

for the presence of Soviet military forces in the Indian Ocean, such as the need to protect the sea lanes linking the European and Asian regions of the Soviet Union, are purely ancillary. Rivalry with China for ideological influence has largely dissipated with the warming trend in Sino-Soviet relations and because of the general disenchantment with socialism as a means to meet the economic and developmental requirements in most of Africa. The potential strategic threat from the United States remains centred on the major US naval facility on the island of Diego Garcia, which supports US naval deployments in the Arabian Sea, and serves as a forward base for elements of the Central Command, or Rapid Deployment Force.<sup>50</sup>

In recent years, Washington has been unwilling to reduce its naval forces in the Indian Ocean because of the threat to energy supplies from the Persian Gulf arising out of the Iran-Iraq war, and because the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan was perceived to be a potential danger to the Gulf and Pakistan. With the end of hostilities between Iran and Iraq, and as a result of their withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Soviets were in a strong position to push again for arms limitations in the Indian Ocean.<sup>51</sup> Gorbachev picked up on this inherent weakness in Washington's position in his Vladivostok speech where he reiterated Soviet support for making the Indian Ocean a zone of peace: "We remain strongly in favour of resuming the talks on turning the Indian Ocean into a peace zone."<sup>52</sup> However, this was the sum of Gorbachev's reference to the Indian Ocean in what is widely regarded as the definitive policy pronouncement on the future of Soviet-Asian relations.

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<sup>50</sup> There is no Soviet position which remotely matches Diego Garcia in capacity or potential, which of itself explains why the NALTS talks have remained in abeyance since the Ogaden War of 1977-78. Moscow has nothing to give up in any regional arms limitation agreement with the United States. Any prospects for re-opening the NALTS talks effectively collapsed following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

<sup>51</sup> As in the case of Southeast Asia, a US refusal to discuss arms reductions in the Indian Ocean could have been damaging to Washington's relationships in the region and might have gained Moscow considerable political mileage. This approach is now moot as a result of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.

<sup>52</sup> See: *Press Bulletin*, No. 38, Ottawa: Press Office of the USSR Embassy in Canada, July 30, 1986, p. 12.