

Associate Paper

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The Maritime Relations of India, the Maldives and Sri Lanka: Part One

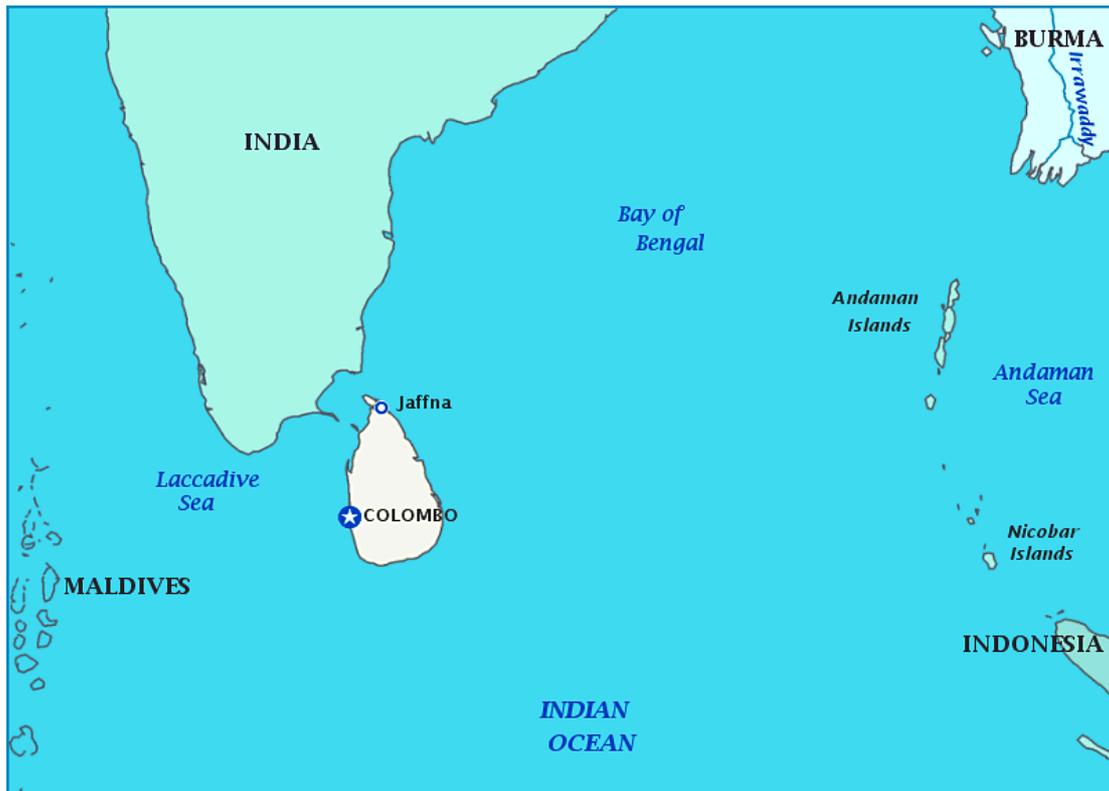
Raj Mittal
FDI Associate

Key Points

- The Maldives, Sri Lanka and India share a maritime neighbourhood in the Indian Ocean (IO). [Indian Maritime Security Strategy](#) (NSP 1.2) is clear that India's maritime neighbourhood and its navy are important facets of its political and economic relationships with countries in that region.
- The Maldives and Sri Lanka are strategically located close to major sea lines of communication.
- India considers the Maldives and Sri Lanka as being in its sphere of influence, which makes China's increasing footprint in the island countries a major concern for New Delhi.
- Arguably possessing the region's most developed navy and coast guard, India is [perceived](#) as the first responder and security provider in the IO, but to be effective in that role, India needs to further engage with the Maldives and Sri Lanka.

Summary

India perceives the Maldives and Sri Lanka as being in its sphere of interest, which makes China's increasing footprint in those countries a cause for concern in India. The Maldives and Sri Lanka have initiated "India First" policies which complement India's "Neighbourhood First" equivalent. While India cannot keep China out of the Maldives and Sri Lanka, it should capitalise on its proximity, first-responder image and historical and cultural ties to safeguard its security concerns by remaining continually engaged with Malé and Colombo through high-level visits and the India-Sri Lanka-Maldives Trilateral.



Analysis

Writing in the *Hindustan Times*, Kanwal Sibal, a former foreign secretary of India [said](#):

All big countries have, in reality, problems with their smaller neighbours because the disparity in size and power create insecurities in them, not to mention loss of identity as in the case of India's neighbours who share with us ethnic, linguistic, cultural, civilisational and even religious commonalities. To balance the bigger neighbour, outside powers are cultivated, which in our case is principally China, though in the past the United States has played this role.

Brewster [echoes](#) similar sentiments, noting:

Smaller states, including Indian Ocean islands such as Sri Lanka, Maldives and Seychelles from time to time seek to play the "China card" in an effort to extract more concessions or economic assistance from India.

The headwinds that India faces in its relations with its neighbours provides traction to the above opinions but yielding space to extra-regional players by retreating from its neighbourhood is clearly not an option. As another commentator and analyst [notes](#), 'A longer look at India's regional diplomacy suggests that Delhi has been losing some and winning some at any time in the region.' He goes on to add that, 'There is no happy end-state in India's relations with its neighbours. It will always be about carefully managing the inevitable difficulties that arise.' Taking the ebb and flow of India's relations with Malé and Colombo in stride, the India-Sri Lanka-Maldives Trilateral was formalised in November 2020. That the talks took place after six years and in "in-person mode" despite the ongoing

pandemic is significant. As another observer [opined](#), 'It [the resumption of the Trilateral] also reflects on the importance these countries attach to their bilateral relationship with India'. A Trilateral Secretariat was [inaugurated](#) in March 2021 in Sri Lanka, which has imparted further momentum to the grouping.

India and the Strategic Salience of the Maldives and Sri Lanka

The Sino-Indian competition is manifest in the Indian Ocean region, as one [analyst](#) notes:

Both Sri Lanka and the Maldives are critical maritime neighbours to India in the Indian Ocean region and there have been continuous efforts by both India and China to win friends and favours in Colombo and Malé.

Similarly, another columnist [observes](#):

Sri Lanka as a South Asian country may be perceived to be within the Indian sphere of influence but Sri Lanka as an Indian Ocean island highlights Colombo's strategic importance, expanding its geographical sphere of engagements.

The Maldives, too, is increasingly more conscious of its Indian Ocean identity. Both it and Sri Lanka sit close to busy waterways which gives them enhanced strategic weight. The main east-west maritime trade routes traverse the northern Indian Ocean and extend from the Red Sea/Suez Canal and Persian Gulf to the Strait of Malacca, passing close to the Maldives archipelago and Sri Lanka. As a previous [FDI paper](#) notes:

This is an important region with, annually, two-thirds of the world's seaborne trade in oil, 50 per cent of the world's seaborne container traffic, one-third of the world's seaborne bulk cargo and the world's highest tonnage in the seaborne transportation of goods, reportedly involving some 100,000 ships, transiting through the Indian Ocean and its adjacent waterways.

As C. Rajamohan [notes](#), however:

Nothing has diminished India's geopolitical thinking [more] than the idea of South Asia. The shrinking of India's regional vision was also reinforced by India's inward economic orientation and the sundering of historic commercial ties with the maritime neighbours.

That construct changed dramatically in the second decade of the twenty-first century. In May 2019, the then newly re-elected Indian Prime Minister, Modi, chose the Maldives and Sri Lanka as his first official visit destination:

[The first overseas visit](#) of Indian Prime Minister Narendra [sic] Modi to the Maldives and Sri Lanka, in his second term, following a landslide electoral victory, is an "important symbolic gesture reflective of the special relationship" between the countries.

[According to](#) Commodore Jonathan Mead, RAN, ‘Political scientists have coined the term “security complex” to describe how countries which are clustered together, tend to have interwoven security linkages – what affects one affects others.’ The “India First” policy of the Maldives and Sri Lanka and India’s “Neighbourhood First” policy can be seen in the context of their interconnected security architecture.

The Maldives-India Relationship

The northernmost island of the Maldives, Thuraakunu, is about 70 nautical miles south of India’s Minicoy Island, making the two countries close maritime neighbours. Both share strong historical and cultural ties. In November 2018, Mr Modi visited the island-nation to attend President Solih’s oath-taking ceremony. In continuation of India’s “neighbourhood first” policy, Modi visited the Maldives in June 2019 as the first overseas visit of his second prime ministerial term. The Indian Foreign Secretary visited the Maldives in late 2020, followed by the Foreign Minister in February 2021. Such high-level visits to the Maldives at close intervals indicate India’s desire for continued strong bilateral relations.

President Solih, too, chose India as his first foreign visit after taking office. The two countries’ bilateral ties are growing under President Solih, who has re-oriented his country back towards India, undoing the previous administration’s [China tilt](#). [‘The growing bilateral ties](#) have also been a result of strong naval interaction between the two countries. According to the Indian Ministry of Defence, the Maldives has more interaction with the Indian Navy and Coast Guard than with any other country in the Indian Ocean.’ In 2014, following a fire in a desalination plant, the Maldives suffered an acute [water emergency](#). An Indian Navy ship with water arrived in the Maldives the next day, enhancing India’s “first responder” image. Another ship and several aircraft followed. For its part, the Maldives remains sensitive to India’s concerns in the international arena. As one commentator [wrote](#), ‘The Maldives came out in strong defence of New Delhi to counter a Pakistani diplomatic onslaught, at a recent Organisation of Islamic Cooperation meeting, over the treatment of minorities and alleged Islamophobia in India.’ A direct service [linking](#) Kochi, Tuticorin and Malé by the Shipping Corporation of India Ltd is expected to further boost bilateral trade and economic relations between the two countries.

The Sri Lanka-India Relationship

Sri Lanka is India’s closest maritime neighbour, being just some [17 nautical miles](#) from the Indian town of Dhanushkodi. [‘The central question](#) is about managing proximity that imposes inextricable interdependence, for both good and bad.’ Sri Lanka is very conscious of its ability to attract extraneous interest. The maritime doctrine of Sri Lanka (MDSL) [states](#), ‘Sri Lanka is a small nation that is nevertheless very strategically placed, at a critical location within the Indian Ocean and this has focused the attention of many powers.’ Brewster, however, [posits](#) that, ‘While Sri Lanka may find a partnership with China as providing useful economic and political benefits, it is difficult to envisage it changing India’s geostrategic domination of that island.’ President Gotabaya Rajapaksa [described](#) ‘... Colombo’s ties with New Delhi as “multi-faceted” as compared to the “by and large economic and commercial relationship” it had with others.’

The current government, headed by the Rajapaksa brothers, has indicated an “India First” policy. President Gotabaya Rajapaksa visited New Delhi in November 2019 on a three-day visit, his first overseas trip after taking office as President. ‘President Gotabaya said in an [interview](#) recently [2019] that his country can’t engage in any activity which will threaten the security of India and that they understand the importance of the Indian concerns.’

To reaffirm Sri Lanka’s “India First” policy, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa [visited India](#) in February 2020 as his first overseas visit. Sri Lanka has also shown sensitivity to India’s concerns. One commentator [wrote](#), ‘Sri Lanka had to cancel Imran Khan’s parliamentary address scheduled for his recent (March 2021) visit (since Khan was expected to raise the Kashmir issue).’ India kept its side of the bargain when, at the end of March 2021 at the [UN Human Rights Council meeting](#) on Sri Lanka’s human rights violations, India abstained from voting. Whether Colombo walks the “India First” talk will be known moving forward.

The China Factor

‘[China’s rise](#) has, arguably, been the most important strategic development of the twenty-first century. With its enormous land mass, huge population, economic heft, formidable military, and political will to be a dominant state, China is omnipresent in its neighbours’ strategic calculus.’ For India, managing its relations with Malé and Colombo in light of China’s forays into the island nations is challenging. India does have advantages as the following views indicate. As Brewster [suggests](#):

While there is considerable jostling among China, India and the United States to develop influence in the Indian Ocean region, no Indian Ocean state (with the exception of Pakistan) would currently be entitled to seriously consider China as a major security provider.

Admiral Arun Prakash, the twentieth chief of the Indian Navy, [stated](#) that:

Alarmist reports about possible PLAN “gunboat diplomacy” need to be viewed against the geographic reality that a Chinese warship would take 8-10 days to cover the 3,500 miles from Yulin to Malé. The flip side of this reality is that Indian troops were in Malé within 16 hours to save the nation from a coup in 1988, and it took the IN just 24 hours to come to the aid of tsunami-hit Maldivians in 2004.

Due to its centrality in the Indian Ocean, India enjoys unparalleled geographical advantage in the area. Its soft power as a liberal democracy and “first responder” image contribute to India’s positive image in the maritime neighbourhood. As Jacob [notes](#), ‘While it might not be possible to keep China out of South Asia or India’s maritime neighbourhood, it will be the nature of India’s relations with its neighbours that will determine the extent and success of Chinese activities in the region.’

The following part of this study will examine some of the challenges to the trilateral relationship and suggest ways to deal with them.

About the Author: Raj Mittal is an Indian Navy veteran and a master mariner. He has sailed on board bulk carriers trading worldwide for eleven years. Raj is a graduate of the Defence Services Staff College, India, and holds a master's degree in Defence and Strategic studies. He is a Perth-based marine consultant.

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Suite 5, 202 Hampden Road, Nedlands WA 6009, Australia.
Tel: +61 8 6389 0211
Web: www.futuredirections.org.au