

# Remarks as Prepared to the Galle Dialogue, Sri Lanka By Robert M. Scher, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for South and Southeast Asian Affairs

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Good morning. I'm delighted to be here today, along with so many distinguished leaders and practitioners of maritime security. I thank my good friend the U.S. Ambassador to Sri Lanka, Pat Butenis, for personally inviting me to participate today. She is an outstanding representative for the United States.

It is appropriate for me to be here in Sri Lanka to talk about maritime security. Sri Lanka has a lot of experience in conducting maritime operations and this is an area where all of our nations clearly share common interests.

I would also like to recognize the Government of Sri Lanka for taking a leadership role on an issue of such import. The Galle Dialogue provides us with an excellent forum for regional stakeholders to share perspectives, experiences and lessons learned in the maritime domain.

Today I would like to share with you U.S. perspectives on security in the Indian Ocean, a region of increasing strategic significance. I'll discuss U.S. interests in the region and conclude with some observations and thoughts on how all of our countries can work together to address issues of mutual concern.

## *Maritime Security and the Indian Ocean Region*

As this audience knows well, the Indian Ocean has always been a region rich with trade, transit and exploration. In recent years, we have noted several dramatic changes in the region that I believe taken together alter the strategic dynamic.

From an economic standpoint, the Indian Ocean is rapidly surpassing both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans as the world's busiest and most critical trade corridor. By some measures over fifty (50) percent of the world's container traffic and seventy (70) percent of global energy trade transits through the Indian Ocean. These numbers are only expected to grow over the next decade, fueled by the Asian economic expansion and the growing need for raw materials and energy resources from Africa and the Middle East.

Additionally, over the next 15-20 years most of the growth in the Indian Ocean trade flows will be the result of increased intra-regional trade between Asia, the Middle East, and Africa.

There are also more actors engaged in the Indian Ocean than ever before. These include nation states both in and outside the region, many of whom that are developing increasingly capable militaries. As a result, the U.S. is taking a renewed look at how this region affects us and how we can best address our interests.

As I like to say to my colleagues in the United States, we can no longer view the Indian Ocean as a place between important places as we sometimes have in the past. It is a critical nexus that demands

renewed attention by the United States and other global players because it impacts United States security and economic interests, both directly and indirectly.

Given these changes in the region, the United States will continue to prioritize efforts to maintain the Sea Lanes of Communication, the free flow of commerce, and freedom of navigation. Beyond these interests, we find that many other security concerns relevant to the United States come to play in this one region. It is a transit hub for proliferators like North Korea, and an important supply route for terrorist networks in the region. I would like to applaud the Indian Navy for its successful interdiction in August this year of a ship suspected of transporting weapons to terrorist groups in the Middle East. Additionally, piracy emanating from Somalia is growing due in large part to that country's lack of capacity to counter it. These are just two examples of a threat that affects not just the countries in the region, but U.S. interests as well.

Finally, the region is prone to significant weather events and natural disasters with devastating consequences for so many countries in the region. The U.S. has been a reliable responder to natural disasters in the region, providing humanitarian assistance to friends and partners. We don't have to look back far to think of examples: last year's floods in Pakistan, Cyclone Nargis in 2008, the 2005 earthquake response in Pakistan and the 2004 tsunami. This support often has long standing impact. My Bangladeshi friends tell me that Operation Sea Angel in 1991 still evokes emotional memories even today.

In particular here in southern Sri Lanka, I know how devastating the 2004 tsunami was for everyone. I am proud that our military was able to provide support so soon after that tragic day in December. We dispatched the USS Duluth, and U.S. Marines provided personnel and materiel to support recovery and relief efforts, assisting with heavy ground and air lift, debris clearing, medical assistance, and transportation of supplies and equipment.

Humanitarian assistance collaboration continues even now. This past August the Sri Lanka Air Force hosted Pacific Airlift Rally, with participants from 18 nations to practice planning and executing humanitarian relief operations.

Even today, US Military personnel are on the ground in Thailand assessing how U.S. Forces can help with the historic flooding in that nation.

#### *Opportunities for cooperation and collaboration*

Something the U.S. Defense Department and I personally have given some thought to is how to generate optimal multilateral approaches to address maritime security concerns. First, we must look at the key mission areas where cooperation is most likely and important.

Piracy is one area where multilateral cooperation has been exceptional. As one of the most visible security challenges in the region, and one that directly affects commercial interests, it is also the issue for which there is the most visible international collaborative effort. We see this collaboration, through the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia and, at the operational level, the Shared Awareness and Deconfliction ("SHADE") process. I note that many of the countries participating in this Galle Dialogue – China, India, Pakistan and Singapore—have contributed ships to operations in the Gulf of Aden.

Natural disasters such as those I referenced earlier are a recurring threat to the region and humanitarian assistance and disaster response is an area ripe for increase multilateral cooperation. The United States would like to explore ways to enhance our humanitarian assistance and disaster response capacity building and cooperative efforts in the Indian Ocean region, particularly through increased training activities and bilateral and multilateral exercises and confidence-building measures.

The proliferation of weapons of mass destruction across the Indian Ocean region is another challenge that threatens to undermine the peace and stability of the region. The United States encourages all littoral nations to join the over 90 other countries across the globe who have endorsed the principles of the Proliferation Security Initiative. Moreover, we would like to explore ways we can assist in building the counter-proliferation capabilities of regional nations, particularly by providing training and assistance in maritime interdiction operations and port security.

Finally, maritime terrorism remains a very significant threat in the region. As demonstrated in the 2008 Mumbai attacks, violent extremist organizations are becoming increasingly adept at exploiting the maritime domain to carry out devastating attacks against innocent civilians on land. To counter this dangerous and elusive threat, regional nations must come together to share intelligence in the maritime domain and cooperate in anticipating, locating, and interdicting terrorists at sea. The United States wants to work with nations in the IOR to explore ways to facilitate this regional information sharing and help develop the maritime counter-terrorism capabilities needed to defeat this threat. Next steps are beginning to work together to share tactics, techniques, and procedures to address this threat.

How we go about building cooperation in these areas has many aspects as well.

First, we in the United States have to do a better job of looking at our interests in the Indian Ocean Region and determining how to modify and build our capabilities to address those interests. Even bureaucratically, we are poorly organized to look at this region as a whole—for example there are no fewer than four State Department Assistant Secretaries who cover the littoral states of this one ocean, and three Combatant Commanders. We must look at our policies, organizations, and our posture in the region to see if it still serves our interests in the changing environment we see, and we are engaged in these discussions right now.

Secondly, we are focusing on working with the nations of the Indian Ocean to see how we can better work together on the full range of maritime security issues. We constantly learn from other nations during these interactions, and I believe that both of our navies or coast guards come away from these exchanges and exercises better prepared to address threats in the maritime domain. This kind of bilateral capacity building will be and increasing focus of our work with the littoral nations of the Indian Ocean.

And finally, we are increasingly looking to regional architecture to promote mutual security in Southeast Asia. There are many, overlapping organizations within the Indian Ocean region, and I think that we all need to look to see how these can and should interact. Certainly the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium is an important venue, and I hope that the members of this group can expand observership for meetings knowing that many nations who are not on the Indian Ocean still have significant interests here.

There are other organizations that are working specifically on maritime security including the ASEAN Defense Minister's Meeting Plus that many Indian Ocean nations are a part of. That may also prove a useful model for countries in the Indian Ocean region. Like many of you, I watched the weekend's SAARC summit with interest as a potential convening body for future security cooperation among the countries of this region.

There will always be some boundaries to cooperation, be it bilateral or multilateral: misalignment of priorities, different approaches and uneven capabilities. But, it is clear that engagement with nations around the world on the basis of mutual interest and mutual respect is, and will continue to be, an important part of US foreign policy, no matter the difficulty.

But I must note that another important part of US foreign policy is engagement in support of human rights. The Obama administration has made it clear that it will pursue policies that include both engagement with those with whom we share interests *and* on behalf of improvements in human rights. These two approaches are not in competition, but must, by necessity, be pursued in conjunction with each other.

That is why in my meetings here, I will discuss areas of mutual interest and security cooperation, such as maritime security, and I will make it clear that the United States needs to see continued progress in promoting the rights of all Sri Lankans and in taking concrete steps to bring about reconciliation with the Tamil population. Further, we believe that a serious effort by the Sri Lankan government to ensure accountability for serious violations of human rights during the war is critically important, and the only way to truly solidify the peace you and your people worked so hard to achieve.

*In closing*, I would like to reiterate that the United States is increasingly attuned to the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean region, not only to our own national defense and economic security, but to global security and stability. I believe that we all share an interest in free and open commerce, free access to the Global Common, and peaceful resolution of disputes. Therefore, we all need to work towards these common norms of behavior, even in the face of a changing security environment.

As a result, we are taking a new look at how we approach this region, and how we are postured to advance and protect our interests here. We already cooperate with many friends and partners in the region to address maritime security issues of mutual concern, and see it as important to expand on that cooperation into the future, both bilaterally and multilaterally.

And this is why I am so glad to have been able to come here today. Today's dialogue provides us an outstanding forum to develop a common picture and understanding of security concerns in the region, and an opportunity to generate ideas for new ways to address them.

I look forward to a fruitful discussion, and encourage us all over the next two days to take advantage of the opportunity to share insights, and identify new areas for collaboration and cooperation.