

In reality, nobody questions the codified rights of passage on the high seas. What is at issue, and where the greatest littoral-state concern lies, is the question of the permanent deployment of such forces. The fear of the littoral states is that they might unwittingly be drawn into a superpower confrontation as a result of the presence of their warships in the Indian Ocean. A naval arms limitation agreement, restricting outside force levels to a token permanent presence, would ease these fears and lead to general benefits for the superpowers in the form of better relations with the littoral states. On the basis of the tangible improvement in energy security, and because of the new strategic elements introduced since 1980, there is little justification for the superpowers to maintain more than a nominal naval presence in the Indian Ocean. Indeed, there are far more effective ways, for the Soviet Union and United States to support their friends in the area.

As a confidence-building measure and demilitarization initiative, the NALTS proposal was both rational and attainable. Moreover, it was very attractive to local governments. This point is not lost on the Soviet Union, which recognizes the broader political advantages to a negotiated settlement in the area. Since the NALTS collapsed, Moscow has consistently called for their resumption. Diplomatic efforts towards this end, through the offices of the United Nations Ad Hoc Committee on the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace, have thus far been stymied by US insistence that any formal debate on the issue be linked to a Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. Now that the question of Afghanistan has been resolved, it is incumbent on the United States to readdress Naval Arms Limitation Talks with the Soviets in the Indian Ocean.