



India, Sri Lanka and Maldives Trilateral Maritime Security Cooperation: Political and Economic Constraints in Implementation

*Dr. M. Samatha**

Introduction

The state centric security policy of the 1990s had to undergo a change due to increase in traditional and non-traditional security threats in the maritime domain. Increasingly, the attention has shifted to cooperative security measures between big and small states. Along with this, the concept of South-South cooperation, which gained momentum in late 1990s, also influenced policy makers to formulate policies that can increase security cooperation among developed and developing countries through bilateral, trilateral and multilateral engagements. This concept helped in moving away from dominant discourse on security propagated by developed countries. In South Asia, policy makers are influenced by these concepts and attempts were made in this direction.

India's engagement with Sri Lanka and Maldives has to be looked into in this context of the need for cooperation to address traditional strategic and non-traditional aspects of security in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The establishment of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in the 1980s had given an impetus and direction to regional and sub-regional cooperation despite its failure in achieving expected objectives of regional economic and security integration in South Asia. The implementation of trilateral cooperation is influenced by overall consensus on the need for cooperation and also on the

domestic political, economic and security situation within these countries. Trilateral maritime security cooperation between India, Sri Lanka and Maldives is analysed in this context.

Factors That Influenced the Trilateral Cooperation

Factors that necessitated the trilateral maritime cooperation are as follows: maintaining peace and security in the IOR; perceived or real threat perception from external sources; energy security; disaster management; non-traditional threats, such as maritime terrorism, arms and drug trade, piracy, human and arms smuggling, to name a few.

Initiation of cooperation is largely influenced by the security scenario in the past in South Asia. India's bilateral relation with its neighbours in the 1980s and 1990s faced a number of political constraints, which led to mistrust and misunderstanding. India's expectation that neighbouring countries' external and internal policies should not be inimical to its interests was challenged by the increasing presence of external actors in the IOR. Since India's security concerns are legitimately linked to the security policies pursued by neighbouring countries, efforts are made in this direction to improve bilateral political and economic relations. Sri Lanka and India's bilateral relations presented complex challenges whereas Maldives and India did not face any specific bilateral problem.

Turbulent political relations, particularly between India and Sri Lanka, had an impact on maritime cooperation. Its effects were more pertinent due to Sri Lanka's strategic location in the IOR. The gap between majority Sinhalese and minority Tamil community's views about what constitutes a state led to bitter civil war that lasted for nearly three decades. The war between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sri Lankan state had spill-over effects on the neighbouring country, India, due to the support that the Tamil cause received from the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Subsequent internationalisation of internal ethnic conflict due to the support the LTTE received from the Tamil Diaspora, other terrorist groups and banning of LTTE in many countries as a foreign terrorist organisation shaped the security policy of both countries in the 1990s and 2000 and beyond.

The turbulent political relations between India and Sri Lanka were addressed through continuous bilateral economic cooperation, humanitarian assistance for the war damaged northern and eastern parts of the country and disaster relief. Even though both the countries do not have a formal security and defence agreement due to internal political reasons, India provides training to Sri Lankan military forces and had supplied non-lethal weapons in the past.

Maldives and India relations are comparatively peaceful and India has been active in supporting disaster management and development cooperation. India also helped the regime in 1988 against a coup attempt by Sri Lankan militant organisation, People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE). Since then, India and Maldives enjoyed closer economic, cultural and security relations. To increase the surveillance, India helped in installing radars along the coast, which is interlinked with the Indian radar system.

Another factor that influenced the maritime cooperation is increasing external actors' presence in the IOR. China, the United States (US) and Japan are willing to play a major role in the region. For instance, the construction of ports and base facilities in the IOR Sea routes by China is a concern for India even though China asserts that it is purely for commercial and economic purposes. India is apprehensive about China's "Maritime Silk Route" concept. India and US relations improved after the cold war and the security of Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC) has been the main objective of cooperation. However, the US has a vital security interest in maintaining its presence in the IOR. The presence of the US in Diego Garcia and the presence of the US 7th Fleet in the Bay of Bengal during the 1971 Indo-Pakistan war are examples of its strategic interests. The US has the strongest military presence in the IOR, which can't be ignored.

Apart from gaining strategic foothold, the other factor that influenced and promoted cooperation was the security of SLOC for trade and energy supply. IOR maritime activity is primarily concentrated on trade of oil and gas and any disruption in the activity would increase the energy costs of the states situated in the region. The protection of Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) and its surveillance is another factor that promoted cooperation.

Therefore, since the 1990s, apart from political and strategic reasons, non-traditional security threats posed a great danger to the security of these three states, and

their policies were formulated to tackle these threats in a coordinated manner. India's Naval and Defence documents defined the maritime strategy of India and provided broad approach for cooperation. For instance, India's Maritime Strategy document (2007) speaks of achieving "maritime security through non military aspects, such as economic, political, sociological and psychological. The document adopts an oceanic approach to strategy rather than focusing only on protecting India's coast line." This strategy is reflected in the trilateral maritime agreement. India has been involved in and, to some extent, it is successful in maritime diplomacy with Sri Lanka and Maldives that consists of 'training of naval officers, regular exchanges, transfer of military equipment, manning of military installations, hydrological explorations, patrolling of borders and EEZs and humanitarian assistance'. Therefore, the identification of shared interests between these three countries led to cooperation.

Main Features of the Agreement

Three NSA-level meetings on maritime trilateral cooperation were held in 2011 in Male, 2013 in Colombo and in 2014 in New Delhi. According to the Ministry of External Affairs, India, "During the second NSA-level meeting, the three sides discussed a wide range of topics including enhancing cooperation in Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) through provision of Long Range Identification and Tracking (LRIT) services, MDA training and Merchant Ship Information System (MSIS) software by India, sharing of Automatic Identification System (AIS) data; strengthening of coordination of maritime Search and Rescue (SAR) including SAR training; promoting marine oil pollution response cooperation; expanding bilateral 'DOSTI' (friendship) exercises through holding of table top exercises; further enhancing sharing of the information on illegal maritime activities through existing points of contact; and forming a trilateral sub-group focused on policy and legal issues related to piracy."ⁱ

Progress has been made to obtain data from the LRIT Data Centre by Sri Lanka and Maldives in order to monitor and track merchant vessels owned by the three countries and in utilisation of the Merchant Ship Information System (MSIS). Regarding cooperation in SAR operations, one week training for officers from Sri Lanka and Maldives was conducted at Mumbai by the Indian Coast Guard from 12-18 March 2014.

Regarding the strengthening of mechanisms for EEZ surveillance and providing additional support and assets on a case by case basis, there are some bottlenecks. The defence cooperation between India and Maldives was extended, in the past few years, to EEZs, joint surveillance, search and rescue operations, training and capacity building of MNDF and Maldives Coast Guard Officers. The Government of India “responded to request of the government of Maldives and provided the first Advanced Light Helicopter (ALH) renamed “Kurangi”. It was commissioned by the MNDF in April 2010 and positioned in Gan. The second ALH was given in December 2013.”ⁱⁱ However, access to EEZs in Sri Lanka is restricted for India, even though the agreement provides for surveillance in and around EEZ. On the other hand, China has better access in the EEZ of Sri Lanka.

Strengthening marine pollution response cooperation by participating in India’s National Pollution Response Exercise (NATPOLREX) as observers was addressed when ten participants from Maldives and Sri Lanka were allowed as international observers in the fifth pollution response exercise in December 2011. Passing Tsunami warnings simultaneously is another important feature. Setting up a trilateral sub-group focused on legal and policy issues related to piracy is still in the process.

To expand the scope of the trilateral initiative, other Indian Ocean littoral countries are included as guests. During the third NSA-level meeting hosted by India in March 2014 at New Delhi, delegations from Mauritius and Seychelles also participated in the meeting as Guest countries. The meeting focused on ‘new areas of cooperation including hydrography; training in visit, board, search and seizure operations; training on board Indian Sail Training Ships; exchanges between think tanks; and joint participation in adventure activities’.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Indian Coast Guard conducted twelfth edition of the joint exercise named “DOSTI-XII” with the Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF) and the Sri Lankan Coast Guard at Male, Maldives from 28-31 October 2014. This exercise was institutionalised since 1991 and Sri Lanka joined it in 2012’.^{iv}

Challenges in Implementation

Asymmetry between the countries will pose a threat to bilateral relations and lead to periodic mistrust and conflict. The security arrangement would help the ruling regimes in

maintaining internal political and economic stability and can work as a motivation for the continuation of security cooperation. But this has to be matched with domestic policies.

The convergence of interests in this domain is a challenging task given the divergent strategic and economic interests in the IOR between these three countries. Here, the role of extra regional players comes into focus due to the opportunities these island states get by cooperating with other maritime powers. Import based economies of Sri Lanka and Maldives will always look for external sources, which may or may not affect the security of India.

Regime change in Sri Lanka and the military defeat of LTTE in 2009 has provided a breather to maritime terrorism and arms smuggling activity across the cost. However, there are reports of active LTTE network in Europe and Western countries. The Sri Lankan navy is vigilant on this front. The role of external actors comes into focus, if they provide better options for maritime engagement and economic benefits through this engagement. For instance, the visit of China's President and Japan's Prime Minister to Sri Lanka last year signalled the importance of Sri Lanka in the IOR. Sri Lanka and China Strategic Cooperative Partnership and Sri Lanka's involvement in helping China in implementing the Maritime Silk Route project in South Asia is conducive for Sri Lanka's expansion of maritime security and economy. Maritime cooperation between China and Sri Lanka is extended to joint naval exercises and military assistance and providing coastal patrol vessels. Sri Lanka and Japan are trying to formalize Sri Lanka and Japan Dialogue on maritime security and oceanic issues. Sri Lanka was also involved in facilitating the port call by the vessels of the Japan Maritime Self Defense Force (JMSDF).

Even though these countries have identified the convergence of interests in maritime security, competition is bound to exist. Successful implementation of the maritime security agreement will depend upon internal political and economic situation to a great extent. In the case of Maldives and Sri Lanka, the regime security is equated with the security of the nation. For instance, Maldives' complete rejection of international concern including that of India regarding the arrest of former President is a case in point. The next trilateral meeting is supposed to take place in Maldives. Disaster relief and management also bring in external actors. For example, response to the recent water crisis in Maldives. China and India have

been competing for the right to develop and use Maldives' port. The port is only a few kilometres from Male and its development is expected to cost US\$501 million.

Tackling non state actors is one of the prime motives for cooperation. To a great extent, domestic political situation determines the activity of non-state actors. Given the conflict between majority and minority communities and the rise of hard line elements, terrorism will pose a challenge in the future.

The fishermen issue between India and Sri Lanka is a sensitive issue involving minority communities on both sides. Therefore, the implementation of the agreement will have to take into account the ground realities. The lack of common legal framework in dealing with this issue will act as an impediment. The death sentence given to five Indian fishermen last year in Sri Lanka is an example of lack of consensus on legal procedures. At the same time, in many cases, illegal maritime activities are carried out with the local communities' support. The economic inducements act as the primary driver in cooperating in such activities. The implementation of the project has to have an economic element beneficial to general population. This will prevent the illegal activities, such as piracy, drug trafficking and maritime terrorism.

Recommendations

- Extra regional powers are keen to increase their presence and access to the IOR for trade and energy security and are looking for bases and other facilities. This provides an opportunity to engage with external actors at multiple levels and there is a possibility that neighbouring country policies may be affected by it. Therefore, there is a need to be involved in maritime infrastructure building in the neighbourhood. Infrastructure building along sea coasts is an important element of engagement. If funds are acting as constraint, one has to find other mechanisms to build the confidence and trust. India can enter into a consortium with other like-minded players to keep these nations engaged.
- The influence of non-state actors can only be tackled by effective implementation of projects that can target coastal communities, particularly on maritime security benefits. Countries have to devise mechanisms to initiate projects that can develop

skills in communities in tackling threats directly. Community radio and coastal monitoring stations would add to the coastal security.

- There is an urgent need to understand legal processes in each of these countries that deal with maritime terrorism and other illegal activities. There is a need for convergence in this area. India, Sri Lanka and Maldives can work on coordinated patrols and sharing of information.
- Need to invest in more technical cooperation and training of personnel in Sri Lanka and Maldives.
- Expansion of joint patrols including Mauritius and Seychelles will enhance cooperation and Involvement of SAARC in maritime cooperation, which may benefit in creating an atmosphere of trust and confidence.

**Dr. M. Samatha is a Research Fellow, Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi.*

Notes

-
- i Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, “Outcome Document of the Second NSA-Level Meeting on Trilateral Cooperation on Maritime Security between India, the Maldives and Sri Lanka”, July 09, 2013, <http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateraldocuments.htm?dtl/21922/Outcome+Document+of+the+Second+NSALevel+Meeting+on+Trilateral+Cooperation+on+Maritime+Security+between+India+the+Maldives+and+Sri+Lanka>
- ii Recent media reports on India-Maldives defence and security co-operation, 12 February 2015, <http://www.hci.gov.in/male/?3841?000>
- iii Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, “NSA level meeting on trilateral Maritime Security Cooperation between India, Sri Lanka and Maldives” March 06, 2014, <http://mea.gov.in/in-focus-article.htm?23037/NSA+level+meeting+on+trilateral+Maritime+Security+Cooperation+between+India+Sri+Lanka+and+Maldives>
- iv High Commission of India, Male, Maldives, October 27, 2014, “Joint 'DOSTI' Exercise by Indian Coastguard with Maldives and Sri Lanka”, <http://www.hci.gov.in/male/?3628?000>