

Inaugural Address

by

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at

International Conference

on

“New Directions in Indian Ocean Studies”

at

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It is a privilege to participate in this important International Conference on a theme that is growing in its scope, impact and relevance day by day. The well-designed intellectual event is the fruit of collaboration between Osmania University Centre for International Programmes (OUCIP) and Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA) as well as representatives of other institutions and eminent scholars who are assembled here today.

2. I am grateful to have been asked to deliver the Inaugural Address. What I propose to do, at this early stage of our conference, is to present an Indian perspective, from the IR point of view, on the changing power dynamics in the Indian Ocean. I would argue that institutions and scholar need to devote more, not less, time, effort and resources to the study of issues pertaining to the Indian Ocean.

OUCIP's Approach

3. But, let me first congratulate OUCIP for conceptualizing this conference and translating an interesting idea into a tangible reality. Even a casual glance at the elaborate programme will make it clear that a thoroughly multi-disciplinary approach has been devised in order to reflect on the chosen theme from multiple angles. Consequently, we shall have expert presentations and dialogues on an array of subjects covering the cultural dynamics; history and archeology; science and technology; environment and climate change; coastal communities; indigenous peoples and small islands; security concerns, changing power relationships and emerging geopolitics; Diasproic communities; literature, culture and recreation; and an informed peep into the future with a focus on how to connect the “roots with routes.”

4. No single person or institution can hope to acquire complete knowledge of this multi-faceted subject. Therefore, this collective endeavour, anchored in a genuine desire to share and to give and take, promises to be beneficial to all of us in our different ventures.

ICWA's Initiatives

5. ICWA, the front-ranking and oldest foreign policy think-tank in this country, has been actively engaged in both research and outreach, with the aim to unveil and showcase the rising importance of Indian Ocean in India's scheme of things. Of a myriad of our activities, three deserve a brief mention here. Firstly, in March 2013, we hosted an international conference on 'Geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific Region: Asian Perspectives', which helped experts to examine how the new construct itself was reflective of the changing mindsets.

6. The second initiative was to organize in September 2013 a Track-1.5 Trilateral Dialogue on Indian Ocean (TDIO), involving India, Australia and Indonesia which were then the present and future chairs of the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IORARC), later known as Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). Two rounds hosted by ICWA and the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) have already taken place and the third session, to be hosted by Indonesia, will follow in due course. The essential take-away from TDIO has been that resident powers need to assume a leadership role in the Indian Ocean through enhanced dialogue, understanding and cooperation among themselves before these features could be consolidated at the pan-regional level. As to the third initiative, it was, in fact, taken by the Ministry of External Affairs and Observer Research Foundation (ORF) with which we were closely associated. This resulted in the first meeting of the Indian Ocean Dialogue in Kochi in September 2014, a highly innovative event. Its outcome document, known as 'Kochi Consensus', remains relevant to our deliberations here today.

Indian Perspective

7. Indian Ocean is the only ocean in the world, named after a country. Barring a minority, most informed Indians do not regard the Indian Ocean as 'India's ocean' or 'India's lake'. But they do want to see it as a region of peace and security that promotes every nation's development and prosperity through increased partnership and collaboration. In the quest for achieving these goals, India visualizes a special role for itself

as a bridge, a natural leader, a premier security provider and a nation instinctively opposed to domination of the region by non-littoral states.

8. The Indian Ocean region has been at the centre of some of the oldest civilizations and indeed recorded human history. In the 21st century, looking at the emerging geopolitics and geo-economics of the world, the Indian Ocean has assumed greater salience as power shifts from the west and to the east, as the dependence of Asia's majors – China, India, Japan – on trade and energy supplies from the heart of the Indian Ocean increases, as power conflicts and competition sharpen, and as non-traditional challenges to security ranging from piracy, terrorism and violent extremism to natural disasters, climate change and calls for 'blue economy' rise. Maritime disputes among nations, freedom of navigation, safety of sea lines of communications and the broad domain of maritime security for have all engaged the attention of policy makers in an unprecedented manner. This certainly is the case with India.

9. Hence, happily, no one talks about 'sea-blindness' afflicting the Indian establishment any more. On the contrary, we seem to be guided by the notion that whatever happens in the Indian Ocean impacts India directly and deeply. It is, therefore, incumbent on us to monitor and mould developments in the region to the possible extent.

10. In this context, I wish to highlight three important developments concerning the geopolitical facets.

11. Firstly, collaboration-cum-competition that defines the role of US, India, and China in the Indian Ocean region needs to be studied with due care. The announcement of 'Joint Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region' at the end of President Obama's recent visit to India is of immense importance. It portrays the US-India partnership as "indispensable" and refers to several specific areas of cooperation that may be further developed in future.

12. Secondly, India's response to the new initiatives by China such as BCIM-Economic Corridor and Maritime Silk Route (MSR) should be analyzed closely. On the first proposal, India is already engaged positively, though somewhat cautiously, whereas on the second proposal, New Delhi is yet to take a clear stand. Whether this position evolves further during Prime Minister Modi's forthcoming visit to China, would be worth watching.

13. Thirdly, India is taking its own initiatives concerning the Indian Ocean. The forthcoming voyage of Prime Minister Modi next month to Sri Lanka, Maldives, Mauritius, and Seychelles will be a unique endeavour to interact with four of our most important Indian Ocean neighbours. It is expected that increased political attention, backed by a higher level of economic, cultural and defense cooperation with these four countries, will be of considerable benefit to them as well as India. In this regard media has drawn attention to the Project Mausam. This is essentially a soft power project, designed to strengthen cultural and commercial links and increase awareness among littoral states of the Indian Ocean, with a focus on India's pivotal role through history. Whether it may have a strategic dimension added to it should be discussed at this conference.

Conclusion

14. Experts on IOR-ARC/ IORA share the view that this institution has not become a strong and vibrant one due to the absence a spirit of solidarity and identity among littoral nations of the Indian Ocean. A sense of community needs to be nurtured. This is why the 'Kochi Consensus', to which I made a reference earlier, recommended: "They (i.e. participants) affirmed that the strategic and foreign policy communities as well as civil society groups must actively contribute to the emergence of a vibrant Indian Ocean community engaged in open-ended regionalism."

15. I am confident that this international conference, examining developments in the Indian Ocean from the prism of past, present and future and outlining new directions in IO studies, will contribute handsomely to increasing the awareness of an Indian Ocean community.
