

The Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace

When African leaders spoke of the de-nuclearisation of Africa at the Second Non-Aligned Summit in Cairo in 1964, Sri Lanka's Prime Minister proposed that the concept of a nuclear free zone be extended to cover the whole of the Indian Ocean. A nuclear free zone is not in itself a guarantee of peace or of the prevention of future intervention, direct or indirect, by outside powers. By the time of the next Summit in Lusaka in 1970, and more specifically, by the time of the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meeting convened in Singapore in January 1971, the concept of a Peace Zone for the Indian Ocean in its present form had matured. It became a U.N. Declaration in the same year.

The origin of the concept of the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace and its momentum since then, can be easily understood against the geographical and historical background of the region.

In the Indian Ocean, three continents become absorbed in a broad marine system along with islands such as Sri Lanka and Madagascar and archipelagos such as Indonesia, Asia, Africa and Australia come into a common focus in this area, bringing African, Arab, Asian and European peoples together in a common destiny. This is also an area with a common colonial past, although there are some areas yet, either under direct colonial rule, or under forms of government which are, for all intents and purposes, colonial.

Sri Lanka is at the very centre of this oceanic system and this geographical position has been largely a blessing to her. In ancient and medieval times when international exchanges in this region were limited to the more peaceful pursuits of trade and cultural interaction, Sri Lanka was a beneficiary of all trans-oceanic traffic, as much in social and cultural exchanges as in commerce. With the dawn of the 16th century, however, she had to pay a price for this central position, through more than four centuries of colonial domination by Portugal, Holland and Britain in turn. She did not escape the notice of other colonial powers either, although she was spared subjugation by them.

It was not Sri Lanka alone that fell victim to colonial empires in the context of military and naval rivalry of the great powers in the Indian Ocean. She was also, in a way, a base for the activities of these powers which embarked on the carving up mainland Africa and Asia, and the Archipelagos and islands to the South-East.

Geographically, the Indian Ocean is not only a vital link in the sea communications between East and West. It is also bordered by states rich in natural resources. The Indian Ocean and its littoral constitute a beach-head to the main land masses of Africa and Asia, and eastward access to the Pacific.

These geographical characteristics led to the shared historical experience of the states of the region, of decades, and in some cases, centuries of subjugation either as colonies or dependent territories, within a context of power rivalry.

This historical experience underlined the need for a system of international relations other than power rivalry, to permit these nations to progress from the colonial era to the era of independence. The post-war realities provided the environment in which the Peace Zone concept matured.

The end of the second World War saw the polarisation of erstwhile allies into two hostile camps based on ideology. The majority of the nations of the world which began to emerge independent at this stage, had to choose between joining either of these camps or of evolving another way of international life without this conflict and tension. The first few countries which became independent in this era, both African and Asian, chose the latter option which gave them the freedom to assess each international issue on its own merits, to judge it impartially and to act effectively for the sake of peace.

When Sri Lanka took up the cause of an Indian Ocean Peace Zone, she was attempting to extend the field of Non-Alignment beyond the borders of individual states into a larger area of the world which is easily definable and, geographically and historically, cohesive. The impetus for this movement was created by the resurgence of power rivalry in the area. If the rivalries of individual states had in the past undermined and destroyed the independence of states in this region, the new rivalry between the two ideologically opposed and highly organised military camps posed even greater dangers to the independence and security of these states.

The emphasis of Non-Alignment on active co-operation is of vital relevance to this concept. The atmosphere of peace which the concept envisages would give substance to co-operation both within the region, and between the states of the region and those outside it, without the risks entailed in ideological confrontation.

Sri Lanka has viewed the Indian Ocean Peace Zone proposal as a step towards the reduction of international tension and the strengthening of international security, and towards the evolution of an Indian Ocean Community. Such a Community could be built on the foundation of a shared past, a common present pre-occupation and a future promise of interdependence, universal security and co-operation.

Not all the countries of the Indian Ocean region are Non-Aligned. But the appeal of the Peace Zone concept is demonstrated by the fact that many countries in the region which are not members of the Non-Aligned movement have lent strong support and even advocacy for the concept. Three major states in the Asian region, China, Japan and India are among its strongest supporters. Other nations in the region have not only supported the concept but promoted their own sub-regional zones of peace and co-operation like the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality declared by the South East Asian nations at Kuala Lumpur. Peace Zones have been mooted in recent years for other areas of the world and it would not be far wrong to conclude that the idea of

a world order, based on Peace Zones over large areas of the world, is gaining ground.

The United Nations resolution which declared the Indian Ocean a Zone of Peace at the 26th Session of the General Assembly in 1971 spelt out the basic elements of the concept. It called upon the great powers to enter into consultations with the littoral states of the Indian Ocean so as to halt the further escalation and expansion of their military presence in the Indian Ocean conceived in the context of great power rivalry.

At the same time, it called upon the littoral and hinterland states of the Indian Ocean, the permanent members of the Security Council and other major maritime users to enter into consultations, with a view to the implementation of the Declaration "in pursuit of the objectives of establishing a system of universal collective security without military alliances.....".

The General Assembly established an ad hoc committee in the following year to study the implications of the Peace Zone Declaration "having due regard to the security interests of any other state consistent with the purposes and principles of the Charter.....". A resolution adopted at the 29th Session of the United Nations General Assembly (1974) called upon the littoral and hinterland states to enter into consultations with a view to convening a conference on the Indian Ocean as early as possible. The 30th Session adopted a resolution which took note of the consultations which had already taken place and of the consensus that emerged at these consultations that such a conference was desirable.

The implementation of the Peace Zone Declaration has assumed a new urgency in recent years. When the Peace Zone concept was first mooted, great power rivalry in the Indian Ocean area was in its incipient stage, and it was hoped that this process could be checked. Developments in Indo-China in the early 1970s and their culmination in 1974 in the re-drawing of the post-war map of that area, might lead the great powers to concentrate their attention on the

Indian Ocean as an alternative to direct involvement on the mainland of Asia. Reports of new construction of bases and other facilities in the area seem to confirm this fear and to highlight the urgency of action to pursue the Peace Zone proposal with renewed vigour.

It appears that the the Non-Aligned nations and almost the entire Third World, supports the concept of a Peace Zone in the Indian Ocean, because they understand its motives and sympathise with its objectives. The great powers and their allies, and some of the major maritime users on the other hand, seem to have misgivings, primarily because they see in it a threat to the old order. "Freedom of the high seas" is an argument often heard. It has been made clear that the freedom of peaceful navigation will not be circumscribed by the proposal and that it is only military or naval presence in the context of rivalry and confrontation that is to be kept out.

It does not make sense today, when the concept of the territorial sea itself has undergone so much change, to take account of changes in the international scene, that nations would want to cling to old concepts of "freedom" based on military and naval might. It is equally ironic that states which show so much enthusiasm for detente in their own respective regions would wish to import their rivalries and tensions into other regions, threatening the security of nations which would not be otherwise involved in them.

The Indian Ocean Peace Zone was not invented to exclude great power rivalries so that new rivalries and new power orientations within the region may take their place. As much as the Peace Zone entails obligations on the part of the great powers and major maritime users in the interests of peace, it places obligations on the countries within the region too, to give substance to that peace. These countries are expected to conduct their relations on the basis of peaceful methods, to renounce the threat or the use of force in the settlement of their disputes and to renounce the nuclear weapon option.