

CGSS Interactive Series

15th November, 2017

Strategic Environments of South Asia/Indian Ocean Region:

Sri Lanka Perspective



Center for Global & Strategic Studies, Islamabad

Opening Remarks by Major General Syed Khalid Amir Jaffery HI(M), (Retd) – President CGSS

The Center for Global & Strategic Studies (CGSS) organized an Interactive Session on “Strategic Environment of South Asia/Indian Ocean Region: Sri Lankan Perspective” on 15th November 2017. The session was chaired by Major General Syed Khalid Amir Jaffery, HI (M), (Retd) – President CGSS. On the behalf of Centre for Global & Strategic Studies, he extended his warm welcome to the worthy participants for their active participation and offered special gratitude to



honourable guest speaker Admiral Dr. Jayanath Colombage - Former Naval Chief of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka for making his maiden visit to Pakistan and he also briefly introduced the decorated credentials of the Chief Guest.

In the opening remarks, Major General Syed Khalid Amir Jaffery, HI(M), (Retd) – President CGSS stated that Indian Ocean has gained tremendous importance over the years and has now become the most concerted area where global economic activity conjoined political interests of regional and global contending actors. In geostrategic aspect, chokepoints and waterways in the region holds immense significance for the rising nations of the world. This is why world’s major economic as well as political concentration has shifted towards Asia.

After brief remarks, Major General Syed Khalid Amir Jaffery HI(M), (Retd) – President CGSS invited Admiral Dr. Jayanath Colombage for the keynote session.

Admiral Dr. Jayanath Colombage

- The guest speaker thanked the Center for Global and Strategic Studies for inviting him and extending an opportunity to address the worthy participants on the topic of “Strategic Environment of South Asia/Indian Ocean Region: Sri Lankan Perspective”. He expressed his gratitude for being in Pakistan for the first time. He briefly enlightened the audience about his post-



retirement activities as former Naval Chief of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka. Admiral Dr. Jayanath Colombage runs a Think-tank in Colombo and frequently visits many countries to address the audience on maritime affairs regarding the South

Asian region. While expressing his views on the particular topic, Admiral Dr. Jayanath Colombage informed the audience that geographic and geostrategic significance of the Indian Ocean has increased the engagement of different regional and global actors in the Indian Ocean in persuasion of their subjective interests. This excessive engagement has further enhanced the complexities in the region due to clash of interest between the contending actors.



- However, he presented the Sri Lankan perspective in this interactive session as he believed it to be the most pertinent. He was of the opinion that current Strategic Environment can be described in six words such as:
 - Strategic Competition
 - Strategic Alliances
 - Strategic Dilemma

Strategic Competition

- Divulging into the concept of “Strategic Competition” in the Indian Ocean, he remarked that:
 - The Indian Ocean is geo-strategically, geo-politically and geo-economically important because of the contest of power domination and deterrence among the major global contending actors. In his opinion, the most significant event that took place in the Indian Ocean is the rise of China as a major power. Potentially, China is ranked as second largest economy in the world in terms of GDP.
 - The IMF Prediction for 2040 also portrays this notion as the Chinese economy is predicted to be the global leader. China - \$45 Trillion, the USA – \$39 Trillion and India -\$16 Trillion

- Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia is also expected to be within top 20 economies of the world.

- Admiral Dr. Jayanath Colombage also cited historical inferences of 19th and 20th Century as the global focus revolved around the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans. In the past, they were the key oceans, as world wars,



Industrial revolution and cold war took place in its waters while the Indian Ocean played a background or insignificant role. However, with the advent of the 21st century the Indian Ocean is becoming the key ocean with the Pacific Ocean owing to geostrategic and geo political reasons.

- He stated that the unipolar world led by the USA is changing rapidly with the rise of China and India. He further argued that both nations are competing to dominate the Indian Ocean. With increasing wealth and power, both powers are coming into contact. This is happening in the Indian Ocean and more specifically in South Asia.
- Admiral Dr. Jayanath Colombage also drew an interesting analogy of “Thucydides Trap” which pertains to existing superpower and emerging power while inferring to the Chinese and Indian competition in the Indian Ocean. In a reference to the mistrust between both countries, the speaker cited the 1962 war, border disputes and recent Doklam issue between China and India as the real contentious issues which carry historical baggage attached to it.
- The retired Sri Lankan Naval Chief observed that the Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean is a current phenomenon. Furthermore, initially Chinese entered the Indian Ocean in 2009, to counter the menace of piracy as Somalian armed pirates were continuously attacking merchant ships. He also highlighted that China has two all-weather friends in the Indian Ocean i.e. Pakistan and Sri Lanka for different reasons. Recalling the difficult times when Sri Lanka was embroiled with Tamil Tigers (LTTE), he

remarked that Sri Lanka took great pride in being the first and only country to defeat terrorism. This precedent is currently followed by Pakistan whose commendable efforts in combating defeating the menace of terrorism is highly remarkable and admirable.

- While recalling the history of insurgency in Sri Lanka, he remarked that joining the Sri Lankan naval service at a time when insurgency started in 1978 while his active service life was mostly subject to immense threats to his and family's lives. Notably, in this crucial time, Pakistan provided its support to Sri Lanka which made it possible to confront the threat posed by Tamil Tigers. The former naval chief went on to say that had it not been Pakistan's support, Sri Lanka would have lost to the terrorists resulting in the division of the country. In addition, China was among other such countries who

were crucial in supporting the Sri Lanka against the terrorism. It is a known fact to the world that India was the country that raised, armed and supported the Tamil Tigers. However, this



fallacious policy backfired after one of their Prime Minister was killed by these terrorists while many Indian soldiers were also brutally massacred. It was after these events that India stopped its support to these elements. Other countries like Russia, Israel and Ukraine were also crucial in winning the war over Tamil Tigers as provision of weapons was imperative to sustaining the war with terrorists. China also established a 'bonded Warehouse' of weapons in Colombo where it was convenient to buy weapons. At one moment, the country would lose 275 lives every month during the war but since the triumph over the terrorists, the casualties' rate is zero. Hence, Sri Lanka won the fight against one of the ruthless organization in the world.

- The speaker identified the sequence of events leading to the growing Chinese involvement in Sri Lanka. While highlighting post-insurgency circumstances, he pronounced that after winning the war, Sri Lanka was left alone by most of the western countries in aspect of financial assistance for rehabilitation and infrastructural development of the country. Although, India provided little help but it was mostly directed towards the Northern provinces. The country needed to develop the connectivity networks across the country through highways, port and airports. Most importantly, the foreign direct investment was badly needed and fortunately, that vacuum was filled by China with immense investment. Consequently, China became a top developing partner for Sri Lanka eclipsing India.
- The Chief Guest was of the opinion that China's presence in the Indian Ocean was suddenly felt by India, USA and Japan (the Trinity) as Chinese maritime infrastructure projects were taking place all around in the region such as Myanmar, Bangladesh,



Pakistan, Maldives and Sri Lanka. This increased presence by China was perceived as contrary to the strategic interests of these powers, hence efforts to push Sri Lanka away from China started taking place by the contending actors. However, Sri Lanka refused to do so and as a result; the regime change tactic was applied. The new government favoured by the trinity (India, US, Japan) criticized the Chinese influence in the beginning. However, Sri Lankan government had to turn back to China once again owing to failure by the Trinity to replace the mammoth investment portfolio

offered by China. This time Sri Lanka embraced a position of weakness as opposed to past position of strength in relation to its bargaining capabilities and leverage over China.

- The Chief Guest expressed displeasure at the dwindling position of Sri Lankan economy which stands at 5th position in SAARC countries due to enduring the effects of the major strategic competition in the Indian Ocean. In his opinion, unfortunately, his country is caught up in between the strategic competition of two contending powers, owing to respective dominance in the region.
- The Former Naval Chief asserted that the Indian Ocean is a heavily militarized zone by presenting the factual data of visiting naval warships of different nations to Sri Lanka from 2009-2017. These figures are:
 - India- 82
 - Pakistan- 24
 - Japan- 67
 - Bangladesh- 23
 - China -31
 - USA- 18
 - Russia- 26
- The speaker also expressed bewilderment that Japan secures the second position which shows the level of interest in the Indian Ocean. It is pertinent to mention that such data may not reflect a scientific conclusion but it is showing the fact that that is present in the Indian Ocean. He also pointed that this presence shows the level of interest in the Indian Ocean in persuasion of their interests.



Strategic Alliances

- While highlighting aspects of strategic alliances in the Indian Ocean, the worthy speaker was of the view that recently three significant events took place, such as:
 - Chinese Communist party 19th congress speech President Xi Jinping expressed his desire to make China a great power.
 - Japan's PM Abe winning a landslide election. He has a vision for expansion in the Indian Ocean; therefore, his re-election has enforced his conviction.
 - US Secretary of State Mr Tillerson's speech in Washington said that:
 - China is the common adversary for USA and India. USA and India, two great democracies should have two great militaries
 - India, USA strategic partnership for the next 100 years.
- If India used this kind strong tone, it would have been acceptable owing to the historical rivalry; however, these remarks coming from Washington has immense significance.
- It is evident that a Maritime Trinity is developing Indian Ocean featuring India, USA and Japan
- Admiral Dr. Jayanath Colombage was of the opinion that India was maritime blind until the Mumbai incident and China's build-up in the Indian Ocean.
- India undertook drastic new strategic initiatives for collaboration after the election of Narendra Modi. These steps include
 - Neighbourhood first policy enacted Look/Act East initiatives. After election, Modi visited Sri Lanka.
 - Enacting 'Security and Growth for All in the Region' (SAGAR) by India
 - India and Japan are collaborating on Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC). It may be an effort to counter the China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Sri Lanka is in dilemma whether to choose the BRI or the AAGC.
 - In the current geostrategic environment, a nexus of Afghanistan, India, and Iran is building up. The increased importance of Sri Lanka has put us in spot of a dilemma to choose one over another.

- Currently, various countries have provided assistance by Gifting of Warships to Sri Lanka. These Include:
 - 02 Advanced Offshore Patrol Vessel(AOPV) and Offshore Patrol Vessel (OPV) from India
 - 03 AOPV+02 OPV'S from Japan
 - 01 Coast Guard Cutter from USA
- While explaining current Sri Lankan geostrategic posture in the Indian Ocean, the former Sri Lankan naval chief metaphorically drew analogy of the circumstances with 'Pretty Girl Syndrome' which infers the presence of many opportunities but difficulty in choosing one.
- Shedding light on the regional cooperation and its future, he commented that SAARC is not moving forward, mainly due to the rivalry between India and Pakistan. He expressed his regret on the postponing of 19th Summit of SAARC in Islamabad due to India's lobbying. He was of the opinion that South Asia is the least connected region in the world.
- BIMSTEC is the new regional cooperation framework which is focusing on connectivity, economic development and even maritime security. India and Japan are keen that BIMSTEC move forward



Strategic Dilemma

- Admiral Dr. Jayanath Colombage proceeded to his third portion of the speech regarding 'Strategic Dilemma' in the Indian Ocean.
- The former naval chief mentioned that recently India sent a shipment to Afghanistan through Chabahar bypassing Pakistan. In this regard, he foresees the formation of new

regional alignments such as Iran Afghanistan and India are emerging with counter alliances of Russia, China and Pakistan on the other end. The US opposes Iran which and such a situation presents a dilemma for future cooperation as an allied countries.

- Admiral Dr. Jayanath Colombage was of the opinion that Sri Lanka cannot make decisions based on economic aspect of the projects offered to the region as strategic Considerations of major powers is also observed which puts the Island country in a spot of having to choose one over another.
- He stated that Major power rivalry has led to an “Undeclared Maritime Cold War” in the Indian Ocean. Furthermore, it is also important to note that it is heavily militarized and nuclearized.
- He further highlighted the plight of poor in the region by quoting figures that 40 percent of South Asia lives under poverty line which needs conscious attention by the regional countries in a combined effort.

Way Forward

- Admiral Dr. Jayanath Colombage presented his way forward on the pertaining situation of the South Asia. He concludes that there is a need to create trust between states and overcome the ‘trust deficiency’.
- Furthermore, it is imperative that regional countries in South Asia should overcome their differences in order to evolve a new security architecture. Admiral Dr. Jayanath Colombage cited Sri Lankan PM who emphasized the need for ‘New Indian Ocean Order’. The former naval chief believes such a mechanism may be difficult to develop on land, however, a maritime security agreement is possible. These steps are very vital to world economy as the Indian Ocean will prove to be the lifeline of the world in future.
- There should be no hegemony by a single or multiple countries over the Indian Ocean while preference should be given to based maritime order which should be inclusive of all the related countries.
- In connection with his earlier proposal, Admiral Dr. Jayanath Colombage suggested that regional countries may also contemplate to utilize existing maritime orders such as ‘The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)’ and ‘Indian Ocean Naval Symposium.’

However, he repeated his earlier suggestion of inclusiveness for all countries and expressed the need to take Pakistan on board.

- The keynote speaker concluded his speech by expressing his desire that a united South Asia will emerge overcoming all the outstanding issues for the common good of the region and its people.



Question and Answer Session

Question #1: There are a number of Islands and Archipelagos in the vicinity of Sri Lanka such as the Maldives, Tim Garcia, and Nicobar and others. How do you view these islands and what kind of relationship do Sri Lanka have with these Islands? **(Brigadier Bilal (Retd))**



Answer: The Indian Ocean can be divided into the Western Indian Ocean, Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal. The Strait of Hormuz, Malacca Strait and the islands are equally important to Sri Lanka. He enlightened the audience that there are over a thousand islands near the vicinity of Sri Lanka which has immense importance due to geostrategic concerns. He cited examples of Diego Garcia as one of those islands which is under US control and gives the Americans a residential power in the Indian Ocean. Furthermore, the eastern Indian Andaman Nicobar islands are under Indian control. Additionally, it is observed that these islands are near South East Asia rather than South Asia due to which an Indian presence in near vitally important Strait of Malacca gives it immense leverage. Therefore, underscoring the critical importance of the Islands, Admiral Dr. Jayanath Colombage believes Sri Lanka attaches great importance to these Islands. Admiral Dr. Jayanath Colombage was of the view that Islands near Sri Lanka are can be beneficial if maritime domain awareness can be activated across the Indian Ocean. He particularly mentioned maritime domain awareness agreement between Sri Lanka, Maldives and India. Furthermore, he briefed the audience about India's plans to take Mauritius and Seychelles on board too. According to Admiral Dr. Jayanath Colombage, to make the maritime domain awareness mechanism more comprehensive, countries on the Bay of Bengal like Thailand, Myanmar and Bangladesh may also be added to the list to cover the whole area. Such a mechanism will have a more long-lasting effect. While redirecting his answer to the question, Admiral Dr. Jayanath Colombage re-iterated his belief that nearby islands may contribute to the well-being of Sri Lanka and the region through such initiatives.

Question #2: South Asia is undergoing a period of rising extremism. The tragic events in Myanmar is an example of these tendencies. However, the question pertains to the safety of Muslim community in Sri Lanka and their safety situation as Sri Lanka is a majority Buddhist country. As the operation against Tamil Tigers was tailored with religious insinuations against Tamil Tigers from clergy, can we expect



a repeat of same religious rhetoric against the Muslims of Sri Lanka? **(Anees Ali Shah (National Defence University, Islamabad))**

Answer: The Chief Guest replied to the question by stating that there is a clear distinction between the Myanmar and Sri Lanka situation. He remarked that Sri Lanka's majority Buddhist community is peaceful, however, there may be some elements within Buddhist clergy who are extremist. These elements are rejected by the masses in majority as these narrow-minded elements have no place in Sri Lankan society. He was of the view that like most big religions, Buddhism is also a peaceful and tolerant religion. Furthermore, he dispelled the notion of religious extremism in Sri Lanka citing his very own example as a Christian Sri Lankan having faced no such religious bias in elevation to the highest post of naval chief of Sri Lanka. He recalled the last days of insurgency where Sri Lankan soldiers were faced with massive 300,000 internal refugees after the end of war. He admired the role of Sri Lankan army in taking care of those displaced people with compassion and acting professionally. Admiral Dr. Jayanath Colombage remarked that after the war, there were 17000 hardened militants in those 300,000 refugees, but were never subjected to revenge. Furthermore, these elements were transferred to de-radicalization centres where they came back as peaceful citizens while no terrorist incident is recorded relating to these people. The Chief Guest was of the view that Buddhism as a religion never teaches violence and condemned the brutalities committed by such elements. He further strengthened his argument by saying that because of the bad actions of few people we cannot blame the entire population. Similarly, extremist using Islamic name does not mean that Islam is an intolerant religion.

Question # 3: In the recent few months, there seem to be conflicting narratives in State Department and Pentagon positions regarding CPEC. The State Department seems to favour while the Pentagon is giving statements against it due to its policy of containing the Chinese influence. Do you see any policy coordination in future or will it follow the same course as currently? **(Vice Admiral Ahmed Tasneem (Retd), (Pakistan Navy))**



Answer: The Chief Guest expressed his views while replying to the question that one should not worry about the present contradictory statements coming from Washington and wait for the consensus policy of US regarding CPEC. Furthermore, the speaker iterated his belief that South Asia must have its own consensus regarding the subject and effort should be made to remove the mistrust among the regional nations to undermine the efforts of intervening foreign powers in our own matters. He went on to focusing on South Asian unity approach by remarking that as long as we are divisive, there is a chance of inviting foreign meddling even in our own internal affairs which is contradictory to the interests of the region. Highlighting the importance of CPEC, he was of the opinion that Pakistan and China have worked diligently on this project, therefore, it is imperative that Pakistan may benefit from this project. Furthermore, he expressed the hope that for sustaining Pakistan's economy, industrialization near the Gwadar port will also take place rather than merely suing the port as a logistical hub. Identifying positive impacts of CPEC, the speaker remarked that Pakistan has already become the number two economy in South Asia which is a positive sign in the right direction.

Question #4: My question is pertinent to the importance of Indian Ocean which is being nuclearized by India. Recently in Shangri-La conference, US secretary of Defence Ash Carter offered an alliance to the states in the Indian Ocean with invitation to other countries who are embroiled in contentious island issues with China. This comment was a clear warning to China. What will be your response to the possibility of NATO styled alliance in the region led by India with the backing of the US? **(Brigadier Said Nazir (Institute of Policy Studies, Islamabad))**



Answer: The chief guest reflected on the question by saying that the Indian Ocean is the lifeline of the world and has a pivotal role regarding the world trade as 70 percent of the energy supplies, 50 percent of the world containers and 35 percent of the bulk cargo flows across the Indian Ocean. On the possible alignments of countries to counter China, he said that Japan, India and the US are the players who may challenge the Chinese influence in the region. Furthermore, Australia is also a prospective partner; however, it is indecisive owing to huge trade with China with repercussions to its economy in case of strained ties with China. Commenting on the alliances in the Indian Ocean, the former Sri Lankan Naval chief was of the opinion that India is lagging behind in the formation any such alliance too as they are not keen to surrender their area of influence to any country including the other partners such as Japan and the US. Therefore, a NATO styled alliance is not expected to evolve. In addition to that, he remarked that the importance of China as major power cannot be neglected in the Indian Ocean. The speaker indulged in the topic of maritime pollution affecting the bio-diversity of the Indian and expects combined efforts by the regional countries. He was of the opinion that China should be taken on-board in the future maritime framework for collaborative, sustainable and secure Indian Ocean. Furthermore, South China Sea issue should be isolated from Indian Ocean as the Chinese have not asserted in the Indian Ocean, unlike South China Sea.

Question #5:

- a) The Europeans call themselves Europeans, Africans call themselves African then why can we not call ourselves South Asians. I want to know your views as Sri Lankan to shed some light on the stumbling blocks in this regard?
- b) What are the various steps that can be taken to improve the political, defence and socio-economic ties between Pakistan and Sri Lanka? (**Rear Admiral Hassan Asif**)



Answer: The Chief Guest responded by enumerating various reasons such as the size and difference in ideology and historical bitterness due to which South Asians don't recognize themselves with a shared identity. He also cited the rivalry between Pakistan and India pertaining to Kashmir and Line of Control as the chief cause of mistrust in the region. He

lamented the fact that due to such attitude, we have invited foreign meddling in our region and stressed the need for mutual free trade agreements and economic ties in the region rather than looking outwards. He mentioned the fundamental reason for the failure of SAARC as the charter prohibits addressing the crucial contentious issues.

The defence cooperation between Pakistan and Sri Lanka is quite extensive ranging from exchanges as well as training of military officers from both sides in Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Furthermore, he augmented the fact that Sri Lanka also took part in “Aman Naval Exercise” in Karachi. In addition to that, he pointed towards a free trade agreement between Pakistan and Sri Lanka, although it is still waiting to be implemented in a meaningful manner to prosper both countries. In the context of SAARC failure, he stressed the need for efforts to invigorate the bilateral cooperation which has immense potential.

Question # 6:

a) Pakistan has been a part of Task Force 150 since 2009 to counter the threat of piracy while India has never opted for joining such mechanism and has been acting as an independent employer owing to concerns Pakistan’s inclusion in this body. What are your views in this regard?



b) In the keynote session it was mentioned that Australia has not decided to side with any side in the competition of Indian Ocean, however, it is also a fact that Australia is very much a part of western or US Asia Balance strategy along with India. What is your views regarding this notion?

c) Sri Lanka is also a part of China’s old friend and part of string of pearls strategy, then what compulsions were faced or currently being confronted by Sri Lana in order to make a clear decision on joining the CPEC with respect to India? **(Rear Admiral Mukhtar Khan HI(M))**

Answer: The former naval chief replied that Indian non-participation in Task Force 150 is related to its disapproval of Pakistani leadership in the maritime framework owing to rotation of leadership rule. Furthermore, he was of the opinion that the Task Force was still effective in achieving its objectives.

In connection with second part of the question, he reiterated the fact that Australia has so far not joined any alliance in the Indian Ocean owing to growing ties with China which amounts to 30 percent of its total trade. Hence, it is highly unlikely for Australia to join alliances in the Indian Ocean. In addition to that, Australia refrained from participating in Malabar (Japan-US-India) exercises owing to its neutral stance. Conversely, Australia's stated policy is to maintain a peaceful and stable Indian Ocean which echoes its policy of collaboration with regional countries without confronting China.

The Chief Guest expressed his reservation on the word "String of Pearls" and attributed it the invention of the West while claiming that Sri Lanka is not a part of any such policy. He emphasized the importance of Sri Lanka as close to the busiest commercial naval lanes in the world and stated that it has all the required elements to become a regional 'maritime hub' such as Dubai and Singapore. He augmented the notion that Sri Lanka has vital geostrategic position and deep sea port which has no parallel in the region.

Sri Lanka has decided to collaborate with China owing to its financial standing, the capacity and capability to undertake the aspirations of Sri Lanka to become a "maritime hub. However, the distinguished Chief Guest added that cooperation with China does not mean that Sri Lanka may allow its ports and land to be used against India. The predicament of any such move is based on the logic that 72 % of cargo from southern India is processed through Sri Lankan port owing to lack of deep seaports in Southern India. On a lighter note Admiral Dr. Jayanath Colombage remarked that out of 72% Indian cargo containers at Colombo terminal is handled by "China container terminal".

Remarks by Mr. Shams-ul-Mulk (Former Chairman WAPDA)

Mr Shams-ul-Mulk expressed his gratitude towards former Sri Lankan naval chief on coming to Islamabad and addressing the audience on such important topic. He commended the chief guest on his comprehensive presentation and remarked that it is an honour to meet such a distinguished sailor belonging to South Asia. Commenting the growing ties between Pakistan and Sri Lanka, he remarked that both countries always enjoyed cordial relations and they have grown from strength to strength over the period of time.



**Concluding Remarks by Major General Syed Khalid Amir Jaffery HI (M), (Retd) – President
Center for Global & Strategic Studies**

Major General Syed Khalid Amir Jaffery HI(M), (Retd) – President CGSS concluded the session by extending his special gratitude to the worthy chief guest on enlightening the participants about the topic “Strategic Environment of South Asia/Indian Ocean Region: Sri Lankan Perspective”. Furthermore, he also thanked the participants who had taken out their time. A souvenir was also presented to Admiral Dr. Jayanath Colombage on behalf of Center for Global and Strategic Studies and concluded the session.

