

One repercussion of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was the abandonment of efforts to stabilize naval force levels between the superpowers in the Indian Ocean.³³ The current geopolitical situation in the Indian Ocean region suggests that it is now appropriate to consider Naval Arms Limitation Talks (NALTS) again. The initial premise of the NALTS discussion was that it was in the interests of both superpowers to reduce the potential for confrontation in a region of relatively low strategic importance. This remains the case and, from the US and Soviet perspective, the benefits for reconsidering this approach are evident.

The naval deployments of both superpowers in the Indian Ocean have long been a cause for concern for the littoral states. Since 1971, efforts have been made through the United Nations to have the entire ocean declared a Zone of Peace. When this proposal was first introduced, by Sri Lanka with Indian support, it was taken to apply to all naval forces, local and external. The concept has since come to refer purely to the military presence of external powers, for obvious reasons of local self-interest. Although the ultimate hope of the Zone of Peace proposal is the elimination of all aspects of the superpower presence in the Indian Ocean, this is clearly viewed as a long-term prospect. The superpowers, and other maritime nations, have consistently rejected the concept of a Zone of Peace arguing that it implies some sort of legal regime which would restrict the rightful passage of their vessels in international waters. However, this is something of a red-herring designed to stall debate on the concept.

³³ Naval Arms Limitation Talks, or NALTS, were part of a package of arms control measures, introduced early in the Carter administration, designed to sound out the possibilities for cooperation with the Soviet Union.