The Indian Ocean: Defining Our Future

Keynote Address by Hon. Ranil Wickremesinghe
Prime Minister of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka
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- Your Excellency, President Maithripala Sirisena,

- Foreign Minister Tilak Marapana,

- UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy on the Ocean, Amb. Peter Thomson,

- Ministerial colleagues,

- Distinguished delegates,

- Ladies and gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to deliver the keynote address at the commencement of this landmark conference- 'The Indian Ocean: Defining Our Future'. Let me begin by extending a very warm welcome to all who are here today, to discuss the future of our common heritage: the Indian Ocean.

Ancient scholars recognised the importance of the Indian Ocean. They called it the repository of jewels in reference to its riches. This was due to the trade civilisation that came about in the Indian Ocean 7000 years ago connecting the cities in the Nile, Euphrates – Tigris and Indus valleys. Many millennia later Admiral Alfred Mahan was farsighted enough to forecast that the 21st Century will be decided on the waters of the Indian Ocean.

The Brookings Institute appropriately refer to the Indian Ocean as the strategic crucible located at its cross roads of global
trade connecting the major engines of the international economy in the North Atlantic and the Asia Pacific.

The Indian Ocean sea-lanes have become the major arteries of East-West trade, connecting East and Southeast Asia via South Asia to East Africa, the Middle East and Europe. The rise of Japan, South Korea China, India and the ASEAN economies have turned these sea-lanes into a maritime super highway carrying   around half   the

world's container shipping and about two-thirds of its oil shipments. A strategic geographic location and a rich resource base underpins this heavy maritime traffic.

That is why the Indian Ocean truly is the 'Ocean of the Future'. Maintaining Freedom of Navigation in the Sea Lanes of Communication of the Indian Ocean therefore assumes significant importance for global trade.

The question that has been posed since the conceptual stages of this conference is -
Is it important to talk about Freedom of Navigation in the Indian Ocean when relative calm prevails in the Indian Ocean, and Freedom of Navigation has largely been respected?

As I see it, the question should be, given the importance of the Indian Ocean, whether we can leave its security and stability to chance? Shouldn't we take advantage of the benign strategic atmosphere that exists to create a Maritime Order in the Indian Ocean that can withstand challenges that may emerge in the future? In my view anticipating challenges and crafting solutions in such an atmosphere can assist in a more manageable future for this important ocean.

Otherwise the geopolitical power interplay resulting from absence of an accepted maritime order will convert the Indian Ocean into a center of tension.

Thee strategic tensions can threaten the immense potential of this region involving regional powers, littoral states, major maritime users of the Indian Ocean, and non-state actors as well. In addition, such tensions are not only limited to the surface of the Indian Ocean, but now extend to its sub-surface waters and its airspace as well.

Given how these risks can jeopardise the region's economic potential, a dialogue is needed between littoral states and major maritime users of the Indian Ocean to build a shared understanding of the opportunities and challenges that our common ocean poses for us.

Therefore, this conference aims to create an inclusive platform for discussion and dialogue for littoral states and major maritime users of the Indian Ocean. Our purpose is to work towards a shared understanding that benefits all.

To my mind, such a shared understanding should address two core, interconnected issues related to the Indian Ocean. They are the Freedom of Navigation and the Freedom of Digital Connectivity. In terms of global trade and commerce the oceans are not only a medium of navigational connectivity but it is also the space for digital connectivity. It is only right, therefore, that we give both these freedoms our attention.

Ladies and Gentlemen

Let me explain the reasons that led Sri Lanka to convene this conference.

First, we see the imperative for strengthening the regional rules-based order, which treats small and large countries alike. Smaller states have a long history of advocating for a rules-based order. In the multipolar world of the Indian Ocean, where there is no overarching security architecture or unilateral security guarantor, it is imperative that only a shared understanding based on rules-based order will ensure the security of both larger and smaller states. Therefore, in the interest of the greater good, a dialogue towards building such a shared understanding is needed.

Second, Sri Lanka has historically been an advocate of rules-based order for the maritime domain. We chaired the UN Conference on the Law of the Sea in 1973, which led to the adoption of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). It is this rules-based order which will keep our sea-lanes of communication open thereby reducing tension in the Indian Ocean.

Third, as outlined in the government's Vision 2025 policy document, Sri Lanka desires to develop as a trading hub of the Indian Ocean. To realise this objective, we are investing in port and airport modernisation to increase our international connectivity, we are investing in developing highways to connect our ports to the Sri Lankan hinterland, and we are making logistics and government procedures more business-

friendly and up-scaling our national exports. However, such aspirations depend, first and foremost, on sustained external demand through thriving maritime trade.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Much has been said about the vital importance of ensuring "freedom of navigation" across our oceans. However, equally important is to ensure the "freedom of digital connectivity" using the ocean bed. Over 80% of internet traffic is transferred using undersea cables. The economic and commercial wellbeing of most countries are now dependent on internet connectivity, and the seabed is becoming an ungoverned maze of undersea cables. What are the security imperatives, threats, vulnerabilities, and responsibilities around the growth of undersea cables on the seabed?

These are ocean issues that have received limited attention but have far reaching consequences into the future. Sri Lanka situated in the middle of the Indian Ocean sees a need to start examining these issues in-depth. Much of the undersea cable connectivity, in fact to be precise all of the digital connectivity between west and east traverses over the seabed adjacent to Sri Lanka. We want to ensure the freedom of digital connectivity not only as an Indian Ocean objective but as a global objective.

We want to establish an international Centre of Excellence on the Safety of Undersea Cables in Colombo. We will work closely with the Global Maritime Crime Programme of UNODC to establish this Centre. We would like to invite each and every country represented here to send an expert to augment the intellectual and technical capacity of the Centre. We hope that undersea cables will form part of your discussions over the next two days and we can find common understanding on the way forward.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Some years ago, an International Oceanology Centre was established in Sri Lanka under the patronage of my office, to provide an international focus for sharing experiences and capabilities to monitor and assist in ocean governance and capacity building therefore. It is our expectation that we could further develop the facilities of

the Centre. Our primary goal is to function as a practically oriented operational Centre in the relevant disciplines.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

What do we hope to achieve from this conference? We see a dialogue to strengthen and uphold rules-based order as vital to realising the interests of all in the region, and particularly smaller states. Now, the core framework for such rules-based order already exists in the UN Convention on the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS), appropriately dubbed the 'Constitution of the Seas'.[1] However, looking at the various challenges facing the Indian Ocean today, it is clear that a dialogue is needed, to clarify grey areas in the law and strengthen cooperation.

For example, we are currently confronted with various forms of maritime crime in the Indian Ocean. While multilateral security cooperation has led to a decline in the incidence of activities such as piracy, they continue to remain a threat. Importantly, states are somewhat hindered in taking measures against such non-state actors on the high seas. This is where agencies such as UNODC have come up with innovative solutions such as their 'piracy prosecution model'.[2] However, a long-term solution to effectively combating and prosecuting maritime crime is needed to facilitate state capacity in this regard.

Another key area is the management and sustainable exploitation of undersea resources. Given that many Indian Ocean littoral states lack the capacity to determine or exploit their resource endowments, they would necessarily have to partner with other states in such activities. Therefore, we are studying on countering transnational maritime crime and proposing to strengthen the maritime surveillance capability and inter-agency operational capability. This would help enhancement of situational awareness of territorial and extended waters by providing a maritime surface picture for law enforcement purposes.

However, this raises the question of whether such partnerships would be equitable and ensure that these as-yet untapped resources would benefit everyone in the region.

So, it should be clear that many of the challenges facing the Indian Ocean revolve around state capacity to address these challenges. Naturally, this is a pressing concern for smaller and centrally located states like Sri Lanka, and we see the strengthening of UNCLOS and its implementation as vital to expanding our capacity in answering such challenges. What we hope to achieve is to reach consensus on the need for a shared understanding on challenges faced to freedom of navigation and connectivity in the Indian Ocean. Then we shall see if countries are interested in going forward to a ministerial conference and reaching a political understanding. This is the test of our commitment.

Conclusion

To conclude, the issues that I have highlighted may not have simple solutions. However, we strongly believe that, despite these difficulties, for the benefit of future generations, we should commit ourselves to strengthening a rules-based order. The alternative 'business as usual' scenario cannot end well for the region, as current geopolitical trends can have unforeseen consequences for all of us. We need a normative framework that is robust, transparent, and committed to equity, leaving no one behind. Your presence today indicates that you share our concerns and desire for such an order, and I hope that, in the next two days, we will make important strides in working towards this goal. The Indian Ocean is our common heritage and the common enabler of our peace and prosperity – let us ensure that it will always remain so.

Thank you and I wish you all the best for a successful conference.