

Still Waters, Deep Waters: Way Ahead for India-Maldives-Sri Lanka Maritime Cooperation

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Since the end of Cold War decades, the global security scenario has undergone significant changes. This is especially the case in South Asia. Since July 2013, when the National Security Advisor-level officials of the three nations – India, Sri Lanka and the Maldives – signed the Trilateral Maritime Security Cooperation Agreement, changes in security-related and political ties have taken a new form, whose importance works at multiple levels. This involves not only the strengthening of politico-diplomatic and security ties among the three countries, but also furthers the evolution of the regional/ sub-regional multilateral security architecture.

Any examination of these issues would include the study of the nature and trajectory of the lateral ties between these three nations, both with one another and otherwise, along with their perceptions and concerns towards security. In the case of India, New Delhi's security concerns have become more complex over the past decades. From once being almost exclusively concerned about territorial issues and border disputes, India is now equally concerned about other non-traditional issues emerging from both near and afar. These range from internal security and asymmetric threats in India to the stability of nations in the immediate and extended neighbourhood, as well as to questions of strategic space and autonomy in India's 'backyard'.

In the case of Sri Lanka, the primary concern till recently was internal - that is, the three-decade old ethnic strife that degenerated into war and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE terrorism). With the end of the 'Eelam Wars' in May 2009, Sri Lanka's concerns regarding security have taken a new turn. Today, Sri Lanka's primary issues come in the form of non-traditional security concerns which are related to economics and development. This is accompanied by the need to balance the tricky issues of domestic politics and polity, both of which have yet not recovered from decades of ethnic hostility.

In the Maldives, an esoteric approach towards security seems to be the focus, along with Global Warming and rising sea levels. Though a global phenomenon which will, no doubt, visit almost every nation, the impact of global warming upon the Maldives will be most profound since the whole nation could go under water. This is, again, a non-traditional security concern.

First of a Kind

Running parallel to the narrative of the varying priorities and positions towards the notion of security is the nature of ties amongst these three nations. For a number of reasons - which range from principle to persecution - India, Sri Lanka and the Maldives have not been accustomed to the concept of a security alliance, either among themselves or with others. None of them joined the post-World War II global/regional security architectures such as North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) or Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO), though they were among the favoured lot in the eyes of the initiators, thanks to their location, particularly with regard to the Indian Ocean. Moreover, the domestic political constraints within these three South Asian nations were also a factor that did not always encourage mutual traction on the subject of security cooperation beyond a certain degree.

Thus, in this context, India, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives worked out the Trilateral Maritime Security Cooperation Agreement. Though only two years old, this Agreement

signifies both the depth and the complexities in the nature of the ties between India and her southern oceanic neighbours. It is possibly the first of its kind in South Asia. So far, it is also the only one of its kind in the region. For the last few years, there has only been a narrative of turbulence in India's engagement with her immediate maritime neighbours. The nature and reasons for this turbulence are many, and is a subject of a dedicated study.

Nonetheless, it is sufficient to point out that two Prime Minister of India- two different personas, representing two different political parties and alliance-formations - had to cancel planned visits to these two nations on two occasions, in less than two years. In November 2013, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh did not attend the Colombo Commonwealth Summit. In March 2015, PM Narendra Modi of the BJP dropped the Maldives from his scheduled four-nation neighbourhood visit in the shared Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

Going by media sketches of the two Prime Ministers, their personalities differed greatly; so did the foreign policy principles of their respective political parties. Yet, they were seemingly influenced by the overall, inherited foreign policy approach of the Indian State since Independence. It could be said that the policy has not changed much since, despite the geo-political and geo-strategic changes contributing to the changes in the nation's all-important economic/developmental policy framework. Whatever be the reason, the decision by the Indian prime ministers to cancel their visits may have not gone well with Colombo and Male, and reflects the complexities of India's bilateral relations with these neighbours.

In Sri Lanka, domestic politics and the unfinished discourse on the ethnic front are seen as a sore point in Colombo-Delhi ties. In the case of the Maldives, the nation's on-going experiment in understanding the nuances of democracy, democratisation and electoral politics has been a restraining factor in Male-Delhi ties. Despite such political baggage on the bilateral front, and past misgivings on the security/military-to-military engagement, the three nations have found a modus vevendi to address issues, wherein

maritime security issues represent a common challenge and a politically neutral concern.

The Broader Narrative

The crux of the trilateral agreement between India, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives focuses largely on non-traditional, asymmetric concerns such as maritime domain awareness, search and rescue (SAR), the strengthening of existing mechanisms in protecting and securing the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), evolving new mechanisms to address environmental concerns and natural disaster responses as well as to address issues like piracy and other illegal activities at sea. At another level, this trilateral agreement has two other outcomes. The first has been the inclusion of Sri Lanka in the DOSTI (the bilateral exercise between the maritime security agencies of India and the Maldives); and secondly, the interest evinced by Seychelles and Mauritius (their common Indian Ocean neighbours) who have since become 'observers' in the trilateral arrangement.

Within the broader narrative of India's maritime engagement with its smaller neighbours in the Indian Ocean, the understanding on illegal activities at sea - especially that of the piracy - is significant. It is in this context that the Indian Navy has taken upon itself to secure the EEZ of the Maldives along with those of Seychelles and Mauritius. India has also provided maritime security assets, including patrol vessels, surveillance equipment, communication linkages and access to India's own computerised data and information of the kind required by these nations.

India's Concerns

There is no doubt that it is the 'spirit' rather than 'letter' of the trilateral Agreement that is of greater importance. This is so as New Delhi may harbour major concerns about Sri Lanka and the Maldives. In the Indian perspective, both these nations are seen as drifting towards China in a bid to shun/limit their engagement and perceived dependence on India. Conversely, these two nations may also share similar but independent apprehensions about India, and this has affected the nature of their engagement with New Delhi. For both Colombo and Male, the Indian involvement in

their domestic politics (even though as an ‘involuntary’ participant) has been seen as a determining and detrimental factor.

Prior to the finalisation of this Agreement - and even after that - these apprehensions have not yet been suitably addressed. This has more to do with apprehensions regarding the party and leadership in power in these nations at any given time. It is their apprehensions about the Indian influence/interference in domestic politics that has influenced, so to say, the security perceptions of the respective countries. It needs to be acknowledged that India - whatever the political leadership - has not done enough to erase such avoidable and unfortunate apprehensions. In the case of Sri Lanka, these go as far back as many decades before the ‘Eelam Wars’ phase. It needs to be pointed out here that, since 2013, India, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives have seen a change of guard, with new dispensations at the helm of affairs in all three nations.

The impact of the change in government on the trilateral engagement is yet to be fully ascertained. However, domestic changes have not derailed this engagement, at least not for the time being. This is was evident in the nature of engagement in December 2014, when the sole desalination plant that quenched the thirst of Male (the capital city of the Maldives, housing a third of the nation’s 300,000-plus thousand population), was destroyed in a fire-accident. Sri Lanka and India, as first responders given their proximity to the Maldives, immediately rushed in drinking water, followed by Indian naval vessels with the desalination plants of their own. It is well known that in December 2004 (the ‘pre-trilateral’ period), the Indian Navy and Air Force rushed non-military aid to the two southern neighbours when these were hit by the Indian Ocean Tsunami.

Beyond the Trilateral

Both episodes were/are expressions of mutual dependence and assistance, particularly in that they differentiated political issues from larger humanitarian considerations. However, politics and security concerns do not always seem to go hand-in-hand. India may have been slighted by Sri Lanka under the previous President Mahinda Rajapaksa,

when Chinese submarines were allowed to berth in its ports and transit Sri Lankan waters - purportedly to the Gulf of Aden on anti-piracy missions.

The two nations, under the respective dispensations of different times, seemed to have implicit apprehensions about India entering into unilateral maritime security arrangements with nations such as the USA, Australia and Japan. From the perspective of the two nations, the Indian engagements have been unilateral. However, unlike in India, where both security and neighbourhood policies are not influenced overly or overtly by political changes, in Sri Lanka and the Maldives, domestic politics and perceptions, independent of Indian concerns and their concerns about India have also been a factor in the two nations designing and re-designing their own security policies, including maritime security engagements.

The time has come for India as the largest of the three nations—in terms of the size of its land mass and its sea-area, as also its economy and military, including the navy—to look beyond the existing nature of the trilateral engagement and take new and bold initiatives. In this regard, the willingness on the part of New Delhi to engage other nations within a framework that carries the baggage of both political and operations limitation is imperative. The nature of military-to-military ties with the littorals of the Indian Ocean has been quite satisfactory, though there is much scope for their doing more and together. Pertaining to the southern island-neighbours, the maritime cooperation arrangement has, thus far, been able to balance security needs and concerns on the one hand, and the political realities and compulsions on the other. The ability to balance divergent views and concerns on the security front as well as the political spectrum could be the cornerstone of India's emerging maritime outreach.

The need for such a complex and complicated architecture is a necessity, at least in the medium term, since most, if not all, the nations within the Indian neighbourhood, including the littorals of the Indian Ocean, share a degree of optimistic outlook towards India that is either accompanied or clouded by a large dose of scepticism about both India's capability and capacity to lead. To conclude, the Trilateral Agreement, though

neither a broad spectrum security arrangement, nor anywhere near being a security pact, has been a welcome development. It has been able to transcend the thin divide between political ties, military engagement, and addressing common concerns. This Trilateral, though still in its initial phase, could be the blueprint for India's emerging and enlarged engagement with her maritime neighbours. Indeed, it is already proving to be one.

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Notes

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