

**Paper Delivered by Rear Admiral SMB Weerasekara, Deputy Chief of Staff  
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Good morning, Chiefs of Naval Staffs and other naval officers of friendly navies, Commander of the Sri Lanka Navy and my colleagues, Ladies and gentlemen, first of all I would like to offer my sincere thanks to the Admiral Gillier for his kind words of introduction. Secondly I must say that it is indeed a privilege to address such an august gathering. Having listened to the two eminent speakers before me, I am a bit daunted whether my effort would be akin to reinventing the wheel, but shall sail nevertheless on the planned passage.

**INTRODUCTION**

Concern over Sea lane and choke point security is one that any maritime nation cannot ignore in this day. Inter dependence between nations for the smooth movement of global maritime trade cannot be denied, disruption of which will affect all nations and could be critical to some.

For this reason it is paramount that the maritime community is prepared to meet any contingency that may arise from these vital sea lanes, chokepoints and narrow seas coming under threat or siege.

Potential threats to sea lane trade security could emanate from an ambitious state in a conventional manner or from a non state actor in an irregular fashion. As most maritime forces are prepared, trained and geared to meet the conventional threat, which is reasonable, most tend to play down the threat posed by non state actors and treat it as a mild irritant. This approach in the present day maritime environment may be foolhardy and one may not realize how menacing irregular warfare at sea could turn out to be, if unchecked.

We in Sri Lanka have experienced the effects of irregular warfare in the maritime domain and learnt bitter lessons. The Sri Lanka Navy evolved with the threat to overtake and overwhelm it, by a radical change in its inventory, attitude, the way it trained and the way it fought.

This experience brought to light the “Achilles heel” of maritime forces when forced to fight in the littorals and the loopholes in maritime law, when faced with the threat posed by non state actors operating in the high seas as well.

What I Intend focusing on – is the threat to maritime security that could originate from the littorals. This may question the effectiveness of present day navies that yet believe that the blue water force will do. I will be dealing with this subject from a Sri Lankan perspective drawing from the experience of the Sri Lanka Navy over the last 30 years of irregular combat at sea.

The contents of the paper will touch upon, Non state and transnational threats, Terrorism and the Sea, Threat in the Littorals, Innovative and Elusive FOE, Evolving tactics, are we prepared? A new approach.

### **NON STATE AND TRANSNATIONAL THREATS**

Firstly, it is imperative that we understand our common enemy which more often than not will be terrorist groups and international organized crime networks - in other words violent non state actors. The challenge to nation states being that the violence perpetrated by a majority of these violent groups amounts to pure terrorism and what makes it frightening is that these violent factions have greater access to lethal weaponry and advanced off the shelf technologies, than ever before, giving them a more or less an equal fighting potential in the littoral battle space.

It is however unfortunate to note that, many of these violent non state actors are protected at times, directly or indirectly, wittingly or unwittingly by nation states, which is a crucial and necessary factor for violent groups that choose to use the maritime domain for their macabre purposes.

At the other end of the scale are the liberal states that choose to turn a Nelsonian eye to activities of these groups, with the "End Victim Syndrome" kicking in.

If we are to suppress these violent forces at sea, we need to put aside our differences and combat maritime threats as one cohesive international force, with global maritime security in mind. This will not leave room for double standards and any leeway for these destructive elements to maneuver unchecked – this is the most effective counter against this threat.

This achieved, we need to be able to break free of our shackles of conventional ideas and be capable of thinking out of the box, horizontally and between boxes, to keep adversaries on the run, isolate the violent group and eradicate terrorism. To this end flexibility and innovation will maintain the initiative of the counter force.

### **TERRORISM AND THE SEA**

Some believe that terrorists can achieve little by venturing out to sea, and if they do, their main motive is logistics and transport. This is not always true, as the aim of these groups are to make a stronger statement. Others are of the opinion that use of the maritime domain by a terrorist group will prove futile and therefore will remain their last option. Here too it is not a choice, but how resourceful, fiscally strong and specialized that particular group is, that opens the option. Above all, it is the geographical location and its value to the global community or the affected state that dictates the use of the maritime environment by a violent non state actor.

The raison d'être for the low frequency of maritime terrorism is that it requires so much more to be effective, and it is only a strong group that will dare to use it, like using the air for example. But be assured

all violent groups have considered the option and will use it in time. The classic examples are 9/11 and the 26/11 attacks.

Weak terrorists groups generally avoid the sea since;-

The risk involved is high in comparison to the returns, basically a low reward ratio. The initial expense in acquisition and subsequent maintenance and concealment of assets are difficult. Also the necessity of safe harbours or secure launching sites cannot be found easily. Publicity of their acts and the shock effect not readily visible to the target audience. Most people deem that what occurs at sea will not directly affect them, therefore the impact is low. The expertise and support structure required to sustain a maritime force calls for mandatory support by “sympathetic” states (with ulterior motives) to be effective, which also cannot be found easily.

Any terrorist, Insurgent, Pirate force at sea requires some integral factors for it to function, such as proximity to sea or water body with access to a secure launching point, control of a stretch of coast or inland water mass. Availability of Potential recruits having a relationship with the sea so that there is basic and expert maritime experience among the core cadres; which will determine the Sea faring tradition of the group. Importance of the sea to the “cause”- a motivator statement. Strong ideals of the leadership and organization. External Support – direct or indirect. Group solidarity (vocation/tradition/pedigree). The Motivation and inspiration to achieve its ends – By protracted attacks or on one decisive act of terrorism.

The denial of any one of these factors will see the terrorist group begin to falter and disintegrate. At the same time, the counterforce that opposes the evolving threat should be strong and balanced, having all the right ingredients to take on littoral irregular combat, which could progressively incorporate “Hybrid warfare” and open up a whole new dimension, if not nipped in the bud.

### **THREAT IN THE LITTORALS**

In Sri Lanka we saw fishermen and smugglers evolving into a group that reached the cutting edge of maritime terrorism, which created chaos and instability for nearly three decades. They chose to use the sea extensively during the conflict years, in order to sustain their protracted acts of terror.

The threat at sea began by the use of small fiber glass boats carrying men with small arms and using speed to outrun naval craft, that were not geared to fight or give chase to “Go fast” boats.

With the introduction of low draft, fast and maneuverable naval Fast Attack Craft the terrorists resorted to modifying and redesigning their own boats to carry anti aircraft weapons and a whole arsenal of modified weaponry on board. Speeds as fast as 50 knots have been recorded during confrontations.

The terrorists also used the guise of fishermen in many of their attacks to lure naval craft into traps.

In later years the terrorists began to use stealth as a main characteristic in the design of craft in order to avoid detection. Many innovative designs of enemy craft have been encountered over the years including submersibles.

### **INNOVATIVE AND ELUSIVE FOE**

The predominant craft used by the terrorists were 15 to 20 M 'Go fast' boats where some were configured to fight and the others to carry logistics. There were many designs of both the types as the enemy flotilla grew.

These craft were equipped with radar, GPS, wireless gun communications and night-vision binoculars. The crew of a attack craft numbered nearly 15 with each combatant donned in helmet, body armour and with a personal weapon. The logistic craft carried weaponry for defensive purposes and could match the speeds of the attack craft. These were successful for a time in which one had to be absolutely lucky to detect and apprehend them, mainly due to the difficulty of identification once intermingled with the cluttered littoral environment. It was only their anomalous movement that gave them away and that too may have been too late to seize the initiative. However certain checks and regulatory controls of fishing in areas of concern reversed the tables. This was not a popular choice but a necessary evil in a high threat scenario where any civilian craft could be a potential ship killer.

Once the enemy had lost the advantage of outrunning and out maneuvering navy craft, tactics quickly changed to wolf pack attack. This method of attack was dangerous if one's own craft was damaged or isolated. Since naval craft operated as single units in the past, the 'wolf pack' could threaten a naval craft, particularly when suicide craft accompanied the pack. Later as the navy began operating attack units in multiples the enemy evolved to use "Swarm Attack", using fast, maneuverable low profile craft with substantial striking power, capable of well coordinated attack from every direction.

Countering this threat in the littorals or in narrow seas becomes extremely complicated due to the numbers involved, leading to the intricacy in tracking and prioritizing targets. Proximity to land brings in the additional danger of being targeted by coastal artillery, missiles, mines or suicide submersible craft. The enemy on most occasions chooses to fight close to the shore where reinforcements and tactical control is possible. Once out at sea and beyond range of the mother base and the land based sensors the efficacy of this mode of attack rapidly dwindles.

The main weapon, and probably the most formidable used by terrorists at sea was the suicide craft. The terrorists in Sri Lanka were masters of this art and had a range of versions, used for various operations; the disguised fishing boat, the ship killer which was a large fast-armoured craft, the stealthy and the semi submersible. Use of this tactic in the littorals and at approaches to harbours or choke points was potent because of the difficulty in detecting the threat in time and the added complexity of targeting these illusive craft.

The other tricky threat to fight was that of the underwater suicide saboteur who used both open and close circuit breathing apparatus, including underwater scooters. Off the shelf diving equipments was extensively used for terrorist activity. Improvised mines, limpet mines and other types of improvised explosive devices were the weapons of choice of these under water saboteurs.

### **EVOLVING TACTICS**

Long years of combating an innovative foe led to evolving tactics of the counterforce, for example, to counter the Swarm and suicide threat the Sri Lanka Navy, after many years of study, responded with the concept of “Swarm against Swarm” , where the adversary was Out-numbered, Out-gunned, Out-run in the littorals and at choke points. The swarms were forced to fight and disperse from formation when encountered with another, thereby disrupting and scattering their forces that could then be targeted. This counter calls for absolutely professional training, coordination, command and control.

### **ARE WE PREPARED ?**

Maritime forces have to now be prepared and trained to fight radical ideologies and fanaticism which was left to those on land in yester years. The unconventional threat that looms before us will be indiscriminate in its targeting, actions and methods which adds to the complexity of future naval operations

Conventional forces that are controlled and disciplined will always be at a disadvantage in this battle field, as they are limited in their actions and not prepared or trained to react to the threat. As a result modern forces need to review their counter strategy and begin to train, estimate and fight differently. As a matter of fact a radical shift in the surface warfare thought process may be necessary to fight effectively in this age of Asymmetric and Irregular warfare.

In the words of SUN TZU, in his treatise the art of war where he dictates

**“Determine the enemy’s plans and you will know which strategy will be successful and which will not”**

In other words empathize with the enemy and be prepared to counter his action even before he acts.

### **A NEW APPROACH**

Combat in the littorals is dynamic, hazardous and unpredictable. The Sri Lanka Navy is a battle hardened force which has been involved in active combat operations. This experience doubtless gives us the edge in predicting the future battle – environment, particularly in the littorals and of the asymmetrical kind. Based on this experience I would say, to win future conflicts, we must train and prepare to master the littoral battle space. For this purpose the course forward entails:-

- “To think, train and fight differently”. The secret in combating irregular threats is to deliver an unconventional response. We may not need to develop new equipment, but we need to change the mindset of conventional thinkers and have the right balance in the order of battle.
- Traditional Naval missions / tasks will continue to exist, but the edge will be with those capable of meeting the littoral threat effectively.

- We have to prepare our young officers and planners to empathize with the opposition, to counter threats before they are encountered.
- Legacy systems will remain to be our mainstay, but the essence will be to morph them with future capabilities in transforming the counterforce.
- Today's asymmetric warfare, shifts warfare into a higher gear but also into a more human domain like in the past. This paradox arises from the fact that – warfare today is shifting away from the machine to the more human on human realm. For example the suicide cadre and the proximity of combat where machines will fail to cope with the intelligence plus the flexibility of the threat and where only human on human will deliver required results. Of course our machines and platforms will aid us but it will ultimately be the quality of the men who match the threat.
- We have to appreciate that the terrorist willing to die for a cause, motivated by radicalism, brain washing and religious fervor, will match against training, physical strength, mental awareness and morale of our troops.
- For small combatant platforms, operating in shallow waters, speed, stealth and maneuverability mean survivability. Good sensors and high rate of fire weapons that can acquire and target small stealthy craft effectively will emerge victors. Fast attack craft including inshore patrol craft will have to operate together, in numbers and dilute enemy swarms, disrupting, isolating and destroying the stragglers.
- The navy will have to foster a new breed of surface warfare warrior who will take the initiative and be aggressive and daring. Naval officers and men will have to form special operation units for this type of engagement.
- Officers and men need to be trained to act on instinct and be capable of profiling enemy craft that lurk within fishing fleets and pleasure craft,.....and they will have to take certain tactical risks to be successful and maintain the initiative.  
Unfortunately, there will be losses – but we will need to invest our time on training our crews to survive – by giving them the best survival training and equipment – Littoral SAR will become an important mission too.
- Navies with experience in littoral combat should disseminate that particular core competence to the rest of the maritime community by means of offering training and experience.
- Last but not least maritime Co-operation between Friendly Navies need to be enhanced. Regional, Bilateral and multi lateral agreements and exercises will build confidence and understanding between forces in tackling irregular warfare.

Today, when security and economic prosperity of our nations are utterly dependent on ensuring that the freedom of the seas are maintained, we need to be prepared to meet maritime challenges as they emerge.

Forces have to accept the fact that the emphasis given littoral combat is played down, mainly since it is a radical change for conventional navies geared and ready or aspiring for blue water operations. Littoral warfare is where officers and sailors alike will have to get in close, get dirty and get the job done more akin to

the infantry soldier. Future conflicts will entail this facet and will probably be the most difficult to face or counter if the right force is not trained now.

### **THE COURSE TO STEER**

We as maritime nations should appreciate the fact that inaction or ineffectual action against violent non state actors boils down to the same result. It encourages perpetrators of violence and other illegal activities at sea to gain confidence and escalate their operations. The message being that mere intimidation by presence is a futile exercise.

Further, as these groups depend on a safe haven to operate from coastal dominance. Operations or raids by Special Forces to take out the launching pads will pay tremendous dividends in the littoral operations.

Also it is rational that the forces combating the threat are provided with more realistic and practical Rules of Engagements for any operation at sea to be effective; for this one needs to accept a certain amount of risk and responsibility for ones actions.

If nations are to contribute to the global force to prevent and suppress threats that terrorise the global commons, it is time that the legal regimes that govern ones action at sea are reviewed positively in parity with the present maritime threat perspective. The law and mechanisms put in place to protect all legal stakeholders of the maritime commons should be practical and have fewer loopholes.

It is imperative that the maritime community lays down a regime that is mutually beneficial in meeting security goals. Post conflict scrutiny has demonstrated that international engagement is necessary in every aspect between maritime forces to be successful in bringing about positive change. International maritime security objectives require creation of a enduring and self sustaining capability in partner nations to maintain safe and secure seas. This mutually beneficial security requires to be proactive, multilateral, realistic and, more daring, for it to be successful.

It is therefore best that we seafarers have a practical, coordinated and consistent approach – that will assure safety, security and sustainable support of and within the global commons.

Thank You