
Indian Ocean Security Conference Inaugural

(Pathfinder Foundation, Colombo, 10 November 2020, 1330-1500 hrs.)

Shivshankar Menon

Speaking Notes

Admiral Prof. Jayanath Colombage, Foreign Secretary of Sri Lanka,
Ambassador Bernard Goonetilleke, Chairman, Pathfinder Foundation,
Ambassador Geetha de Silva, Secretary General, Pathfinder IOSC,
Excellencies,
Participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen.

I would like to join Ambassador Bernard Goonetilleke in welcoming you all to the Pathfinder Foundation Indian Ocean Security Conference. It is a particular pleasure to welcome (back) Admiral Colombage, who made this conference possible in his previous avatar, and whom we have the privilege of hearing today.

It is good to see so many old friends at once, though virtually. I am particularly happy to see the number and high level of participants in the conference — we have over a hundred participants from business, think tanks, government, diplomatic missions and academia. This is tribute to the reputation and expertise of the speakers and the excellent papers that they have prepared.

It is also due to the importance of the subject of this conference, Indian Ocean security, and its topicality.

The Indian Ocean has always been an ocean of peace, an ocean of trade and human contact and migration. It has avoided the fate of some closed seas of being primarily a battle space or a domain of contention. It did so largely due to its geography, though the inhabitants of the littoral can claim some credit. Its open geography and predictable winds made it so.

But today our life has been complicated by several factors: by advances in technology which make contention in large open ocean spaces like the Indian Ocean and the western Pacific possible; by the contention between great powers that characterises the geopolitics of today; and, by the very high stakes that we all have in the flow of trade and energy across the Indian Ocean sea lanes. Today, the Indian Ocean is ringed by rising and rapidly developing states, and is significant to the security and prosperity of several extra-regional powers. The size of the arms build up in the Indo-Pacific in the last two decades has no parallel anywhere in history. The central geopolitical fault line in the world today is in the Asia-Pacific, not in Europe as it was in the Cold War, and the Indian Ocean, or the larger body of water known as the Indo-Pacific, is at the heart of that. As a consequence, when the

world is between orders, great powers are bringing their contention to the Indian Ocean. Security has thus become an issue in forms that are new and different from what we were used to.

I speak here of security in the broadest sense — not just of the safety of mariners, fishermen and their vessels but of everything up to ecological security, including the effects that climate change and human actions are having on the ocean that is critical to our livelihoods. This is why we have sessions not just on the traditional hard security issues later today, but also on enhancing connectivity tomorrow and on identifying and addressing major issues day after tomorrow.

But lest by speaking of complicated geopolitics and ecological threats I leave you with the wrong impression, let me hasten to say that I am an optimist about the future of Indian Ocean security, despite the complications of contemporary geopolitics and the prospect of sustained great power rivalries. That is because we have the skills and experience of working together and cooperating to deal with emerging security threats. In the past, we cooperated in new and imaginative ways to successfully deal with piracy off the Horn of Africa and earlier around the Straits of Malacca. If we put our minds to it, and realise our common interest in keeping this a free and open ocean of peace, trade and travel, I am confident that we will succeed.

And that is what I hope this conference will result in — that our discussions over these three days will identify what is missing, and what more can be done, not just by the states and navies but also by the other actors who affect Indian Ocean security, broadly defined. What we suggest will have to be inclusive, to serve the common interest, and to provide the maritime security and public goods in these commons that we have so far taken for granted but that are today at risk not just from geopolitics but from environmental and other factors.

I do hope that we are able through our discussions to arrive at a common understanding and a set of recommendations that would be of use to the governments, navies and others in our countries, around the Indian Ocean and beyond, build on UNCLOS to create a free and open Indo-Pacific.

With these few words, let me welcome you again and wish you success in the conference.