2021) (Ахтырко, А. "Экономическая помощь в обмен на военную базу на Красном море: В Судане рассказали, на каких условиях готовы разместить базу ВМФ").

2020, President Putin signed the presidential decree authorizing Russia's minister of defense to sign an agreement with Sudan regarding the construction of a "Logistic Support Facility" of the navy in Sudan.<sup>23</sup> Russian media responded to this with the usual fanfare and declared, "Russia returns to the Indian Ocean".<sup>24</sup> However, this plan never materialized. The Sudanese government hurriedly reversed its agreement with the Russians and it is now unclear whether the facility will be built at all.

## Conclusion

In principle, Russia does not have any special interests in the Indian Ocean, and reference to the ocean in official doctrinaire documents reflects this. Neither are Russian corporations developing large-scale projects which would have necessitated increasing its military presence on the Indian Ocean's shores. In contrast to the Cold War days, there is no strategic threat to Russia that would justify a permanent presence of Russian forces there.

It may be that the maritime activity related to the Indian Ocean is driven primarily by the principle of "competing with the West", which was adopted by the Russian leadership in recent years, and from the ambition to "show a flag" wherever there is a western military presence. At the same time, this is a token presence only, since the Russian Navy's order of battle does not allow it to maintain a permanent presence in multiple remote arenas simultaneously. The use of naval forces as part of the diplomatic efforts vis-à-vis Iran, China and India seems more like a byproduct of this activity, since the naval collaboration is a completely secondary area in the relations between Russia and these countries.

The activity in the Indian Ocean is also consistent with the interests of the navy's high-command, since it enables it to present independent activity, in which the navy is not subject to other branches (as opposed, for example, to the activity in Syria,

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<sup>23</sup> "Decree from the President of the Russian Federation to sign an agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Sudan regarding the construction of a logistic support facility for the Russian Federation's Navy on the territory of the Republic of Sudan" 16 November 2020 (Распоряжение Президента Российской Федерации о подписании соглашения между Российской Федерацией и Республикой Судан о создании пункта материально-технического обеспечения Военно-Морского Флота Российской Федерации на территории Республики Судан от 16 ноября 2020 года"), [Official legal information website](#).

<sup>24</sup> See, for example: A. Kupryanov, "Wandering in Africa – what will Russia gain from a military presence on the Indian Ocean shores: Navy to get a base in Port Sudan", *Izvestia*, 16 November 2020 (Куприянов, А. "В Африку гулять – что даст России военное присутствие на берегах Индийского океана: Флот получит место для базирования в Порт-Судане", *Известия*, 16 ноября 2020 года).



where the deciding factor is the Air and Space forces, whereas the naval forces fulfill a supporting role). In addition, this activity represents a return, albeit a symbolic one, to the days of the "glorious past" where the Soviet navy, the breeding ground where the majority of Russia's present-day admirals began their service, was considered to be a strategic force.