



Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS)

Forum for National Security Studies (FNSS)

41/20

Reviving the Trilateral: Maritime Security Cooperation between India, Sri Lanka, and Maldives

Shantanu Roy-Chaudhury
Research Associate, CAPS

Keywords: India, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Indian Ocean, Maritime Security, Trilateral Cooperation

After a hiatus of six years, the 4th NSA level meeting on Trilateral Maritime Security Cooperation between India, Sri Lanka, and Maldives took place at the end of November in Colombo. With India's Ministry of External Affairs stating the meeting would "provide an opportunity for discussion on issues pertaining to cooperation in maritime security in the Indian Ocean region," delegations from Bangladesh, Mauritius, and Seychelles also participated as observers, although only virtually due to travel restrictions¹. The revival of this trilateral comes at a pertinent time of increasing activity in the Indian Ocean and signals New Delhi's proactive approach to strengthen cooperation with its partners and ensure peace and stability in the region.

Apart from the growing Chinese presence, recent regional developments have included a U.S.-Maldives defence pact, the U.S. Navy

Secretary calling to establish a new numbered fleet in the Indo-Pacific that could potentially be based in Singapore, and the Russian government approving a new naval facility in Sudan that will improve their operational ability in the Indian Ocean². Additionally, in September 2020, Germany released a document where they endorsed the concept of the 'Indo-Pacific' for the first time, signalling a shift in the European power's approach to the region as they had previously been reluctant to use the term³. Subsequently, in November 2020, the Netherlands also released a strategy document for the Indo-Pacific⁴. Together with France, which adopted the concept of the Indo-Pacific in 2018, the increasing attention given to the region indicates its importance to the European economies, global stability, and could result in a wider European Union strategy in the future. Combined with numerous high-level American, Chinese, and Indian visits to various countries in India's neighbourhood in the preceding few

months, these developments foreshadow increasing engagements in the Indian Ocean and the revival of the trilateral, therefore, was an important step for India, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives to take stock of the maritime security environment and promote cooperation at a subregional level.

The meeting, which was attended by Indian National Security Adviser Ajit Doval, Sri Lankan Defence Ministry Secretary Major General (Retd) Kamal Gunaratne, and Maldivian Defence Minister Mariya Didi, resulted in the three countries agreeing to expand the extent of intelligence sharing, and discussed issues relating to “terrorism, radicalisation, extremism, drugs, arms & human trafficking, money laundering, cyber security and [the] effect of climate change on [the] maritime environment”⁵. The meeting broadened the scope of the trilateral which had previously focused on the maritime domain. The delegations also agreed to “hold Deputy NSA level working group meetings biannually for cooperation at [the] operational level,” an important step in institutionalising security cooperation between the three countries⁶.

The platform also provided an opportunity for bilateral discussions. During the NSA’s meeting with Sri Lankan President, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, apart from “stressing the need to further strengthen an already satisfactory bilateral cooperation,” an agreement

was reached to “expedite the completion of Indian funded development projects” in the country and assist Sri Lanka in strengthening its maritime security infrastructure⁷. With the Maldivian minister, discussions took place to further deepen relations on the defence and security front.

In the larger strategic scenario in the Indian Ocean, the revival of this trilateral is an important event and has three significant opportunities for New Delhi. First, it brings together Sri Lanka and the Maldives, both of which are strategically located island nations on either side of the Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs) and oversee the large amounts of transnational shipping across the Indian Ocean. By strengthening defence and security ties with them, India can be better placed to monitor and secure its interests in the region. This is important as India, while it does have an advantage when it comes to geography and operational experience, New Delhi “suffers from serious capacity constraints,” which could be plugged through effectively using the trilateral as a forum to strengthen relations⁸. Vice-versa, Sri Lanka and the Maldives could significantly benefit from India’s resources in the maritime security domain. Second, with the increasing external presence and a growing understanding of the importance of the Indian Ocean to the global economy, it provides a platform for three South Asian nations to discuss topics as mentioned above that are crucial for stability and

peace in the region. This will not only positively affect security coordination between India, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives, but will also have wider global ramifications in ensuring a free and open ocean. Third, in analysing the trilateral through the lens of balancing China, it provides an opportunity for India to pursue its neighbourhood first policy and assert its position as a “preferred security partner” in the Indian Ocean region, a term recently used by the chief of the Indian Navy⁹.

However, the trilateral is not free of challenges. While this meeting does bring together India, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives, Colombo’s approach to China is significantly different from that of New Delhi and Malé’s. Although one of the main reasons for the gap in this trilateral was “a growing disconnect between Maldives and India during the tenure of former president Abdulla Yameen Gayoom,” this has been overturned since President Ibrahim Solih has ascended to power in 2018 and has been accepting of a growing Indian role in the country and region¹⁰. On the other hand, Sri Lanka, while committing to an India-first approach has continued to deepen engagements with China. President Gotabaya Rajapaksa has agreed to revive the stalled Free Trade Agreement (FTA) discussions with Beijing, while also stating a desire to follow a “China-style development model for Sri Lanka”¹¹. Furthermore, while rejecting the U.S. Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) agreement on the

basis that provisions could “potentially affect national objectives, sovereignty and national security” of Sri Lanka, Colombo has continued Chinese investments and loans. By doing so, the Sri Lankans are increasing their countries debt and dependence on China, which will be in a position to exert pressure on Colombo and dictate terms¹².

Overall, the resuscitation of the trilateral between India, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives on maritime security cooperation is an encouraging development for subregional relations in an increasingly active Indian Ocean. For New Delhi, therefore, the trilateral allows a platform to further enhance ties with Sri Lanka and the Maldives, become a preferred security partner and net security provider in the Indian ocean, and at the same time keep a check on China’s growing footprint in the region.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ “4th NSA Level Meeting on Trilateral Maritime Security Cooperation,” *Ministry of External Affairs*, November 26, 2020, https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/33238/4th_NSA_Level_Meeting_on_Trilateral_Maritime_Security_Cooperation. Accessed 7 December 2020.

² Geoff Ziezulewicz, “SECNAV calls for standing up new numbered fleet in the Indo-Pacific,” *Navy Times*, November

19, 2020, <https://www.navytimes.com/news/your-navy/2020/11/19/secnav-calls-for-standing-up-new-numbered-fleet-in-the-indo-pacific/>. Accessed 7 December 2020; Andrew Osborn, "Putin, extending Russian footprint, approves new naval facility in Sudan," *Reuters*, November 16, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-sudan-navy-idUSKBN27W29A>. Accessed 7 December 2020.

³ "Policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific region," *The Federal Government*, September 2020, <https://rangun.diplo.de/blob/2380824/a27b62057f2d2675ce2bbfc5be01099a/policy-guidelines-summary-data.pdf>. Accessed 7 December 2020.

⁴ Sebastian Strangio, "Following France and Germany, the Netherlands Pivots to the Indo-Pacific," *The Diplomat*, November 18, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/11/following-france-and-germany-the-netherlands-pivots-to-the-indo-pacific/>. Accessed 7 December 2020.

⁵ "Joint Press Statement," *Ministry of Defence Sri Lanka*, November 28, 2020, http://www.defence.lk/Article/view_article/2654. Accessed 7 December 2020. http://www.colombopage.com/archive_20B/Nov28_1606582323CH.php. Accessed 7 December 2020.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ "India's National Security Adviser Ajith Doval meets the President," *Colombo Page*, November 29, 2020, http://www.colombopage.com/archive_20B/Nov29_1606588881CH.php. Accessed 7 December 2020.

⁸ Darshana M. Baruah, "Strengthening Delhi's Strategic Partnerships in the Indian Ocean," *Center for a New American Security*, October 23, 2019, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/strengthening-delhis-strategic-partnerships-in-the-indianocean>. Accessed 7 December 2020.

⁹ ANI, "Prepared to face both COVID-19, Chinese challenge on LAC: Navy chief," *ANI*, December 3, 2020, <https://www.aninews.in/news/national/general-news/prepared-to-face-both-covid-19-chinese-challenge-on-lac-navy-chief20201203163205/>. Accessed 7 December 2020.

¹⁰ Ahmed Aiham, "Minister of Defence Mariya Didi meets Sri Lanka Prime Minister Rajapaksa," *The Edition*, November 29, 2020, <https://edition.mv/news/20645>. Accessed 7 December 2020.

¹¹ Meera Srinivasan, "Expect China-style development model for Sri Lanka: Gotabaya," *The Hindu*, October 9, 2020, [https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/expect-china-](https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/expect-china-style-development-for-sri-lanka-gotabaya/article32816165.ece)

[style-development-for-sri-lanka-gotabaya/article32816165.ece](https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/expect-china-style-development-for-sri-lanka-gotabaya/article32816165.ece). Accessed 7 December 2020.

¹² "Sri Lankan government decides not to sign MCC agreement," *Colombo Page*, February 28, 2020, http://www.colombopage.com/archive_20A/Feb28_1582873544CH.php. Accessed 7 December 2020.