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SAGALA RATNAYAKA

CHIEF OF STAFF TO THE PRESIDENT AND NATIONAL SECURITY ADVISOR, PRESIDENT’S OFFICE, SRI LANKA
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Let me now quickly turn to our next speaker, Sri Lanka’s National Security Advisor and Chief of Staff to the President, Sagala Ratnayaka. A Royal College Columbo graduate, Sagala Ratnayaka entered politics in 1999, has served as the Chief of Staff to the Prime Minister, been a cabinet minister and a year ago was appointed by President Ranil Wickremesinghe as Chief of Staff as well as National Security Advisor in the President’s Office, two full-time jobs. So I’m delighted that he’s had the time to come to us in Singapore. National Security Advisor.

Sagala Ratnayaka, Chief of Staff to the President and National Security Advisor, President’s Office, Sri Lanka

Thank you, Mr Chaudhury, and thank you to the IISS and the government of Singapore for having us here at this amazing event. This is my first appearance at it and it’s been quite an experience. Thank you for the opportunity also to share some thoughts on ‘Defence Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region’ within this prestigious environment of the Shangri-La Dialogue, 20th Asia Security Summit.

Geographically the Indian Ocean region appears to be a largely disaggregated oceanic and littoral zone, in fact more in line with a collection of sub-regions than a coherent single region. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), in its Outlook on the Indo-Pacific Region, emphasises that while the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean are two different oceans, distinct from one another, they are interconnected, now dubbed as the Indo-Pacific region.

The Indian Ocean region has transformed from a mere passage of maritime trade to a major global nexus of players on security, strategic, economic, environmental and social issues. Expectedly, the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean has breached its limits with external major powers jockeying for presence and supremacy in the region, whose increasing struggle is to sustain a military presence near the key choke points of the trade routes, seemingly to protect the sea lines of communications.

It would be relevant to examine the presence of the big powers in the region. The intense upsurge in strategic interest in the area defined as the Indo-Pacific is also linked to the global rise of China. The big-power competition between US and China, compelling India to checkmate Sino moves, has the relatively peaceful Indian Ocean region metamorphosing into a key arena of strategic power and political play. A stable Indian Ocean is paramount for India’s security environment. The US has relegated the Indian Ocean to support India’s role as a net security provider.

National interests of states drive the international system. For effective regional defence cooperation, there needs to be a strong sense that commonly held interests are under threat, at risk or vulnerable with the geostrategic environment being at its core. While cooperating on threats to law and order at sea being paramount in defence cooperation in the Indian Ocean region, there are the threats by non-state actors.

The growing interest by the European and Middle Eastern nations in the Indian Ocean is a positive development. However, it is important to ensure that this does not lead to increased tensions among the powers in the region. Therefore, it is crucial for all stakeholders in the Indian Ocean region to prioritise a constructive dialogue in the pursuit of shared interests. Upholding open lines of
communication, adhering to multilaterally agreed rules based on the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and utilising multilateral and bilateral frameworks can work towards ensuring stability in the region. Adhering to such prescriptions could thwart possible moves in the guise of cooperation by extra-regional security alliances.

Various permutations of partnerships in the Indo-Pacific, including Australia, India, Japan, France, UK and US, form a core of states with capable navies based on shared threat perceptions on China. In this context the Quad and AUKUS come to mind. While these platforms serve as mechanisms for fostering cooperation, the notion of their transformation into military alliances raises concerns within the region. In particular, AUKUS brings forth special concerns regarding nuclear proliferation and other sensitive areas of security cooperation.

As we navigate these intricate waters it is crucial to engage in open discussions that address these concerns. Moving from aspirations for cooperation towards effective action is enormously challenging in the Indian Ocean due to the absence of a region-wide security architecture, common regional identity or accepted regional leadership frameworks.

For successful defence cooperation we should also seek to align with and support existing regional frameworks and initiatives. The Indo-Pacific region already has deliberative mechanisms to advance common defence-related goals in the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and the ASEAN Regional Forum. Additionally, the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific seeks to lead the shaping of the economic and security architecture in Southeast Asia, as well as the wider Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean regions. This is a much-needed collective leadership to evolve a security and economic architecture for the Indian Ocean region. These two ASEAN mechanisms could be cooperative models to be pursued for the region.

We also have the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), which spans from western Australia to South Africa and has maritime safety and security as a priority area of focus. This mechanism would be an obvious choice for initiating discussions and related action at a politically high level. A political fillip is important for progressing the already agreed work plan. The inclusion of dialogue partners for this initiative could be appropriate. Sri Lanka will assume the Chair of IORA in the latter part of this year, when it could be pursued.

It is observed that the Indian Ocean itself is largely free of conflicts and disputes. However, the prism of the Indo-Pacific tensions tend to reflect into the Indian Ocean region. Therefore, it is imperative to keep the big-power rivalry and external conflicts out of the Indian Ocean. Sri Lanka upholds a neutral position of abstaining from military alliances and aspires for the Indian Ocean to be devoid of conflict. In fact, back in 1971 Sri Lanka was successful in having the UN General Assembly declare the Indian Ocean together with the airspace a ‘Zone of Peace’ for all time. This has contributed to the freedom-of-navigation and -overflight aspects.

The significant challenge before us is the need to recognise and integrate the interests and involvement of regional and extra-regional power combinations. It would be sensible and in the best interests of one and all that the major powers address their military interests away from the region to

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avoid a second cold war with an Asian presence on one side descending on the international system. Thank you.

Rahul Roy-Chaudhury, Senior Fellow for South and Central Asian Defence, Strategy and Diplomacy, IISS

Thank you very much, including for mentioning China by name for the first time in the panel. I’m sure we will come back to that during the Q&A session.