

THE INDIAN OCEAN AS A ZONE OF PEACE

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As Director of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs responsible for Asian/African Affairs, I was asked in late 1970's by the Government of the time to prepare a Paper on 'Indian Ocean Security'. The Paper was to be circulated to Commonwealth Governments Meeting in Singapore, then due to convene in January 1971.

You would appreciate these were early days in the consideration of the Issue. Expectedly, there was little or nothing by way of policy studies, position papers or Memoranda-not in the Chancellery in Sri Lanka or possibly in Chancelleries anywhere. No one was getting his PhD at the time by writing dissertations on the IOPZ for western or other Universities. The academic community had not joined issue so that there was no writing worthy the name on the subject and journalist interest, such as there had been was negligible.

What thinking there was tended, moreover, to be dominated by the interest of the general community of the Non-Aligned Nations as a whole in military stand-off, not confrontation, between the Great Powers, in cessation or mitigation of the arms race, in preventing the establishment of military bases of the Great Powers on the territories of Third World States and in creating conditions for assuring the political independence of these States.

Not surprisingly, in preparing my Paper the main background on which I could rely was the declarations and resolutions of the Non-Aligned Movement. At the Non-Aligned Conference in Belgrade in 1961, the Indian Ocean had not attracted direct attention. But, I could see, the Peace Zone concept itself had achieved national life in the definition the Conference gave as to who constituted members of the Movement. Bases conceded to a foreign power, bilateral military agreements with a Great Power and regional-defence pacts that were tied to Great Power conflicts were taken as evidence that an applying country was qualified for membership. To the extent these criteria applied and states became members of the Non-Aligned Movement, they answered subsequent conceptualisations and were by definition 'peace zones' themselves already. It followed that having the Indian Ocean declared a 'zone of peace' meant no more or no less than having a vast expanse of Ocean, but insignificantly appropriated to national jurisdiction, declared and respected as a non-aligned sea.

The Non-aligned Conference moved closer to the Indian Ocean both geographically and economically when it convened in Cairo in 1964. The Ocean then had explicit recognition. But, with the explicitness went also a

concern dominated by the anti-colonial feelings that were uppermost at the Conference. Instead of a call for a 'peace zone' the Conference condemned the intention of imperialist powers to establish bases in the Indian Ocean characterising this "as a calculated attempt to intimidate the emerging countries of Africa and Asia and an unwarranted extension of neo-colonialism and imperialism." The Indian Ocean had become explicit but not the 'peace zone' in association with it. The lesser theme of the non-aligned movement, anti-colonialism, overshadowed the greater, Great Power rivalry.

It was at Lusaka in September 1970 that the explicit concern with the Indian Ocean meshed with an equally explicit interest to have it declared as a 'zone of peace' in other words, as an Ocean of the non-aligned. A Resolution of the Conference called for the adoption at the current session of the UN of a declaration calling upon all States to consider and respect the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace from which Great Power rivalries and competition as well as bases conceived in the context of such rivalries and competition either army, navy or air force, are excluded. The area should also be free of nuclear weapons."

The central concern now was with Great Power rivalries and competition. There was a certain moral equality of treatment with regard to both powers. Bases to be excluded were only those conceived in the context of such rivalries. The anti-

colonialism there was gone. Moreover, UN action was to be part of a wider effort at international construction including the adoption of a Declaration on Principles Governing Friendly Relations among States, a declaration on Strengthening International Peace and Security, of a document on International Development and Strategy for the Second Development Decade, a Declaration of Principles for the peaceful use of the sea-bed and so on.

It was in pursuit of the objective of obtaining from the UN General Assembly a Declaration on the Indian Ocean along the lines called for in Lusaka that Sri Lanka in 1970 began the process of Commonwealth consultation for which my background was to be the working document. These consultations were to be a prelude to an initiative by Sri Lanka at the UN Sessions.

Official perceptions in Sri Lanka of the Peace Zone concept, I should recall, were themselves dominated by the non-aligned approach. In preparing my Paper, I not only had no other back ground than the non-aligned documents I have just referred to. I had also no directive that might have necessitated variation of the conception suggested in that background, particularly the Lusaka Resolution relating to the Indian Ocean.

I have two problems, however about that non-aligned formulation of the concept. One problem was that in its terms peace and peace zones

came to be associated with the mere absence of Great Power conflicts. For a peace conception, this was a negative idea. Apart from this, the concept left the field wide open to a more circumscribed theatre in which regional rivalries and competition would have free manifestation. So long as these had no links to Great Powers, and their rivalries, presumably the peace zone carried no reins on behaviour. A Hobbesian state of nature could still prevail, the life of man probably more 'nasty, brutish and short' because there are no greater feuds than blood feuds and stripping the region of extra-regional balances is no way of mitigating them.

The second problem was equally fundamental. It occurred to me that it was alright for the Non-Aligned Nations to call for vacation of Great Power rivalry and military competition in relation to outer space and celestial bodies, to the sea-bed and ocean floor and to Antarctica. But, to call for a Peace Zone free of Great Power presence and competition in relation to an Ocean that is part of undifferentiated Ocean space providing links between far flung lands and regions, something less general than ideas such as the common benefit or heritage of man, less metropolitan than the mitigating impact of a peace zone in the Indian Ocean in global rivalry in the heartland centres of tension and more special than the general security of the Indian Ocean states was called for to justify a demand for exclusion.

Both problems, it seemed to me, raised the question whether an ecological perspective, necessarily a search for eco-system characteristics offered any realistic ground in the area of the Indian Ocean. As defined by Clifford Geertz from the viewpoint of cultural ecology, such a perspective, to the extent it had ground, meant that "as one specifies more fully the precise nature of a people's adaptation from the geographical side, one inescapably specifies at the same time and to the same degree, their adaptation from the cultural side. One advocates in short, an eco-system within which certain selected cultural, biological and physical variables are determinately inter-related, and which will yield to the same general mode of analysis as eco-systems within which human organisms do not happen to play a role."

Effectively, the question was whether the Indian Ocean carried any evidence, active or potential, that might afford us ground for thinking of it in eco-system terms. Were there variables we might point to cultural, physical biological and even political since we are concerned here more with political than with cultural ecology—which have become inter-related in a determinate way such that when we specify the adaptation of the societies of the region from the geographical side we are specifying at the same time and to the same degree their adaptation from the political and cultural side and vice versa.

Of course, we have to bear in mind the colonial era and the impact that the so-called Epoch of Vasco da Gama made in ecological terms on the developing international area of the Indian Ocean. A researcher seeking eco-system characteristics in the post-colonial societies of the region would not be working on material and sources representing the conditions and relationship of these societies "in their pre-western incarnations." He would be looking at evidence in the aftermath of European dominance, in the aftermath of an Epoch in which the Indian Ocean was subordinated to the North Atlantic and became the periphery of metropolitan life elsewhere. This means each step of the research is a task of reconstruction of conditions and realities that no longer quite obtain and which are only distorted mirrored in the empirical evidences of present conditions of the region.

Still, I saw immediately that geographically speaking the area of the Indian Ocean met certain critical conditions that argued its special reality. Among the Oceans of the world, it is the most land-locked. The accesses into it are few constrained. Opaque land-forms, continental in size, block its horizons to the north and west. Even the Ocean's circulation with Arctic realities is massively interdicted. It is conspicuously the most tropical of the oceans. The land immediately joining the Ocean, besides, have physical features, some quite obtrusive, that mark them

off from the continents to which they belong and bring them into an Oceanic system. Monsoon winds and Ocean currents make for immensely circulatory conditions. To detail more would be to go to great length.

I saw also the special historical reality of a region so nurtured by these geographical conditions. The abutting societies were Asian and African. They had much greater contact and intermingling between them in pre-European centuries than even the work of the most frontier researchers have disclosed. When the European came, they were not societies on the verge of either breakdown or exhaustion. They were in the midst of what I would call great and encompassing change and on the verge of major transformations. Politically, we could have justifiably identified the region as an international system, relatively autonomous as such systems were before a general global system was forged by the European at the cost of autonomous international life. It was probably as much an international system as Europe was before it embarked on foreign ventures and discoveries.

Apart from this, although the colonial era had put these societies of the Indian Ocean apart and asunder, although it had served vital links, stopped on-going contacts and relations, and forced virtually regressive or retrogressive subsistence conditions on what was a vigorous trading system predicated on maritime life

and exchange, the experience of colonial rule, good and bad, had added a great deal to common elements in their heritage and contributed to similar development destinies.

One could presume at least basic general conditions for postulating the region as demarcating a special reality. If there was something new my Background Paper added to the Non-Aligned rendition of the concept of a Peace Zone in the Indian Ocean, it was the ecological perspective which enabled me to note, probe and stress that reality.

Of course, the Paper made no easy assumptions. The area of the Indian Ocean gave ground for specifying it as a distinctive region of the world. But, it gave no ground for assuming that, therefore, consensus and solidarity in the area of the Ocean pursued high levels. "The India Ocean area", the Paper stressed, "is a region of low solidarities and community of interests." Such links as existed were "bilateral or sub-regional." The Paper also emphasized that a corollary of the Peace Zone was the obligation of regional or Indian Ocean states to refrain themselves from any action prejudicial to the concept of the Zone. It held their defence requirements will have to be measured against their obligations in that respect.

On the other hand, the Paper was emphatic that a "Peace Zone in the Indian Ocean will provide transitional minimum conditions for the development of an Indian Ocean Community." This

conceptually, was a great distance travelled from the Lusaka Resolution calling for a Peace Zone where the dominant objective was a non-aligned Ocean, an Ocean purely and simply vacated of Great Power rivalries, purely and simply without any positive underpinnings that would have even justified such a call.

It is now well over a dozen years since Sri Lanka, an Indian Ocean State of a centrality without parallel, took the initiative of raising a decision of the Non-Aligned at the venue of a hinterland state of the Indian Ocean at its western, African end, at a Conference of Heads of Governments of the Commonwealth at a venue of a coastal state that stood at the gateway of the Indian Ocean at its eastern Asian end. An Olympic runner could not have brought out the symbolic elements of encompassing unity better.

The question is what these twelve years have accomplished and what of the future.

We have, of course, some manifest evidences of achievement. In 1971, the UN General Assembly adopted a Resolution solemnly declaring that the Indian Ocean, within limits to be defined together with the air space above and the subadjacent ocean floor, was a Peace Zone for all times. In calling for consultations between the Great Powers the major maritime users of the Indian Ocean and the littoral and hinterland States, the Resolution linked the general non-aligned objective of universal collective security

without military alliances with the objective of regional co-operation of Indian Ocean States.

I attended that Session of the UN to help promote and steer a Resolution and well remember the difficulty of the task. For the traditional major users the very thought of a Peace Zone involving the high seas of a major Ocean was ridiculous. There was full congruence on this position from the part of the major non-traditional user, the Soviet Union. The Great Powers as a whole had even more reason to see no Resolution of the UN pass on the subject. It touched deeply critical strategic interests. There were perfunctory elements in the concern of the Non-aligned themselves for a Peace Zone in the Indian Ocean with which many of them had no contiguity. Most of the littoral and hinterland States did not even know they were littoral and hinterland States, so abstracted were they in their post-colonial reality from the neighbouring Ocean, so absorbed in continental and land-based pre-occupations and horizons, so interior and inland bound in any case. Those littoral States that were self-consciously aware of their reality in the Ocean looked at the idea of a Peace Zone with no great alacrity to be sure, first, that their interests in the Indian Ocean meshed. Indeed, the first drafts of a Resolution we circulated to littoral and hinterland states were received at the Meeting with what we thought was strangely 'deafening silence'.

Clearly, there is only a limited value by themselves in general Declarations of this kind. But, as a means for sharpening perspectives or better to achieve frontier advances in perception, they serve the purpose most decisively. The Declaration on the Indian Ocean, I think, did so pre-eminently.

There had been even disagreement within the Sri Lankan delegation whether the Resolution should call for negotiations in good faith to install a Peace Zone in full legal plenitude or leave the question of such negotiations wide open and instead look for an ambitious political Declaration backed unambitiously, however, by not more than exhortation and calls for consultations of a political and diplomatic kind. In its wisdom the delegation finally supported my preference for the latter course. The consensus, I thought, was simply non-existent for any other recourse whether we held in view the littoral states, the major maritime users or the Great Powers. In other words, the Resolution realistically looked to the growth of consensus through consultations. But, again realistically, there were no dates or time limit set for consultations. None were even envisaged. It was realised that even the political will to consult was weak. Before it could strongly manifest, there would have to be evolution and change, and this would need to embrace not just the Great Powers or the major maritime users but

also, indeed particularly, the littoral and hinterland states of the Indian Ocean.

Of course, at the next Session of the UN General Assembly we managed to set up an Ad Hoc Committee to provide a continuing institution for securing action on the Declaration. But, this again was an extrinsic step compared to the need for political change and development.

What evidence have these dozen years brought to the fore of such evolution and change? The case of Sri Lanka affords the evidence of a heartland Indian Ocean State. Change here cannot help but be reflective of exclusively Indian Ocean dynamics. They do not dovetail into the dynamics or conditions of other regions as would be the case in a littoral or hinterland state with a less central and less purely Indian Ocean location. Besides, the Sri Lanka case should be a familiar one to us.

We must note here the Indian Ocean fashioned Sri Lanka's historical reality over the millenia in which it was formed. Thus, in a developing Oceanic International System Sri Lanka had been a Bay of Bengal State from the 5th Century B.C. till about the 10th. transitional dynamics set in about the 10th when the Arabian Sea began to exercise influence over the area. By the 14th these changes had effectively converted Sri Lanka from Bay of Bengal to an Arabian Sea political reality. The centres of Sri Lankan political life

had gravitated to its western littoral. In 1505 the Portuguese arrived. Transitional conditions set in again. A period of expanded international relations in which Atlantic Ocean powers came into contact with the states of the Indian Ocean, it led before long to the dual reality of a European government of the Maritime Provinces and an indigenous government of the Interior.

This history of the Indian Ocean change was, of course, part of Sri Lanka's historical reality when it emerged as an independent state in 1948. During the Bay of Bengal period of its international history the Raja Rata had been the dominant political region; the Ruhuna to a lesser extent. Kotte and Jaffna became centres of political life when the Arabian Sea became dominant. The arrival of the Portuguese led to the rise of Colombo and the historical region of the Low Country. Colombo not only supplanted Kotte and Jaffna; it also created its antithesis, Kandy and the historical region on which it was based - the Up Country.

It is such a country, so internally differentiated, insufficiently integrated, compounded by the dualism of life that the European impact brought about, that in 1948 became an independent State - trying against historic contradictions to remain cohesive, internally coherent. But, the Raja Rata, Ruhuna Rata, Kotte, Jaffna, Colombo and Kandy were no procession of names of place, no roster

of successive things. They were part of the conditions of Sri Lanka's post colonial life. They reflected or mirrored an Indian Ocean History that was itself no history of continuous development and continuity. The western interregnum stopped indigenous impulses for change, reversed progressive trends and brought new dynamics that forced a dualist restructuring of internal conditions.

It would take a great deal more time that I have to identify the specific dynamics in post-independent Sri Lanka and establish the co-relation of domestic to Indian Ocean change. Suffice it to say that the emergence in Sri Lanka of a national state entity that integrates and assimilates into an organic order all the regions that its Indian Ocean history had helped to implant in its social reality: Raja Rata, Kotte, Jaffna, Colombo, Kandy - would be no domestic event. It would mean also, and necessarily the emergence of an Indian Ocean region more reflective of a Community of States than if such a domestic crystallisation does not take place. We would then be more on the road to an Indian Ocean Community of States. The slow movement in the UN on consultations with regard to the Peace Zone does not dampen my hopes. It does not do so because I am convinced political development in the region of the Indian Ocean is enhancing conditions daily for regional life. This, more than anything else provided the launching pad for a Zone of Peace.