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Secret White House papers

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bare Indian 'Tonkin Gulf'
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WASHINGTON — The secret White House papers reveal some ominous similarities between the Bay of Bengal and the Gulf of Tonkin.

The Gulf of Tonkin incident on Aug. 4, 1964, led to our deep involvement in the Vietnam war. The American public was told that North Vietnamese torpedo boats had

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staged an unprovoked attack upon a U.S. destroyer, although later evidence indicated that the attack was actually provoked.

The risk of a similar naval incident in the Bay of Bengal caused grave apprehensions inside the State Department as a U.S. task force steamed toward a Soviet task force at the height of the Indian-Pakistani fighting.

On Dec. 7, a top secret warning was flashed to Washington that "three Soviet naval ships, a seagoing minesweeper and a tanker have begun to move northeastward into the Bay of Bengal. The units entered the Indian Ocean from the Malacca Strait on 3 December and were located approximately 500 nautical miles east of Ceylon on 7 December."

Urgent huddles in the White House led to a decision on December 10 to assemble in Malacca Strait a U.S. task force, spearheaded by the aircraft carrier Enterprise, the Navy's most powerful ship. The primary purpose was to make a "show of force" and to divert Indian planes and ships from Pakistan.

As the task force moved into position, Admral John McCain, our Pacific commander, inquired on December 11 about "the feasibility of . . . aerial surveillance of Soviet task group located approximately 180 NM (nautical miles) southwest of Ceylon."

Air surveillance

Authorization was flashed back the same day in the event Task Force 74 is directed to transmit the Strait of Malacca. At that time appropriate . . . screening-surveillance flights are authorized."

As the American warships moved through the strait and headed into the Bay of Bengal, even more ominous reports reached Washington from the Defense Intelligence Agency.

Recent indicators have been received which suggest the PRC (Peoples Republic of China) may be planning actions regarding the Indo-Pakistan conflict," a top secret message reported tersely. "According to a reliable clandestine source, (Pakistan's) President Yahya Khan claimed . . . today that the Chinese Ambassador in Islamabad has assured him that within 72 hours the Chinese Army will move towards the border.

"President Yahya's claim cannot be confirmed. However, recent Peking propaganda statements have become more critical of India's involvement in East Pakistan."

From Katmandu in the Himalayas, meanwhile, came word that both the Soviet and Indian military attaches had asked Col. Melvin Holst, the American attache, what he knew about Chinese troop movements and U.S. fleet movements.

"USSR Attache Loginov," said the secret dispatch, "called upon PRC military attache Chao Kuang Chih in Katmandu advising Chao that PRC should not get too serious about intervention, because USSR would react, had many missiles, etc."

Holst concluded, the dispatch added, that "both the USSR and India embassies have a growing concern that PRC might intervene."

Simultaneously, the Central Intelligence Agency rushed out a top secret report that "the Chinese have been passing weather data for locations in Tibet and along the Sino-Indian border since 8 December. The continued passing of weather data for these locations is considered unusual and may indicate some form of alert posture."

Soviet threat

And from New Delhi, the CIA reported: "According to a reliable clandestine source, Prime Minister Gandhi told a leader of her Congress Party that she had some indications that the Chinese intend to intervene along India's northern border . . . Mrs. Gandhi said that the Chinese action might be in the Ladakh area."

Russia's ambassador to India, Nikolai M. Pegov, however, promised on December 13 that the Soviets "would open a diversionary action" against the Chinese and "will not allow the Seventh Fleet to intervene."

Here are the highlights of this ominous Soviet pledge, which the CIA claimed to have picked up from a "reliable source."

"Pegov stated that Pakistan is trying to draw both the United States and China into the present conflict. The Soviet Union, however, does not believe that either country will intervene.

Peace on earth

"According to Pegov, the movement of the U.S. Seventh Fleet is an effort by the U.S. to bully India, to discourage it from striking against West Pakistan, and at the same time to boost the morale of the Pakistani forces. Pegov noted that a Soviet fleet is now in the Indian Ocean and that the Soviet Union will not allow the Seventh Fleet to intervene.

"If China should decide to intervene in Ladakh, said Pegov, the Soviet Union would open a diversionary action in Sinkiang. Pegov also commented that after Dacca is liberated and the Bangladesh government is installed, both the U.S. and China will be unable to act and will change their current attitude toward the crisis."

This is how the big powers danced precariously on the edge of the brink just before Christmas as people sang about peace on earth and good will toward men.