SUPERPOWER NAVAL DIPLOMACY IN THE INDO-PAKISTANI CRISIS

James M. McConnell
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Professional Paper No. 108

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Institute of Naval Studies

CENTER FOR NAVAL ANALYSES

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5 February 1973

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SUPERPOWER NAVAL DIPLOMACY IN THE INDO-PAKISTANI CRISIS

When the Indo-Pakistani War broke out on 3 December 1971, both the U.S. and the USSR had normal naval contingents in the Indian Ocean. The war led to record force levels for both powers--14 combatants and auxiliaries for the U.S., 26 for the Soviets.[1] There was another "outsider" on the scene--the British Far East Fleet, with at least 17 warships and auxiliaries.[2] It has been overlooked as a factor in the Soviet calculation, presumably because London was genuinely neutral in the conflict and the British deployment was not occasioned by the war.

No satisfactory account has been published of superpower naval diplomacy during the crisis. U.S. aims are still uncertain. There is even less clarity about USSR behavior--the forces deployed, their targets and objectives. Ignoring the few episodes of the 1920's, the systematic practice of "gunboat diplomacy" by the Soviets dates from 1967, less than six years ago. Previously, Western navies had policed areas of instability without great power opposition; now the Soviets are there, with their own notions of "order." Clearly this makes a difference; how much remains to be determined. If we can unravel the naval events surrounding the Indo-Pak crisis, link them up with policy and reflect on the whole in the light of previous cases of coercive diplomacy, perhaps we can derive some lessons of general application.

The Sequence of Events

When the war began, the U.S. had two destroyers and a seaplane tender at Bahrain in the Persian Gulf. The Soviet presence was also nominal--a destroyer, an F-class conventional attack submarine, a minesweeper and a tank landing ship.[3] The UK had by far the largest contingent of combatants--the attack carrier Eagle, the commando carrier Albion (with the 40th Commando Battalion on board), plus at least six destroyers and escorts.[4]

The British presence had nothing to do with the emerging Indo-Pakistani crisis. Under the eye of a Russian tanker, the Far East Fleet had come out of Singapore at the end of October as part of the winding down East of Suez.[5] The Albion went first to Kenya, remaining in Mombasa from 14-22 November while it landed its marines for an exercise.[6] In the meantime, from 1-12 November, the rest of the fleet exercised off Malaysia,[7] then apparently headed for the vicinity of the Persian Gulf to cover the UK withdrawal from the area.[8] As the Daily Telegraph explained on 11 November, the Eagle and the Albion, with its commandos, "will ensure no one takes advantage of the British withdrawal to cause trouble."

Trouble was expected over the disposition of three islands strategically located in the Straits of Hormuz--Abu Musa and the Tunbs, claimed by

both the Arabs and Iran. With London in the role of honest broker, the Times could announce by the 29th that the Iranians had struck a bargain with Sharjah over Abu Musa, giving military control to Teheran; but Sheik Sakr of Ras al Khaymah remained obdurate in his claim to the Tunbs, despite London's warning that he had only himself to blame if the Shah acted unilaterally, out of concern for the security of his oil trade.[9] On the 30th, the Iranians seized the islands. The radical Arabs were outraged, but the Russian reaction was mild. There were no press polemics before or after the seizure,[10] nor any naval reinforcements sent from Vladivostok.

Then came the war on 3 December. The Soviet destroyer and minesweeper then in the Indian Ocean were nearing the end of their normal six months deployment and were thus due for relief. The relief in fact was on the way--a destroyer equipped with surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) and a minesweeper, which by chance happened to exit the Straits of Malacca on 5 December, shortly after the war broke out. At some point Moscow evidently made the decision not to replace the original contingent; "a routine rotation became a timely reinforcement."[11] However, the Russian presence was still not formidable, since it had no surface-to-surface cruise-missile (SSM) capability. This deficiency was remedied by the first wartime deployments from the Pacific Ocean Fleet.

The Russians apparently intended a balanced "task group" consisting of a variety of platforms for coordinated anti-carrier operations and self-protection. It included a Kynda SSM cruiser, a conventionally-powered SSM submarine[12] (possibly of the J-class), and the SAM destroyer and F-class attack submarine already in the Indian Ocean--a total of four major combatants with 12 SSM launchers and six SAM rails.[13] First sighted by the Japanese in the Straits of Tsushima on 9 December, the "task group" must have left Vladivostok on 6-7 December, given the distances involved and the calculated speed of advance between the Straits of Tsushima and Malacca.

By this time the Dacca evacuation crisis had emerged. The first of many abortive attempts to bring stranded foreign nationals out of East Pakistan took place on the morning of 6 December. Both London and Washington were not unnaturally concerned. The British eventually reacted by sending the Albion "toward" the Bay of Bengal as a standby.[14] The U.S. reacted by forming Task Force 74 on 10 December and sending it to a holding position off Singapore.[15] Its nucleus was the attack carrier Enterprise, then on Yankee Station in the Gulf of Tonkin, but it also included the helicopter carrier Tripoli, three guided-missile escorts, four destroyers and a nuclear attack submarine.[16] The secret orders to the Task Force referred to the evacuation problem and to the possibility of a situation arising which would require a U.S. carrier presence "to insure the protection of U.S. interests in the area."[17]

On 12 December all foreign nationals who wished to leave Dacca were successfully evacuated. London responded by relieving the Albion of its

mission and diverting it to Gan in the Maldives,[18] away from the Bay of Bengal. Task Force 74, however, was sent into the Straits on the 14th,[19] debouching into the Andaman Sea the following day.

Several days after the departure of the Enterprise from Yankee Station, the Soviets sent a second anti-carrier "task group" from Vladivostok. In its composition, it was apparently an almost exact duplicate of the first--four combatants with 8-12 SSM launchers and eight SAM rails. The group, first observed in the Straits of Tsushima by the Japanese on the 15th, included a Kresta SSM cruiser, a Kashin SAM destroyer, and a pair of submarines, presumably one with and one without SSMs, as in the first "task group."[20]

Due to the distances it had to cover, the first Soviet "task group" did not arrive in the Indian Ocean until 18 December, three days after the Enterprise,[21] two days after the end of the war in the East and one day after the armistice in the West. At least some of the Soviet units then sought out Task Force 74,[22] steaming off the southern tip of India between Ceylon and the Maldives.[23] By this time the British Far East Fleet had departed the area, the Eagle arriving in Durban on the 22nd and the Albion in Capetown on the 30th.[24]

U.S. Objectives

Since all foreigners who wished to leave Dacca had been flown out on 12 December, it is proper to be skeptical that evacuation remained a significant mission for Task Force 74 when it headed into the Straits two days later. We also doubt that the deployment was determined by the Russian buildup. The task force was formed up too late to be a reaction to the small Soviet relief force which fortuitously arrived on 5 December, and it preceded all the other Soviet deployed units in reaching the Indian Ocean.

The likely U.S. target was India. In this respect U.S. policy was, and still is, highly controversial. Previously Washington had remained aloof from the quarrels of the subcontinent, and few saw grounds in this particular conflict for altering course. Human decency was all on Delhi's side, international law on Islamabad's; it would have been easy to temporize. In late 1971, however, the very existence of Pakistan seemed at stake; Islamabad lay at the mercy of a Soviet client.

The predictable loss of East Pakistan was bad enough, but early in the conflict the White House saw grounds for concern over Indian intentions in the West. Clandestine reporting quoted Mrs. Gandhi as indicating that, after the reduction of East Bengal, India would not accept a cease-fire until parts of Azad Kashmir were taken and Pakistan's airpower and armor eliminated. The Anderson papers show Sisco of State and Packard of Defense reluctant to accept this version of Indian intentions.[25] Their

reluctance is understandable. Delhi's vital interests would have been adequately served simply by the separation of East Bengal. The Indians were painfully conscious of their isolation in the world community; and a policy of naked aggression in the West was a luxury difficult to justify by the price.

However, even if the White House were to become convinced of an error in assessing Indian intentions, it is problematic that it would judge Task Force 74 to be a policy excess. The President wanted to "tilt" and did not seem too particular about the grounds. He obviously had no sympathy for Packard's view that "the overriding consideration is the practical problem of either doing something effective or doing nothing." The initial U.S. steps--branding India an aggressor and terminating economic and military aid--were hardly thought of as "effective" in this narrow sense. The next step was to arraign Delhi before the Security Council and then the General Assembly, despite the admission that this was "likely to be an exercise in futility;" the UN would "in all probability do little to terminate the war." By this time, in the relentless search for new ways of registering American protests, the Administration was preparing to wink at the illegal transfer to Pakistan, by Jordan and Libya, of U.S.-supplied aircraft, an action referred to by State's U. Alexis Johnson as a "token" gesture that could not substantially narrow the Pakistani defense gap.[26] It was more in the nature of a demonstration, and the logical next step in escalation from a demonstration by U.S. arms aid is a demonstration by U.S. arms. We think it important to stress this point, which gets lost in the debate over Indian intentions.

To borrow from the language of "gunboat diplomacy," Task Force 74 amounted to an "expressive" show of force, designed to emphasize the U.S. attitude in action language.[27] To plagiarize Clausewitz, it represented a continuation of the policy of "tilting" but with military means. "Everyone knows how all this will come out," said Dr. Kissinger, "and everyone knows that India will ultimately occupy East Pakistan. We must, therefore [sic!], make clear our position relative to our greater strategy." Presumably the task of the Enterprise in this greater strategy was to infuse visible power into the region, provide a point of stability around which concerned littorals could rally, mobilize the world community through the contagion of Washington's example and thereby limit and partially compensate for the adverse consequences of the war, both on the regional and--because of linkages--the international balance of power.

The Peking Summit was nigh. If Washington wanted to be a factor in Chinese policy, it would have to prove itself a factor in an area of interest to the Chinese.[28] A strong stand might convince Chou of the practical value of a U.S. connection, arrest centrifugal forces in the Pakistan rump and edify Islamabad's Moslem friends. The Indians and Soviets would have their victory, but they would have to pay for it elsewhere and there would be little bandwagon effects. The Third World was cool to Delhi's violation of international norms, ripe for a Sino-U.S. lead in

"tilting" that the Enterprise could dramatize. It would not be lost on the radical Arabs that Moscow was opposing on the subcontinent the very formula that they were advancing in their contest with Israel--cease-fire and withdrawal.[29] As the Indians themselves noted, almost everywhere else in the Third World--Ceylon,[30] Southeast Asia,[31] Black Africa,[32] Yugoslavia--there was the "nameless fear of the dismemberment of a state." Faced with nationality problems and secessionist movements that have been or could be exploited by outside powers, few countries in the unstable state-building stage could afford the "dangerous precedent" involved in the birth of Bangladesh.[33] The Indians lamented their "isolation" and "erosion of prestige" in the General Assembly vote of 7 December,[34] which went 104 to 11 against them, with 10 abstentions. The President may well have calculated that the gains from tilting, including tilting with Task Force 74, would more than compensate for the loss of U.S. influence in Delhi and Dacca. It is yet to be demonstrated that he was wrong.

Soviet Targets

While the U.S. was reacting to events on the mainland, the most reasonable interpretation is that the USSR was reacting to the presence of "imperialist" fleets. The deployment of the second Soviet task group was very probably in response to the movements of the Enterprise away from Yankee Station on the 10th. The uncertainty centers on the target for the first force augmentation out of Vladivostok on 6-7 December. It seems unlikely that the Soviets were deploying in anticipation of a U.S. deployment. If they were, then why did they need to send a second task group when the U.S. threat actually materialized?

It is even less likely that the Russians were deploying against the Pakistani; the Indians did not need their help. If the Russians were "skittish" about their client or had an unfocused anxiety about the crisis, one would have expected this to show up in their pre-war deployments. Yet here Moscow presents itself as cool and calculating, concerned not to over-react. Both the original and relief forces were normal, and by the time the first augmentation left Vladivostok on the 7th, Delhi had already demonstrated command of ground, air and sea; both East and West Pakistan had been effectively blockaded. Aside from the superflousness of Soviet help, it would have the positive disadvantage of "drawing flies," providing the U.S. with an excuse for matching deployments and a cover for subsequent intervention.

The Soviet line during the war is consistent with this interpretation. Moscow's great fear was the internationalization of the crisis. In the TASS statement of 5 December, all governments were urged to "refrain from steps signifying in this or that way their involvement in the conflict." Despite the temptation to induce caution in the Chinese, not once during the war did Moscow so much as mention its August Treaty with Delhi, a

reticence in accord with its demands for non-involvement.[35]

The most reasonable hypothesis is that the first "task group" was in reaction to the British presence. Admittedly, though, there is an obstacle to its credibility. London had already demonstrated its neutrality by abstaining in the Security Council on the 5th; the Far East Fleet was no threat to India. On the other hand, Soviet reaction to a British naval presence is generally reflexive. In the Mediterranean they do not differentiate between U.S. and U.K. capital ships; the carriers of each "imperialist" power are impartially monitored and countered. In terms of propaganda, there has been a similar lack of discrimination in the Indian Ocean. In the spring of 1971 the U.S. carrier Ticonderoga conducted an exercise south of Java, more than a thousand miles from Ceylon. Following this, H.M.S. Albion transited the region on a visit from Singapore to the Maldives. According to Radio Moscow, Indian observers interpreted both movements as "military demonstrations" linked with "the exacerbation of the domestic situation in Ceylon,"[36] at that time in the throes of insurgency.

All during the Indo-Pakistani crisis, Soviet propaganda was almost as hard on London as on Washington,[37] without, however, referring to the Far East Fleet. The Indian press showed more restraint about British policy but less about the UK naval presence. In the summer of 1971, when the crisis was heating up, a Times columnist complained that Britain's image in India was being blackened, "because the pro-Soviet lobby...are embarrassed by the UK's comparatively strong stand on East Pakistan and Moscow's equivocal efforts to remain in favor in both Islamabad and Delhi...."[38] Further embarrassed by London's goodwill during the war, anti-British officials in Delhi and in the Indian High Commission in London were said by "some British diplomats" to be deliberately planting reports in the Indian press implying a UK bias in favor of Pakistan.[39] One article claimed that the war had brought the Far East Fleet to the Indian Ocean.[40] Another seemed to be hinting that the Soviet naval deployments had been in reaction to the British as well as the U.S. presence.[41] A third article--"the latest of a long line of reports"[42]--brought to light what was referred to as "an Indo-British diplomatic tussle over Britain's desire to show its flag in the Bay of Bengal during the Indo-Pakistani fighting." Informed by London of its intention to send the Albion to the Bay, Delhi's response was said to have been a "categorical" negative, on the grounds that the deployment would be "misunderstood," presumably as a demonstration against India. London sent the Albion anyway, "obviously in concert with the U.S. aircraft carrier Enterprise." The article failed to mention the Albion's mission of mercy, alleging instead that when the Albion "was quickly diverted to South Africa," it was "apparently in view of the imminence of the Indian victory,"[43] rather than the successful evacuation.

It is difficult to say whether the first Soviet task group was sent as an automatic crisis reaction to the British presence or in connection with a specific event--the Dacca evacuation problem--which might have adverse consequences for Indian interests. It is also difficult to tell

whether the Soviets were genuinely concerned over the Far East Fleet or saw an opportunity to make an impact in the factional struggle within the Indian foreign affairs establishment. However, New Delhi's sensitivity to the British presence does suggest that it was the target for the first Soviet task group.

Soviet Intentions and the "Rules of the Game"

In the Anderson papers, the Russian Ambassador to India, Pegov, is quoted in a CIA document as saying the USSR did not believe the U.S. would intervene in the war. This suggests the Soviet objective was simply to counter-demonstrate against "imperialist provocations" and thereby generate credit with Delhi. Pegov, however, was attributed with the additional remark that the Soviet fleet in the area would not "allow" Task Force 74 to intervene.[44] We have no reason to doubt the Ambassador said this. Nor would we suggest it should not be taken to heart and seriously weighed. But there must be times when ambassadors say things out of ignorance, or when they are not sure they mean them, or when they know they don't. At all times they ought to boost the morale of an ally and put their own country in a good light, especially if it costs nothing. Perhaps this was one of those occasions.

With the appearance of a Soviet blue-water fleet, it might be supposed, at one extreme, that a stalemate in coercive diplomacy would ensue; Lebanon-type interventions, we often hear nowadays, are a thing of the past. At another extreme, there is a widespread fear of willful solutions by the superpowers. Both extremes may reflect the superpower dilemma brought about by the inability of patrons to control their clients. Lacking control, patrons are reluctant to assume responsibility for client actions. On the other hand, since the fortunes of clients often affect the balance of power, patrons cannot always afford to be "above the battle."

In actual fact, rather than either one of the extremes or an uncertain oscillation between the extremes, the logic of the dilemma seems to have led to a calculable "sorting out" of superpower behavior, such that each can protect its minimum interests without unacceptable risks of a US/USSR clash. Experience shows no across-the-board paralysis of action, but also no anarchic test of superpower wills; "rules" are emerging to discipline behavior and expectations. Each patron retains both the "right" of intervention and the "right" of deterring intervention, but these rights are in practice subject to limitations of context. As the Soviets demonstrated in their Egyptian intervention in 1970--and as the U.S. recently demonstrated by mining Haiphong and bombing Hanoi--it appears permissible for one superpower to support a friend against the client of another superpower as long as the friend is on the defensive <u>strategically</u>; the object must be to avert decisive defeat and restore the <u>balance, not</u> assist the client to victory. The issue of who began the war is not

central; it is the strategic situation of the client at the time of the contemplated intervention that counts. The tactical character of the intervention is also not central; it can be offensive or defensive, depending upon the requirements of the situation.

The "rules of the game" hypothesis does not depreciate strength of will but sums up its effect. There is nothing in the recent behavior of the superpowers to suggest that one or the other has the greater native resolution. Their relative fortitude in a crisis depends more on external factors than inner endowment. The first two such factors are the general strategic balance and the balance of forces on the spot. Here neither side has a clearcut advantage; there is a rough parity on the strategic level and both powers can deploy sufficient force locally to forestall any "definitive solution" to a confrontation in Cable's sense.[45] A third factor is the value of the interest at stake. Eastern Europe, for example, is more important to Soviet than to American security; hence the Russian will is stronger there. The Third World, however, is an intermediate area between the Blocs, where superpower interests are relatively equal and, moreover, generally not vital. Firmness of will on both sides is reduced to manageable proportions by lessened incentives.

This appears to leave a fourth factor as decisive--what we shall term, faute de mieux, the "fact of possession." A patron whose client is in recognized possession of a value has greater strength of will than the patron of a would-be conqueror. In each case of conflict between clients, therefore, the balance between competing superpower wills is struck such that defensive interventions are reluctantly allowed, offensive interventions discouraged. As the cases accumulate, behavior and expectations are conventionalized on that basis.

In treating these conventions, there is no imputation of deliberate rationality or "fairness," only of the emergence of objective norms ordering the system. Obviously, these norms do not constitute a codified set of principles ratified by the superpowers; in each crisis the calculus of forces, interests and circumstances has to be made afresh. It may be, of course, that the policy makers of both camps already recognize the limits of the possible. The President seems to have endorsed this interpretation of the "rules" in his address to the nation explaining the mining of Haiphong. The USSR has not sounded the theme with the same clarity, but it is not a matter of policy declarations. In their various excursions into gunboat diplomacy since 1967, the Soviets have communicated in the "language of deeds" that perhaps they understand and respect the "rules." They have supported with force or demonstrated on behalf of governments against domestic dissidents (e.g., Yemen 1967, Somalia 1970, Sierra Leone 1971) and against outside powers (e.g., the UAR-Israeli conflict 1967-72).[46] With one probable exception, an exception which "proves" the rule,[47] all Soviet military initiatives in the Third World have been strategically defensive; and they have not attempted to interfere with Western initiatives, which have also been strategically defensive

(e.g., Operation Linebacker).

Given the "rules of the game" perspective, it would appear to be offensive actions on the order of the British-French-Israeli invasion of Egypt in 1956 which today are ruled out, not defensive, limited interventions of the Lebanon type. The Russians would probably have been aware that the circumstances of the Indo-Pakistani conflict were almost tailor-made for uncontested U.S. intervention under these "rules" and that Washington was not obliged to recognize the credibility of the Russian deterrent, satisfactory though it might be in combat capability. Under this interpretation, the Russian presence would be designed to remind the President of the seriousness of the situation, to force him to think through the grounds of intervention and make sure that real interests, and not luxuries, were at stake. Above all, it would be designed to enforce the "rules of the game," i.e., restrict the degree and scope of the U.S. intervention and confine it to defensive ends. If the opposing superpower does not deploy a credible deterrent and thereby demonstrate an interest, the "rules" are relaxed and only the ordinary political, moral and local military constraints are operative. No policeman, no law.

Lessons Learned

The crisis certainly revealed the high value now placed by Moscow on coercive naval diplomacy. Despite diverse Soviet efforts in this field in recent years, doubt has persisted as to whether this is a significant factor in its own right in the Soviet calculation, or basically a by-product of Russian preoccupation with strategic defense of the homeland. Previous Soviet crisis initiatives and reactions either had ambiguously intermingled strategic aspects (Jordanian crisis) or involved the expenditure of relatively modest naval resources (West African Patrol). However, strategic defense was clearly not a Soviet consideration in December 1971; the British Far East Fleet had been in the Indian Ocean for more than a month before the war broke out without prompting reinforcements from Vladivostok. Soviet deployments during the crisis were dictated by the needs of diplomacy. Their magnitude demonstrates conclusively the significance of this factor in Soviet naval policy.[48]

In retrospect, this appears a normal, almost predictable evolution, a manifestation of the gradual erosion of ideology and the ascendancy of "state interests" in the Soviet calculation. In 1951 the Soviets made the decision to expand trade with the non-Communist world, to put it on a normal rather than exceptional basis. This was followed shortly by the decision to give economic, then military aid to selected non-Communist countries. The final decision was to assist these countries with the Soviet military establishment itself. Moscow has realistically turned away from a single-minded preoccupation with the high-value real estate of the European center to pursue less ambitious goals on the flanks and

the periphery. The adversary relationship between East and West in which the entire system is at stake has partially evolved into a contest within the system, with the under-developed world as the arena. The direct confrontation of blocs has been replaced by a confrontation mediated by clients, with the patrons there to assist militarily in adversity and to enforce the emerging "rules of the game" against opposing superpowers.

Western freedom of action has obviously been constrained by the appearance of a Soviet blue-water fleet, but the ensuing despair and anxiety seem unnecessarily defeatist. The great strength of the Soviets lies in their ability to deploy a credible deterrent at sea; in enforcing the "rules of the game" they are the true equals of the U.S. However, these "rules" still permit initiatives in defense of clients that are probably not subject to deterrence. With its formidable projection power, Task Force 74 may have confirmed anew for the Soviets that the U.S. has a superior capacity to take the initiative on behalf of its friends. The formal equality of the superpowers masks a still substantial U.S. advantage. This advantage, given the appropriate circumstances, can be used to support policy and is not therefore an empty display; it can be used advisedly, with an approximate knowledge of consequences, and is not therefore an unacceptable provocation.

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45. Cable, op. cit. 23-39.

46. For details on Soviet coercive diplomacy, see R.G. Weinland, "The Changing Mission of the Soviet Navy," Survival, XIV (May-June 1972), 131-132.

47. The probable exception is the Soviet West African patrol maintained against Portuguese Guinea (Bissau) since 1970. The patrol is clearly defensive in the tactical sense; it deters further raids on Conakry, the capital of the neighboring Republic of Guinea. Strategically it is a defensive operation insofar as its object is to prevent the overthrow of the Touré Government, but an offensive operation insofar as it permits the Guinea (Bissau) insurgency, mounted from the Republic of Guinea, to maintain and expand its offensive against the Portuguese colonial regime. It could be, of course, that the Soviets intervened only because of the threat to Touré; they might have held back if the P.A.I.G.C. alone were imperilled. In practice, the fortunes of the two cannot be separated and there is no evidence that the Soviets have tried to moderate Conakry's support for the rebels. Indeed, the USSR openly admits arming the P.A.I.G.C., which presumably takes place through Conakry (see commentator V. Stepanov, Moscow in English to Africa, 2030 GMT 9 Sep 72). But even though strategically offensive, the West African Patrol does not deny the "rules of the game," since Lisbon has no patron in an African context.

48. In the aftermath of the Indo-Pakistani crisis the Russians have made their most explicit commitment yet to the peacetime political uses of naval power. See the articles by Fleet Adm. Gorshkov under the general title, "Navies in War and Peace," serialization of which was begun in the February 1972 issue of Morskoy sbornik.

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