

# Changing Dynamics in the Maritime Domain: Special Emphasis on the Indian Ocean

Rear Admiral William C. McQuilkin (Retired)

Former Director, U.S. Navy Strategy and Policy Division, U.S. Navy, USA

[wm.mcquilkin@gmail.com](mailto:wm.mcquilkin@gmail.com)

Aayubowan! Subha Udesanak Wewa! It is really great to be back in Sri Lanka and to have a chance to attend the 10th International Research Conference (IRC). I spoke at the 8th IRC and it was a wonderful experience. I found it to be an important forum and great learning experience where ideas were freely expressed and exchanged. And I also enjoyed the cultural tour to Kandy. It was the time of the Pera Hera. Sri Lanka has such a rich culture and vibrant history. I was asked to talk about the changing dynamics in the maritime domain with a special emphasis on the Indian Ocean. This is such a rich topic. I am a big fan of Robert Kaplan and his masterpiece of a book, *Monsoon*, which focuses on the Indian Ocean and how global power is shifting in the twenty-first century. *Monsoon* had a big influence on me when I read it back in 2010 and when we were writing the U.S. Navy strategy in 2014, we decided to use the term Indo-Asia-Pacific rather than what was then the more accepted term, Asia-Pacific. We used this lexicon because: --we recognized the reintegration process that was underway among East Asia, Central Asia, South Asia, East Africa, and the Middle East --widening the aperture to the expanded scope of the Indo-Asia-Pacific countered any negative perceptions that we were shifting our focus away from Southwest Asia in favor of East Asia. -- I personally felt that this allowed us to view China in the larger context of Asia rather than overly focusing on what was going on in the South and East China Seas. The Indo-Asia-Pacific remains the most dynamic region in the world. The center of gravity for economic activity and trade has shifted east of Suez. I was reading in Parag Khanna's excellent book, *Connectography*, that in the 1970's, transatlantic trade represented 80 percent of global trade.; by 2013 it was only 40 percent. The trade nexus between East Asia, South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East now makes up a significant portion of world trade. Accordingly, the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) that run across the Pacific and Indian Oceans are the economic lifeline of the world. Globalization rests on the free flow of international maritime trade. Ninety percent of world trade by volume travels across the oceans and about 70 percent of the world's population lives within 100 miles of the coastline. Plus, the sheer vastness of the Indian and Pacific Oceans point to the need for all of us to work together be it for MARITIME SECURITY, ECONOMIC SECURITY, or HUMAN SECURITY. It is just too big a job for any one country or navy. No country is too big that they can't use help, and no country is too small that they can't make a valuable contribution. We also must collectively ensure that this vital region remains open and inclusive, while respecting established rules and norms in the maritime domain. So when I was asked to talk about some of the changing dynamics in the maritime domain, I focused on three areas. 1) Traditional and non-traditional maritime security threats are increasing 2) Evolving Military Challenges to include anti-access in the Indo-Asia-Pacific 3) New Silk Roads and Infrastructure Provision in the Indian Ocean Region Let's look at the

maritime security challenges first. To give you some idea of the scope of the problem, and just how big this ocean area is. It is over 8,000 nautical miles from Shanghai to the Gulf of Suez. From the Gulf of Suez to Colombo, Sri Lanka it is 3,695 nautical miles. If you look at slide #5 you will also see that this same ocean area comprises some of the most strategic maritime passages (or navigational choke points) in the world. These include the Strait of Malacca, the Strait of Hormuz, Bab-el-Mandeb, Sunda, and Lombok. If you look at the same map of the Indian Ocean that displays shipping route density, you would see how much shipping traffic converges at these strategic passages and what a disruption to the flow of these merchant ships would cause to the global economy. With the globalization phenomenon and the need of these large Asian economies for imported energy one can imagine that this trend will only continue. This is also the region that in terms of natural disasters is probably the most dangerous in the world. We are all familiar with the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, Cyclone Nargis in 2008, the Tsunami and nuclear crisis in Japan in 2011, Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines in 2013, and more closer to home, Cyclone Mora which just a few months ago caused devastating floods and landslides, tragic loss of life and the displacement of over 400,000 of the Sri Lankan people. Sadly, these extreme weather events will only become more frequent in the future. Is it now time to set up some coalition or mechanism to more quickly respond to these events across the region? I think this is a conversation we need to have. These are seasonal events, and could have a seasonal ready response force. In terms of maritime security, we also have to remember that this is the region that saw the Mumbai terror attack of "26/11". (Which came via the sea from a commandeered fishing vessel.) As well as the Tamil Tigers who used seaborne terrorism as a tactic against Sri Lanka. This region continues to deal with the risk of piracy and armed attacks at sea. While incidents of piracy are down off the east coast of Africa, armed attacks have actually risen in the Bay of Bengal and Malacca. To be sure, there has been a lot of good progress in this region with the formation of organizations like Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Armed Robbery and Piracy (ReCAAP) and the standing up of The Information Fusion Centre (IFC) in Singapore. These are great examples of the region working together to solve hard problems. We also have the issue of Illegal Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing which becomes a matter of both livelihood and security. And with overfishing, pollution and mismanagement of ocean resources this could become a major issue of food security in the future. I haven't even addressed migrant and refugee issues which we will also have to deal with, but you see how complicated an overlay of maritime security concerns could become. For all these reasons, it is so important that we work together in these interagency and multilateral fora to promote peace and prosperity. The second area I'd like to talk about in respect to the changing dynamics in the maritime domain are the evolving naval and military challenges. There is a strong push for naval modernization among the countries of the Indo-Asia-Pacific. I see three drivers of naval modernization in the region to be 1) competing/ potentially conflicting maritime interests (e.g. access to resources) 2) as a response to modernization/ expansion by potential competitors, or 3) in response to specific security challenges So essentially, there is a maritime arms-race ongoing

in the Indo-Asia-Pacific. Some countries are focused on anti-access weapons and strategies. This is a serious problem as access is a pre-condition for monitoring the health and safety of the maritime domain, for ensuring freedom of navigation, and for building and sustaining relationships of the countries sharing the global maritime commons. The other concerning trend that I see is the proliferation of submarines in the region. All the major countries in the region are increasing or modernizing their submarine capacity. Additionally, new countries are seeking to enter the submarine game. These include Malaysia and Thailand as well as Singapore. One way to think about the naval modernization that is taking place in the region is in terms of stabilizing vs destabilizing capability development. I see many capabilities such as MDA, environmental monitoring and law enforcement, maritime C2, coastal patrol and HADR capabilities as generally stabilizing. Conversely, there are other capabilities that are much more potentially destabilizing. All of this has implications for what capabilities countries should pursue. Remember our ultimate goal should be to protect the global commons, respect the rule of law, preserve the peace and to respect individual nations' sovereignty. The third phenomenon that I see in this region in terms of the maritime domain and the Indian Ocean rimland is that of the accelerating competition in terms of physical connectivity in connecting Asia. By this I am referring to port infrastructure, new road and rail networks, and economic and security infrastructure provision across the region. Physical connectivity and infrastructure are manifestations of overall economic development – which can be collaborative or competitive (or both at the same time). This infrastructure play that is occurring in the Indian Ocean Region could have significant strategic consequences. Infrastructure investment, economic development, and increased connectivity are generally good for everyone. However, economic growth combined with population growth and rising expectations increase the potential for competition for resources, for markets, and for regional influence. This has the potential to lead to actual confrontation. This is actually an exciting time to watch as the Silk Roads and Spice Routes are returning. China's planned Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which seeks to link, through infrastructure provision, economies across Eurasia and East Africa is the perfect example of this. New supply chains are being created, and the question is whether they will be inclusive or exclusive and what cost participants will be asked to pay (e.g. influence). Now, please let me shift gears for a moment and talk about all the positive developments over the last couple of years in our military to military relationship. U.S. - Sri Lanka relations are currently at an all-time high. I was really excited to see the visit of the USS BLUE RIDGE, the U.S. Seventh Fleet's Command Ship, to Colombo in March of 2016 where the ship hosted Sri Lanka President Sirisena. This paved the way for three more high profile port calls by U.S Navy ships last year. This included the visit of the USS SOMERSET and her embarked marines where they conducted an important theater security exchange with the Sri Lankan Navy and Marine Corps that concentrated on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief missions. Also last year, for the first time, Sri Lanka sent two officers to participate in the RIMPAC 2016 exercise as observers. This is the world's largest maritime exercise and I am sure that the Sri Lankan officers gained much from the experience that they can share with their fellow Sri Lankan

military officers. Additionally, last year marked the restoration of IMET, which can only further deepen ties between our two militaries in the future. These are just a few of the examples of how far we have come in just a short while in terms of this vitally important strategic partnership. This is a long-term commitment and we look forward to the future and what will become many significant security contributions to the Indian Ocean Region from Sri Lanka.