

“Advancing Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific”
Nilanthi Samaranyake, CNA
Galle Dialogue 2016
Sri Lanka

Admiral Wijegunaratne,
Excellencies, senior officials and officers,
Distinguished guests:

Good morning. My name is Nilanthi Samaranyake, and I’m a Strategic Studies analyst at CNA in the Washington, DC area. CNA is a non-profit research organization that provides independent analysis of security issues to the U.S. Navy and other sponsors.

I offer my congratulations to the Sri Lanka Navy for hosting the Galle Dialogue for the 7th consecutive year. This is a major accomplishment, and now the Dialogue is being held in Colombo for the first time in recognition of how large this annual gathering has become. The meeting was originally focused on the Indian Ocean where Sri Lanka is located in the center. But it has evolved to a truly Indo-Pacific gathering and beyond, where stakeholders have come here from the western Indian Ocean to the Pacific; from Africa to Asia; even from Europe and the Americas.

Today I will discuss the subject, “Advancing Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific” and provide you with some of my personal views about the outlook for the region.

Region

To start with the “Indo-Pacific” aspect of my topic today, many have started using this geographic concept in recent years. Australian strategists had been discussing the concept for decades, even before the 2013 Defence White Paper. But the growing, acute awareness of Australia’s strategic intersection with the oceans, as well as Indonesia’s for that matter, have increased the popularity of this term. India notably uses the “Indo-Pacific” term in its latest maritime strategy. Since 2012, U.S. diplomats have talked about an “Indo-Pacific Economic Corridor” connecting South Asia and Southeast Asia through sea, road, and air links. In 2013, U.S. defense officials began discussing the “Indo-Asia-Pacific,” which is modified from the traditionally used term “Asia-Pacific” to include the Indian Ocean. Also for the first time, the U.S. tri-service maritime strategy from 2015 uses the “Indo-Asia-Pacific” phrase in recognition of the growing importance of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific’s interconnectedness with it. Yet, to some, it is a controversial idea because you can reasonably argue that the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean are distinct theaters with different histories and equities at stake. However, we are increasingly seeing the integration of the two spheres, where the Royal Singapore Navy has commanded the Combined Maritime Forces’ counterpiracy task force, while Indian and Bangladeshi naval ships have sailed to the Chinese coast and to observe the Western Pacific Naval Symposium. So the Indo-Pacific is an operational reality even if not everyone agrees on it as a strategic construct.

Emerging trends of potential concern

Before we can examine how to advance maritime cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, it's important to identify trends of concern that are taking place in this sphere—both naval and commercial trends—and ask questions about their implications.

For the naval side of things,

1. More countries' maritime forces are operating in the Indian Ocean over the past decade. Both from within the Indian Ocean—i.e., the resident countries—as well as out-of-area forces. Understandably, some resident countries are uneasy about developments that have altered the state of operations in the Indian Ocean.

2. Second is the wider trend of Asian military modernization, including developments in undersea platforms. This, of course, involves the increased potential for accidents.

On the commercial side,

3. We all know the often-cited statistic that between 30-40% of global trade passes through the Indian Ocean, as well as half of all container traffic. But there has been a slowdown in global shipping and an increase in excess port capacity. The bankruptcy this year of Hanjin Shipping, one of the world's largest container operators, was a stark representation of this new reality. Meanwhile, ship orders are down, and we've seen the consolidation of major shipping companies. What will be the impact on the Indo-Pacific region? What are the implications for naval and maritime forces? We saw how counterpiracy efforts drew more out-of-area powers into the western Indian Ocean, but how could this trend alter the state of traffic in the Indo-Pacific?

4. Despite this trend of trade slowing down and excess port capacity, countries still want more infrastructure. Developing economies seek to improve internal connectivity and external connectivity for the movement of goods as well as people. Countries can do this through new or upgraded seaport and airport terminals, highways, roads, and railways. For example, the World Bank finds that South Asia will need \$2.5 trillion in investment for infrastructure projects over the coming decade. Unfortunately, concern inevitably arises about the potential for strategic influence by some countries due to these commercial projects. Regardless of the answer to this question, there is a danger of politicizing these efforts, which do help expand national infrastructure. The alternative for countries is not to put a hold on concrete national development projects due to vague strategic concerns.

Taking together these naval and commercial trends,

5. A narrative of great power competition has developed. People discuss a new "great game," a "string of pearls," or a "necklace of diamonds." Moreover, governments have assigned grand names to their goals such as Japan's Bay of Bengal Industrial Growth Belt or BIG-B initiative; China's One Belt, One Road or OBOR, and Maritime Silk Road; India's Security and Growth for All in the Region or SAGAR, and Project Mausam. So there are a lot of metaphors and acronyms, which reinforce some of these narratives of competition. Making matters worse, the media's misreporting of facts helps cement these narratives. Similarly, as with commercial infrastructure projects, it's important to caution against the politicization of naval developments, such as a port visit here or there. Certainly, military planners need to prepare for the worst

potential outcomes; this is their most important job. While there is understandable unease over these developments, much cooperation is still inherent in the system and should be acknowledged. Furthermore, this narrative of competition that has emerged in recent years is often framed in a bilateral context. But this is simplistic. In reality, there are many countries with economic and security interests in the Indian Ocean, many of which are represented today in this room: the U.K., France, the U.S., Bangladesh, Seychelles, South Korea, Germany, Australia, and the Netherlands to name a handful. The interests and commitments of all of these stakeholders will help reinforce stability in the Indo-Pacific.

How are countries partnering?

We've examined the trends that may be concerning. But in order to study the ways to foster maritime partnerships in the region—the theme of this conference—we should take stock of the ways that countries are currently cooperating. And they do need to cooperate—no country and its maritime forces can go it alone in an environment of transnational threats, where narcotics and weapons flow too freely.

1. Through regional institutions and frameworks

The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, or IONS, continues to go strong. This institution was modeled off the Western Pacific Naval Symposium, or WPNS, and has been hosted in all corners of the Indian Ocean since its founding by the Indian Navy in 2008. The Bangladesh Navy is currently the chair and hosted a successful, high-level meeting earlier this year in Dhaka.

Meanwhile, the Indian Ocean Rim Association, or IORA, is focused on more economic and maritime safety issues and is currently chaired by Indonesia. In March, Indonesia will host the first-ever leaders' summit for IORA, which was previously held at the ministerial level. This will assemble heads of state from the 21 member countries, thereby bringing even greater attention from world leaders to the Indian Ocean and issues of concern to the wider Indo-Pacific.

ADMM-Plus (ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting-Plus) provides another useful vehicle for cooperation between the 10 ASEAN and the eight Plus countries. The grouping has organized exercises on maritime security and counterterrorism, as well as humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and military medicine between Indo-Pacific stakeholders.

2. Through national information-sharing efforts

Seychelles will host a Regional Maritime Centre for Operational Coordination to address maritime threats in the Western Indian Ocean.

At the nexus of the Indo-Pacific, Singapore stood up the Information Fusion Centre which is a national-led effort that invites liaison officers into the Singapore Navy's base to exchange information and improve maritime domain awareness.

In the central Indian Ocean, India stood up its Information Management and Analysis Centre, or IMAC, to monitor the area along its coast and across the Bay of Bengal. Furthermore, India is signing white shipping agreements with Indo-Pacific countries to increase information sharing on potential maritime threats.

3. Through capacity-building

Australia and Japan have undertaken important capacity-building efforts for maritime forces in the Indo-Pacific. For example, Australia has gifted patrol boats to Sri Lanka and Malaysia to help address the scourge of people smuggling. The United States has also transferred retired coast guard cutters to Bangladesh and other countries. Finally, India's shipyard in Goa recently transferred the first of two fast patrol vessels built exclusively for the Mauritius Coast Guard, in addition to fast interceptor boats. As a result, all of the recipients are using these platforms to address security challenges in the region.

4. Through crisis response

We've seen countries band together to respond to collective crises in the region, such as after the 2004 and 2011 tsunamis in the Indian Ocean and off Japan. More recently, we've seen the multinational provision of aid to Maldives after the fire of a water treatment plant and the leading role of the Maldives National Defence Force in distributing relief. In addition to disaster response, the region has witnessed naval forces conduct search operations for the Malaysian Airlines and Air Asia flights, with countries tackling these duties in discrete areas of responsibility.

5. Through international legal forums

In the Indian Ocean, the use of these by countries has been especially striking, thereby cementing the role of international law and norms. Bangladesh, Myanmar, and India deserve great credit for being willing to submit their maritime disputes to international arbitration and abiding by the verdicts of the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea and the Permanent Court of Arbitration. Moreover, China, South Korea, Germany, and India have all sought deep-sea mining rights in the Indian Ocean from the International Seabed Authority.

6. Through commercial maritime infrastructure

In our age of globalization, a terminal built by a company from one country will facilitate another country's trade with the rest of the world. For example, here in Sri Lanka, we're already seeing Indian-manufactured automobiles being transshipped by Japanese liners at Hambantota port, which was built by a Chinese company. These vehicles are destined for East Africa and beyond. We are also seeing Indian companies' port-building projects (plus other infrastructure) in Chabahar, Iran and Sittwe, Myanmar.

As a result of these cooperative efforts, we are gradually seeing the integration of the Indian and Pacific Oceans in an operational and commercial sense, if not necessarily the strategic sense.

The way ahead

After examining regional trends and the state of maritime cooperation, how should we think about expanding on this cooperation? Countries can certainly think about doing more in the areas of cooperation that I just listed. But in addition to these areas, what are some ideas that Indo-Pacific stakeholders can take into account? I'll offer a few ideas.

1. Inclusiveness. The maritime realm lends itself to this idea given the shared challenges all face at sea. At the next IONS meeting in 2018, can all applicants be permitted to join or have observer status? If a country sees itself as an Indian Ocean stakeholder, then why deny that country the

opportunity to join? Permitting this would be a success story of a type that you can only have on issues in the maritime realm, where all face common challenges. Thinking about the wider Indo-Pacific, IONS officials have in fact stated their intention to eventually have IONS and WPNS shake hands.

Similarly, in IORA, can Pakistan be allowed to join if it applies? In recognition of that country's significant contributions to CMF and leadership of the counterpiracy and counterterrorism task forces, eight and nine times, respectively. Can Myanmar and Maldives be permitted to join too? Institutions like IORA and its commitment to the Blue Economy allow the Indian Ocean to live up to its full potential as a vital and strategic link to the rest of the world.

2. Transparency. Can navies try to share more information with each other? This transparency should also extend to diplomats working on the maritime realm. For example, if Chinese diplomats were to share with India more details about Beijing's plans for OBOR, this would do much to allay concerns that New Delhi has about the project and may even foster ways to mutually benefit. Track 1.5 dialogues are effective ways of facilitating exchanges such as this. At my organization, CNA, we have a series of these dialogues with Asian think tank partners that involve a mix of naval officials and academics to examine challenges at sea and potential approaches to cooperation.

To close, I continue to be struck by the rising degree of cooperation in the Indian Ocean. While more can always be done to increase cooperation, I believe maritime officials serving in this region share more in common than areas of disagreement. I had the honor of speaking at the Galle Dialogue in 2013 and discussed the idea of the Indian Ocean as a testing ground or a laboratory for cooperation in the art of the possible. What have we seen since then across the Indo-Pacific? Certainly, tensions have risen in hotspots in the Pacific Ocean, yet we've witnessed cooperative successes in the Indian Ocean. They include the near elimination of piracy in the western Indian Ocean, multinational search operations, and deepening legal norms at sea. Notably, India and China held a first-ever maritime dialogue earlier this year in New Delhi, with a follow-up meeting to be held next in Beijing. Through regular conferences such as the Galle Dialogue, officers from navies and coast guards can interact with each other, create lasting relationships, and build the foundation for greater cooperation between countries—extending across the Indo-Pacific.

I'd like to thank the Sri Lanka Navy for the invitation to speak today, and I wish everyone a productive conference.

Nilanthi Samaranayake
CNA, Strategic Studies division
United States