

Statement

by

Ambassador Rajiv K. Bhatia

Director General, ICWA

at

Indian Ocean Dialogue

Session I

on

“Indian Ocean Region – Growing Geostrategic Salience”

at

Cochin, Kerala

6 September 2014

I address you as a member of India's vibrant strategic community which is deeply interested in matters maritime. Our institution, the Indian Council of World Affairs, has been quite active in this domain.

In India's strategic thinking a notion like 'sea blindness' has no place whatsoever today. Indeed, this Dialogue is a testimony to it. We begin from the fundamental perception that was articulated well by our first prime minister who observed in 1948 that "anything that happens in the whole of the Indian Ocean affects and is affected by India. It simply cannot help it."

It is customary to begin our presentations on Indian Ocean by recalling facts and figures that demonstrate its growing importance for trade, transit, energy security and economic development. I shall skip this ritual before this expert audience.

Therefore, one may refer straight away to the key trends which offer answers, or at least clues, to the two questions raised in the Concept Paper: 'What are the current contours of the geopolitics in the region?' and 'What are the prime drivers of "political turbulence" in the region?'

At least **five key trends** may be identified in this context.

Firstly, the phrase – 'the region' – should be defined with some degree of clarity. Indian Ocean region is, of course, a fairly well-defined area geographically, but its geopolitical dimensions have been changing. The region's linkage with the Pacific Ocean region has been gaining acceptance. Even though a concept such as "Indo-Pacific" is yet to win consensus, it has triggered much debate. The essential point is that from the Indian perspective the entire region stretching from the Suez Canal to the Sea of Japan and Australia is one large seamless canvas that has to be taken into consideration, regardless of whether one is engaged in policy research, strategic thinking or policy formulation. The mention of "the inter-connected Asia, Pacific and Indian Ocean Regions" in the Tokyo Declaration of 1 September 2014 assumes special significance.

Secondly, our strategic analysts consider security and development as twins; they are inextricably connected; one is unthinkable without the other. The central leitmotif of the Indian government is to secure all-round economic development of our nation and region. This entails security of a broader kind, covering physical, energy, economic, social and other facets of human and societal existence. There is evidence of greater urgency and stronger commitment today.

Thirdly, parts of the Indian Ocean region are stamped today by four Ts, namely Turbulence, Turmoil, Tensions, and Transitions. In the hinterland, numerous polities stand fractured such as Libya, Egypt, Somalia, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, among others. The curse of violent sectarianism, extremism and terrorism has been taking a heavy toll. On the sea, activities of pirates, terrorists and other unlawful elements continue to cause havoc, despite signs of rising international cooperation. We then have to factor in the implications and impact of other non-traditional threats, including natural disasters and climate change.

Fourthly, maritime rivalries and intensification of strategic competition among traditional powers (e.g. NATO powers) and others such as Russia, China, Japan and India is a fact of life in the 21st century. This phenomenon is marked by patterns of selective cooperation, with the underlying goal being to avoid confrontation and conflict.

Robert. D. Kaplan is right in asserting that the Indian Ocean is not just a geographic feature but also “an idea.” He explains: “It combines the centrality of Islam with global energy politics and the rise of India and China to reveal a multi-layered multipolar world.” However, it is difficult to accept his conclusion that “a dynamic great-power rivalry” between India and China is underway in the Indian Ocean waters where the US will serve as “a stabilising power.” In our view, the contours of geopolitics in the region are far more complex and dynamic, and also susceptible to other interpretations. Experts assembled here will no doubt help us to gain new insights and thus contribute to better mutual understanding.

Fifthly, an important intellectual trend is that analysing geopolitics is not enough. What should we do with this analysis? The answer perhaps is that the region, above all, needs to support all those forces and factors that favour stability, security, peace, economic development

and prosperity. We need to ponder collectively as to how this goal – this challenge – should be addressed.

This brings us to the third question in the Concept Paper: ‘What are the hindrances in enhancing cooperation within the Indian Ocean Region?’ My response is that we need to re-visit our mindset. We talk a lot about the Indian Ocean, but we do not yet consider ourselves as the Indian Ocean community.

Happily some progress has occurred concerning our institution under the chairmanship of India and Australia. Between Bengaluru and Perth Meetings of the Foreign Ministers, IOR-ARC, now IORA, has begun to move forward, befitting the needs of the 21st century. Of the various proposals being pursued, may I recommend that special consideration should be accorded to strengthening maritime security and to deepening economic cooperation.

Finally, some thought should also be given to reforming our regional architecture. In this domain, the contrast between the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and the East Asia Summit Region (EASR) is stark: the former has too little of Pan-region architecture for dialogue, interaction and cooperation. Should we, therefore, not think in terms of elevating IORA to the summit level? We look forward to hearing your views on this and many other issues.

Thank you very much for attention.
