

Opening Remarks by B. Goonetilleke, Chairman Pathfinder Foundation

PF IOOSC – 10th November 2020

Sri Lanka & the Indian Ocean

The Pathfinder Foundation is pleased that it was able to conduct this meeting amidst difficult circumstances. Originally, we planned to have the meeting in April this year with personal attendance of littoral countries in the IOR, for which purpose we held a preparatory meeting in March 2019. However, it had to be postponed due to the ongoing pandemic, which made us to conduct this gathering in virtual format.

Sri Lanka's interest in the Indian Ocean is not new. Almost half a century ago, with the support of the non-aligned countries, Sri Lanka succeeded in getting Res. 2832 adopted by the 26th Session of the UN General Assembly. That task was undertaken with the intention of declaring the IO as a Zone of Peace. However, the intensity of the Cold War prevailed around that time prevented further negotiations to bring that Declaration closer to reality.

During the past several years, the Pathfinder Foundation has done considerable work on the IO. We first focused on the Bay of Bengal, on which we held two regional meetings, one in 2017, and the other in 2018. And now, our focus is the wider Indian Ocean. Also, in 2018, our Foundation proposed a draft '*Code of Conduct for the Indian Ocean*', to get the attention of the regional and extra-regional countries for mutually agreed rule-based arrangement for the IO.

Trade led to conquest

For millennia, IO has been a place famous for maritime trade, - and, conquest was not the norm. However, with the arrival of the European powers since the beginning of the 16th century, first for trade and later conquest, majority of L & H countries of the IO ended up becoming colonies of - one or the other European powers. Decolonization process that commenced since the end of the Second WW, saw the withdrawal of colonial powers dominated by the British from their possessions, which vacuum was quickly filled by the USA. The Great Power rivalry that was at its height around this period, led to the establishment of new military bases, and forced

countries in the region to throw their lot in favour of one or the other ideological camps. The emergence of the NAM, since the Belgrade Conference, enabled the newly independent countries, to take shelter from the super-power rivalry.

Rationale for the IO Security Conference

Let us briefly consider reasoning for this Conference to be convened by the Pathfinder Foundation. Almost 3 decades after the end of the Cold War dominated by a unipolar world, we are currently witnessing signs of another change. That is, emergence of a multi-polar world, yet again. In this scenario, there are emerging global powers such as China and India, and the former, is said to be challenging the current hegemon, with consequential reaction by the US. Meanwhile, both China and India are expected to reach the heights of their new-found economic power by the middle of the century. What has not been clearly assessed is whether China is seeking to replace the US as the leading power in the Indo-Pacific, or merely looking for its rightful place in the global system.

To achieve the predicted economic growth, emerging economic powers will require unimpeded access to energy and other resources and markets for finished goods. Each rising global power would consider that - it is their right to have unhindered access to the desired natural resources, and it would be their duty to protect the conveyance of such resources to their countries. Securing international sea lanes and ensuring the vital choke points in the IO will not be blocked by hostile forces, will be a responsibility that no major industrial power could ignore.

Meanwhile, no one should be surprised by the determination of the current dominant power in the IO to hinder the progress of the challenger, notwithstanding the fact it will be a harbinger for confrontation. In the colonial era, European powers fought against each other using cannons mounted on sail ships. Any naval confrontation in the 21st century will rely on submarines, cruise missiles and wholly new generation of weapons with devastating results, disrupting the global economy and security.

We have also witnessed extra-regionals getting involved in regional armed conflicts such as the 'Tanker War' during the 8-year long Iran-Iraq war. As the confrontations escalated, the USA, its allies and the Russian Federation deployed their naval vessels to protect movement of oil tankers. In that process, firing of missiles against ships, deploying of mines in the Gulf resulting in hits that nearly sank '*USS Samuel B. Roberts*', attacking Iranian oil platforms, and

accidental downing of an Iranian civilian airliner by a missile occurred in quick succession. Fighting raged until July 1988, when the UN Security Council Resolution 598 was adopted resulting in a ceasefire. That confrontation was not an isolated incident, as similar confrontations occurred in the Gulf, during 2019 and 2020, with attacks, counter attacks and seizure of oil tankers etc. drone attacks against Aramco owned oil processing facilities in Saudi Arabia etc., which threatened the security of the Gulf region and the global economy.

Looking at the larger picture, confrontations between the dominant power and the challenger, may or may not decide, who the winner is. However, consequential fallout will be detrimental to the interests of the littoral countries, whose priority would be uninterrupted economic development leading to wellbeing of their populations. According to the ADB, the development needs of the Asian countries would be in the range of massive 26 trillion dollars from 2016 - 2030! Consequently, priority of the countries in the region would be to realize their development goals, and that will not be possible by choosing to become party to military confrontations of others.

Meanwhile, we also note the steady expansion of navies by regional states, such as India, Iran, Pakistan etc. while other countries such as Bangladesh and Myanmar have acquired submarine capability demonstrating their interest in safeguarding their national security.

Countries in the region also have to face security threats emanating from non-state actors, who engage in piracy, drug and gun running, people smuggling, IUU fishing etc. Piracy around the Horn of Africa necessitated establishment of tripartite coalition consisting of the NATO, the EU and the US combined Maritime Forces, with others, such as India and China joining in anti-piracy patrolling, in response to the call made by the UN Security Council.

We have to accept the fact that the Indian Ocean is a common heritage of the global community, and as in the past, its sea lanes will continue to provide accessibility to regional as well as extra-regional states. Meanwhile, non-state actors too will make use of the ocean to carry out illegal activities, as Sri Lanka had experienced during the separatist war that ended in 2009. What is needed therefore is an arrangement to maintain 'good order at sea'. Ensuring the ocean is 'open and free' for all, without exception, in keeping with the Convention on the Law of the Sea and finding ways and means of addressing any shortcomings in that Convention, through

discussion and negotiation, and taking steps for domain awareness are among the solutions to the problem.

Let me conclude by asking, is it practical to expect removal of naval and other military assets of the extra-regional powers from the IO? Is it pragmatic to expect emerging naval powers not to establish such facilities, which in their opinion, are necessary to ensure supply energy and other resources? Finally, what specific arrangements are available or necessary to address the prevailing mistrust, which may result in miscalculations leading to armed confrontation? Perhaps we should concentrate more on confidence building measures and give high priority to domain awareness.

It is the expectation of the Pathfinder Foundation that the papers submitted by the eminent academics and professionals would enable the participants to address the broad issues during our 3-day discussion.

Thank you.

Now, I have the pleasure of handing over the floor to Chairman of the Conference, Amb. Shivshankar Menon.

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