THE CHANGING MARITIME THREAT ENVIRONMENT
IN THE INDIAN OCEAN

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Sri Lanka and the Indian Ocean

At the outset I would like to thank our kind hosts, Sri Lanka's Ministry of Defence, Public Security, Law & Order for their gracious hospitality. I would also like to complement Vice Admiral Samarasinghe, Commander of the Sri Lanka Navy for having conceptualized the Galle Dialogue and organized this event in an immaculate manner.

Let me coin a phrase, and say how "serendipitous" it is that we should have assembled for a dialogue on maritime issues, in the Sri Lankan port city of Galle, whose lighthouse is one of the more familiar landmarks for mariners in this part of the world.

To my mind, Sri Lanka's recent past provides the clearest manifestation of a maritime nation's critical relationship with its surrounding seas. The Indian Ocean governs the safety and security of Sri Lanka, its bountiful waters bring economic prosperity, and yet its occasional fury underlines this island nation's susceptibility to environmental threats.

To a greater or lesser extent, the lessons from Sri Lanka's recent history are applicable to all of us from the Indian Ocean region. A terrorist group like the LTTE could not have waged war against the state, for three decades, without the sustenance they received from abroad via the sea. Equally, the comprehensive defeat of this organization could not have been achieved without the Sri Lankan Navy's gallant endeavours, making innovative use of sea power. The port of Galle itself was the scene of devastation after the 2004 tsunami, and serves as a grim reminder of the havoc that can be wreaked by oceanic fury.

Sri Lanka's physical location has, historically, represented a critical focal point in the Indian Ocean region. European colonial powers recognized the geo-strategic importance of "Serendip" as this richly endowed island was known, early in the 16th century. Using their mastery of the seas the Portuguese came first to Sri Lanka; they were followed by the Dutch and British who colonized this island for

the next 400 years. In that era, no country, in this part of the world, had a navy to speak of, and the colonial powers faced no opposition.

During World War II, after the fall of Singapore in 1942, the British Far Eastern Fleet withdrew to Trincomalee harbour and an RAF base was set up in China Bay. March of that year saw the Japanese capture the Andaman & Nicobar Islands, in the Bay of Bengal. A month later Japanese Navy aircraft attacked Colombo and Trincomalee harbours, and sank the British aircraft-carrier *Hermes* off Baticaloa. Allied naval forces then withdrew further west to the Addu Atoll.

From 1943 to 1946 the town of Kandy, in the Sri Lankan highlands, served as the HQ of Admiral Lord Mountbatten who, as Supreme Allied Commander SE Asia, managed to defeat the Japanese 15th Army just on the borders of India.

It is clear that even while grappling with a serious internal security situation, Sri Lanka has shown vision and resolve, and thus sustained a fairly good rate of economic growth. Looking at the future scenario, the end of the civil war, and healing of past wounds promises to put the nation on the fast-track to prosperity.

Dondra Head, is just 40 km from here, and marks the southernmost point of Sri Lanka. If you were to stand atop its lighthouse, you might be able to see some of the 70,000 merchant vessels that transit the Indian Ocean annually, east-bound for the Malacca, Lombok and Sunda Straits, or west-bound for Hormuz and Bab el Mandeb. Colombo is one of the region's most efficient ports, and Trincomalee is arguably amongst the best natural harbours in the world. These two will be rivaled by the Hambantota international port when it is ready in a few years. It is apparent that the importance of Sri Lanka as a key Indian Ocean nation and important shipping and trading hub is bound to grow in the years ahead.

Let us then survey the IO scene.

The Indian Ocean as an Entity

People often question whether the Indian Ocean can be termed as a region at all, because in their vision, this area is one big clutter of military, economic, religious and racial turmoil and they fail to discern a common thread running through it. In the words of American analyst Robert Kaplan, *"…the Indian Ocean forms a cultural and historical unit. Yet it has no single focal point."*

While that may be true, outsiders often forget that the Indian Ocean, far from dividing lands, has been one of the strongest unifying factors in history. For centuries, it is the waters of this ocean which have carried religions, cultures, languages, traditions, and people, across thousands of miles from one shore to another. So much so that no two individuals in this part of the world can meet and fail to strike a common chord in some manner or another. In this process of synthesis and cultural churning, India and Sri Lanka have played a catalytic role, because of their central geographic location in this region.

The IOR, at one of whose focal points we are now present, is replete with unique features; many of which contain the seeds of conflict. For example, it is home to 1/3rd of the world population, and the world's fastest growing economies co-exist with some of the poorest. It is the largest repository of not just hydrocarbons, but also many strategic materials, eagerly sought after by the world.

The powerful phenomenon of globalization has highlighted the criticality of Indian Ocean sea lanes for trade and energy security, it has also revealed the extreme vulnerability of burgeoning economies to maritime threats. Oil and gas- laden ships from the Persian Gulf transit via the Strait of Hormuz, around Sri Lanka through the Malacca Straits or Indonesia's archipelagic sea lanes into the waters of South China Sea. Reciprocal traffic, carrying finished goods comes from China, Japan, Korea and Taiwan travels the other way. During the voyage they run the gauntlet of piracy, maritime terrorism and inter-state conflict. One of the he biggest sources of concern to nations whose economies are dependent on trade and energy, and that includes all of us, is the maintenance of peace, tranquility and law and order at sea.

The Roots of Conflict

In this context, let us examine, against the backdrop of geo-politics and history, the roots of conflict in the IOR.

The theory of political realism postulates, amongst other things, that states seek to amass resources in pursuit of national security and that the international community is essentially anarchic and self-seeking. There is also a footnote that morality and law are irrelevant beyond one's national boundaries. The history of countries in this region bears witness to this. Colonialism was a typical expression of political realism, wherein European powers possessing strong

navies established economic domination in the Indian Ocean region for the benefit of their own populations.

It would be wrong to assume that such motivations ceased to exist with the end of colonialism. Apart from "national security" or "national honour", which are intangibles, the two most common causes of conflict in the world are still; either pursuit of territory, or the quest for resources; with a thin line dividing them.

If one looks closely at the complex situation that prevailed in Europe as well as Asia in the 1930s, it becomes clear that fundamentally it was a quest for scarce resources that propelled the world towards a great conflict. Germany, had embarked upon a massive rearmament programme, and was facing an acute shortage of steel, coal, oil, minerals, and food grains which she coveted from Eastern Europe and Russia. Hitler's twisted vision also sought *lebensraum* or living space for German masses on the Ukrainian steppes, and therefore he marched the *Wehrmacht* eastwards.

But Japan's case, closer home, is of greater relevance. An island nation with few natural resources, Japan invaded China in 1937 in order to gain access to its vast resources and raw material, and thus ensure an economically self-sufficient Empire. Seeing a looming clash of interests, the US started the application of economic pressure, including embargoes on strategic materials in 1939. As the US and her allies gradually intensified economic pressure on Japan their respective positions became irreconcilable. Finally, in a desperate bid to buy some time to consolidate her conquests, Japan decided to attack Pearl Harbour, and brought a disastrous war upon the Asia-Pacific.

People are often skeptical about the lessons of history, but this peek into the past was to remind ourselves of three immutable geo-political factors which have bearing on the manner in which rising powers may conduct themselves.

➢ Firstly; that national strategies are predicated on the assured availability of vital resources for economic development as well as a nation's industrial and military complexes, and any disruptions will have far-reaching and serious consequences.

➢ Secondly; that maritime security and sea lanes have always played an important role in the destiny of nations, and continue to do so.

➢ And lastly; when faced with desperate situations, nations will instinctively react to safeguard their own vital interests.

In addition to these imperatives, some other factors that will influence future inter-state relations include: the transfer of wealth and power, the impact of dwindling resources coupled with climate change, and above all; the growing influence of non-state actors. We must bear in mind that countries of the Indian Ocean region are also afflicted with problems of poverty, fundamentalism and insurgency, and many of them are under military dictatorship or authoritarian rule. For these reasons, our region has seen frequent conflict and turmoil in the post-Cold War era.

While considering the changing threat scenario in the Indian Ocean, and seeking to establish the likelihood of conflict, we need to first dwell on inter-state relationships before examining other factors. In this context, I will focus on just two potential hot-spots that lie in our close vicinity.

The Sino-Indian Equation

The seeds of Sino-Indian divergence lie in the Chinese annexation of Tibet in 1950, and the consequent elimination of a natural buffer between the two large neighbours. India's grant of asylum to the Dalai Lama in 1959 aggravated an existing border dispute and led to the brief but bitter war of 1962. Continuing unrest in Tibet and social tensions in interior regions possibly engender a sense of insecurity in communist China. Combined with other geo-political imperatives, this has led China's authoritarian regime to ratchet up Sino-Indian tensions. One of the major causes is China's huge territorial claim to a strategic north-eastern Indian state.

The Chinese engine of growth has a voracious appetite for energy, and its own oil resources being insufficient, the country became a net importer in 1993. The burgeoning demand for energy has led to increasing dependence on overseas imports. China has acquired energy assets abroad, mostly in Africa and the Persian Gulf, and most of it comes home by sea. This is perceived as a strategic vulnerability, because most of her oil imports and commodity exports are shipped via the Indian Ocean.

With mutual suspicions that one is trying to trump the other as far as Indian Ocean sea-lanes are concerned, the Sino-Indian rivalry has expectedly spilt over

into the maritime domain. India points at various Chinese inroads into Indian Ocean locations as evidence of China's long term objective of encirclement and sea lane domination. The impending entry of PLA Navy nuclear submarines and perhaps even an aircraft-carrier into the Indian Ocean will only confirm these apprehensions.

China on the other hand, views the expanding blue-water capabilities and growing regional influence of the Indian Navy with considerable unease, and is convinced that the evolving Indo-US strategic relationship is aimed at her "containment".

Both China and India and India are major military powers with nuclear arsenals. Both have aspirations in the maritime domain. Opinion is divided between the sanguine who say that there is enough space for both to grow peacefully, and others, more skeptical, who predict an inevitable clash of interests between the competing neighbours. We can only hope for the best.

I now come to the second Indian Ocean potential hotspot: the Indo-Pakistan relationship.

Indo-Pakistan Relations

As a large and significant Indian Ocean nation, the integrity and continued stability of Pakistan is of vital importance not just for her neighbours, but also to the whole region. The Indo-Pakistan dispute over the northern state of Jammu & Kashmir has been simmering since independence in 1947, and has led to three open conflicts so far. The six decade long state of armed hostility between the two neighbours is frequently exacerbated by a steady influx of terrorists across the Indo-Pak border. Efforts by India to seal its land borders have caused the terrorist groups to start using sea routes.

The evolving situation in Afghanistan has unfortunately had a direct and adverse impact on India's security as well as on Indo-Pakistan relations. The US backed Mujahedeen fighters who fought the Soviets in the 1980s, have, over the past two decades, mutated into a hydra-headed set of fundamentalist organizations with different names like Jaish-e-Muhammad, Harkat-ul-Mujhedeen or Al Qaida but with a common agenda of terrorism.

Of special relevance to India is the Lashkar-e-Taiba or LeT, an organization formed with the sole aim of providing volunteers for the terrorist attacks in Kashmir and in India. The LeT is the primary suspect behind the Mumbai terror attacks of November 2008, and the lone surviving gunman, has admitted that the attacks were planned and executed by this organization. LeT attacks have increased tensions in the already difficult relationship between India and Pakistan.

Many of the fundamentalist outfits created during and after the Afghan war have now turned on the Pakistani state itself. A bitter internecine conflict of this nature between state and non-state entities, can pose a major threat to stability in the IOR.

In the midst of this turmoil there are two major areas of concern. Firstly the possibility that yet another major terrorist strike, seen as originating from Pakistan could elicit a military response from India. This could then escalate into a full-fledged war. The second, a nightmare scenario, is that one of the Islamic fundamentalist groups in Pakistan may lay their hands on a part of the nuclear arsenal and create a sub-continental holocaust.

Either of the hotspots that I have mentioned exploding into an inter-State conflict would have implications for the whole of our region and, indeed, on global maritime stability.

Other Sources of Maritime Threat

But there are other sources of threat in the IOR too. These span a broad spectrum of sources ranging from natural and environmental to man-made. While the frequency of their occurrence, as well the severity of their impact varies greatly, I will highlight a few that have common and widespread implications for the region.

Natural Disasters and Climate Change. A majority of the planet's natural disasters, unfortunately, happen to strike our region. The great Asian tsunami of 2004 vividly demonstrated the level of suffering that could result from a mega disaster, and the scale of humanitarian aid and disaster relief that such scenarios would demand. Climate change too is now becoming manifest in many ways, including global warming, melting glaciers, rising ocean levels and unexpected floods and droughts. The impact of climate change is likely to amplify human

distress by submerging islands, and inundating coastal areas leading to mass migration, social upheavals and regional crises. Navies are relevant here because they are the repository of capabilities like search and rescue, diving assistance, salvage and hydrographic surveys which play a key role in the discharge of tasks such as humanitarian aid and disaster relief.

Boundary & Fishing Disputes. There continue to be disagreements in this region involving unsettled maritime boundaries. These disputes often become the cause of rising tensions, and have a two-fold implication for bilateral relations. Firstly; neither party to a dispute can register its EEZ claim till there is mutual agreement on the maritime boundary. Since the EEZ is the repository of great mineral and organic wealth there is the possibility of economic loss because a third party may take advantage of the situation. The second consequence is of a humanitarian and social nature. Fishermen in legitimate pursuit of their livelihood are often oblivious of disputed boundary lines and suffer bodily harm from coast guards or even arrest and indefinite imprisonment. This is a live problem on the Indian sub-continent which needs early resolution.

Marine Pollution. Three months after the *Deepwater Horizon* drilling rig disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, the world is still taking stock of the resultant damage, and the economic as well as environmental costs of the oil spill. With increasing ship-borne energy traffic, and enhanced offshore exploration effort under way, the threat from marine pollution to the fishing and tourism industries as well as to the delicate marine environment is growing. In addition, illegal discharge of bilge water and tank sullage by merchant ships, and deliberate dumping of toxic wastes are rampant in unregulated Indian Ocean waters. More stringent laws and law enforcement will be necessary for us to combat this threat.

Maritime Terrorism.

➢ The "youth-bulge" areas of the Middle East, Africa and South Asia, breed disaffection and growing radicalism, and provide a pool of youths for recruitment into terrorist groups. There is a dire need to create employment opportunities and means for political expression, in these areas.

➢ The western world awoke to the perils of maritime terrorism in October 2000 when an Al Qaida suicide bomber attacked USS *Cole* in Aden harbour and blew a hole in her side, killing 39 sailors. However, by then the Sea Tigers wing of the LTTE had been in existence for many years, providing support to the mother

organization, by smuggling men and material and through acts of terrorism at sea and ashore.

➢ With enhanced security measures on land, terrorist groups are increasingly looking to transit by sea and are likely to zero-in on maritime targets like ships, ports and oil rigs. There are now fears that hijacked product carriers could be used as floating bombs to attack ports or sunk in narrow straits to disrupt traffic.

➢ The Lashkar-e-Taiba group which attacked Mumbai in 2008 undertook a 600 mile sea passage involving considerable navigational and seamanship skills, found its way through Mumbai harbour by night and made a landing by rubber dinghy. They, then, split into sub-groups which unerringly found their way to multiple targets and played havoc in the city. The actions of such organizations have demonstrated that although they are classified as non-state entities, they receive full support from states, on whose behalf they act as proxies. These need to be classified as "state-sponsored" non-state entities.

iracy & Maritime Crime. Notionally, terrorism has political underpinnings, while piracy and other crimes are supposed to be driven by pecuniary gain. In practice, however, the lines get blurred because terrorists often seek funding through gun-running or the drug trade.

➢ Tackling maritime crime has not received the kind of impetus it requires because of two reasons. Firstly, much of its roots lie in complex causes on land: radical politics or syndicated crime, poverty, unemployment, and ecological degradation; often too complicated to be resolved by organizations and even by governments. And secondly, the jurisdictional, legal and human rights issues involved in bringing maritime outlaws to justice are obscure as well as convoluted, and navies find that apprehending them is just not worth the effort involved.

➢ Piracy had always tended to impact negatively on seaborne trade and commerce, but with the modern day grid-locking of international markets, and the utter dependence of economies on steady energy supplies, the effect of any maritime perturbations can become exponentially magnified. While a coordinated multi-national response has brought down the incidence of piracy in SE Asia, the situation around the Horn of Africa has remained a source of concern to the maritime community and to governments world-wide.

➢ The abjectly poor Somalian Republic, which occupies most of the Horn, has been in a state of turmoil for nearly two decades. The lack of law and order in Somalia is a consequence of the limited authority of the Transitional Government over the country.   The rich Somalian fishing grounds, have for many years, been ruthlessly exploited by foreign poachers, and this is one of the reasons for deprived local fishermen taking to the lucrative occupation of piracy. Regrettably, the international response to piracy has been uncoordinated and largely ineffective, because the answer lies as much in improving conditions in Somalia as in pursuit of pirates on the high seas.

Conclusion

"Already the world's preeminent energy and trade highway," says analyst Robert Kaplan, *"the Indian Ocean will matter even more in the future."* The region has not experienced a serious conflict since the 1999 Kargil war. There is a view that nations are so occupied in coping with the global recession, and internal problems that domestic considerations will prevail over any thought of conflict. But such logic does not take into account either political Realism or the historical fact that WW II followed the great depression of the 1930s. Nor does it accord recognition to the emergence of a serious threat from non-state entities.

This century has been envisaged as the Asian Century, and the rise of Asian nations, many of them in the Indian Ocean, is predicted to trigger a "power-shift" from the west to the east. While a global restructuring is, no doubt, in the offing, we must remember that order and stability in this part of the world have, thus far, been underwritten by ubiquitous presence of the US Navy. If we are, indeed, witnessing the "gentle decline" of US power, it could mark the beginning of a race to supplant America's role in the region, to a certain extent.

Some of you may have been present at the second meeting of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium which took place in Abu Dhabi in May this year. One of the objectives of the IONS charter seeks to: *"... establish and promote a variety of trans-national, maritime, cooperative-mechanisms designed to mitigate maritime security-concerns within the Indian Ocean."*

Keeping this in mind, I had made a suggestion at Abu Dhabi which I now repeat at the Galle Dialogue. I had recommended to the assembled Chiefs that they should consider the formation of a regional maritime concord. Given the nature of

maritime challenges facing all our nations an *"IOR Maritime Partnership"* needs to be created to serve the common cause of regional maritime security.

One manifestation of this partnership could be a modest multi-national naval force to undertake anti-piracy operations and SLOC security. Nations which agree to join this initiative could pledge the availability of some ships and aircraft to the Partnership at short notice, and to share the maritime traffic picture with each other. Such a force in being could also proceed to render succour in case of natural disasters in the region.

The seas do not just make us all neighbours, they also provide unlimited opportunities for us to work together in a common cause; certainly in good times, but even more so when our neighbours need help. We must develop capabilities and linkages to work with partners from within and outside the region for the common good of our people. The Galle Dialogue has presented us with a great opportunity to discuss these and other issues. Let us make full use of it.