

USSR. In order to support their regional political relationships and global security interests, the United States and the Soviet Union augmented their naval deployments in the Indian Ocean through the development of bases and access arrangements. As a result, the region became pivotal to the strategic rivalry between the superpowers.

The paper focusses on the interaction between the presence of the superpowers in the Indian Ocean and the regional conflicts which have caused them so much concern in the last decade. The paper first presents an historical survey of external involvement in the Indian Ocean and defines the region in its geographical context. Then, in a chronological assessment of the activities of the United States and the Soviet Union in the Indian Ocean region, it is shown how the Indian Ocean moved from being an area of low strategic priority, to one at the forefront of the strategic competition between East and West.

Finally, the paper considers the impact of changing geostrategic circumstances on regional security relationships. Rapidly moving events in the last few months have reduced regional tensions considerably and the way seems open for the superpowers to return the Indian Ocean area to its former low level of strategic interest in their relations. It is argued that the time is ripe for a return to bilateral discussions aimed at limiting the superpower's naval presence in the Indian Ocean.

The Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, and the ultimate end of the Iran-Iraq war, will present new opportunities for greater superpower cooperation in maintaining stability in the region. The resolution of these conflicts coincides with an increased strategic involvement in the affairs of the region by certain littoral states. Therefore, the Indian Ocean will remain strategically significant to the superpowers, but the