

Colombo Security Conclave: A New Initiative in the Indian Ocean Region

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Abstract

Colombo Security Conclave, a mini-lateral initiative, was undertaken recently in November 2020 as a much-reformed version of its predecessor, NSA Trilateral on Maritime Security, a security dialogue between the National Security Advisors of Sri Lanka, India and Maldives. Despite putting primary focus was based on the strategies for a secured Indian Ocean Region in pen and paper, tackling the emerging influence of Beijing has been one of its major underlying motives. The competition between India and China to develop a greater sense of alliance involving the Indian Ocean countries brought such regional groupings into the frame. A new beginning as such will apparently be a key in establishing a strategic architecture required for a long time to fulfil the existing security vacuum in the region, simultaneously bringing developments in all aspects for the stakeholder countries like Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bangladesh and so on. Evaluating all the incidents of the past decade, the primary focus of this paper is to analyze what impacts may fall upon the region alongside the major stakeholders in shaping up the future of the Indian Ocean Region after the re-emergence of the security dialogue.

Background

Earlier, known as the NSA Trilateral on Maritime Security, the grouping between India and its two southern bordered states was first formed holding the hands of the Sri Lankan current President Gotabaya Rajapaksa in 2011 when he was acting as the Defense Secretary for the state. The initiative was solely based on maritime security in the Indian Ocean Region, which focused on military and security collaborations between Sri Lanka, India and Maldives. The first dialogue between the three nations took place in 2011 in the Maldives, and later it was followed up in 2013 and 2014 hosted by Sri Lanka and India, respectively. However, the meetings were supposed to occur in regular intervals following such rotation among the three

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countries; it could not see the light of the day till 2020. The rising influence of China in the region and India's lack of strategic interest back then was believed to be the main reason of such disruption. In these six years, not a single gathering between these three nations together took place for any purpose. While addressing the disruption, Gotabaya directly pointed fingers at Doval, the National Security Advisor of India of Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) administration, during an event in 2017, blaming his 'China obsession' for the downturn in India-Sri Lanka relations.² The initiative later took a major turn since 2020 as the emergence of China's influence in the Indian Ocean became one of the major concerns for New Delhi.

China as an Emerging Threat

One of the biggest reasons India has been very proactive recently in taking different initiatives centring the maritime security in the Indian Ocean Region is due to the rising influence of Beijing. With their enormous efforts towards the Indian Ocean countries to enhance its dominance, China has compelled New Delhi to establish its own outreach. The projects and ports have had a

Country	Active Naval Vessels Manufactured/Co-Developed by China*	Big-Ticket Maritime Infrastructure under development by China	Chinese Investment Spending 2005 – 2017 (in \$ bn)+	Status of Free Trade Agreement with China
Bangladesh	46	Chittagong Port	24.1	Biggest Trading Partner, Feasibility Study Started in 2016
Maldives	0	Ihavandhippolhu Integrated Development (iHavan) Project	NA	Signed (2017)
Myanmar	17	Kyaukpyu Deep Water Port	7.4	ASEAN-China Free Trade Area (2010)
Pakistan	15	Gwadar Deep Water Port	50.6	Signed (2007)
Sri Lanka	17	Hambantota Port	14.7	Biggest Trading Partner, Negotiations Started in 2014

Figure 1: Economic and Strategic Relationships of Selected Littoral South Asian Countries with China³

² "Doval's China obsession made India go for Sri Lanka regime change: Former Lanka defense secy" | The New Indian Express | March, 2017 | <https://www.newindianexpress.com/world/2017/mar/27/dovals-china-obsession-made-india-go-for-sri-lanka-regime-change-former-lanka-defense-secy-1586564.html>

³ "China's Maritime Quest in the Indian Ocean: New Delhi's Options" | The Diplomat | March 2018 | <https://thediplomat.com/2018/04/chinas-maritime-quest-in-the-indian-ocean-new-delhis-options/>

significant hold for China in this region, especially with the military base in Djibouti, controlled ports in Gwadar and Hambantota and its other initiatives with Maldives and Myanmar. Several reports also suggest that the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) are willing to launch a "special naval fleet for the Indian Ocean" beside their constant patrolling with warships in the Andaman Islands, which belongs to India's Exclusive Economic Zone. In response to the initiatives taken by China, India has been taking a lot of measures to cope with the rivalry presented by Beijing by extending its parameters with multiple states close to India's borders.

The significance of the Security Conclave has been immense for India in retaining its good relationship with the island countries. Despite China's efforts in the Maldives, one of the three nations of the NSA Trilateral Dialogue, New Delhi have made considerable progress in building India-Maldives ties. In a meeting between the Indian and Maldivian foreign ministers during August 2020, New Delhi announced a \$500 million infrastructure project along with an additional \$ 250 million for aid in the Maldives. Several reports suggest that the Maldives also consider scrapping the free trade agreement with China that Solih's predecessor Abdulla Yameen signed.⁴ This indicates the important role these regional mini-lateral groupings will play for India in tackling the emerging influence of China. All these factors lead to a clear fact that there exists a clear rivalry and competition between India and China to win their friends in Sri Lanka and the Maldives to expand its influence in this key strategic region.

Colombo Security Conclave's New Journey

With China taking control over the Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka, being in such close margins to the Indian border gave birth to a concerning security threat for India. Despite Sri Lanka having an "India First" security approach over the years, it is still pretty much dependent on China for its economic developments.⁵ China's emerging influence in the Indian Ocean Region technically revived the tri-lateral grouping in late November 2020, as the Colombo Security Conclave (CSC). The Secretariat was established in Colombo after the 4th Deputy National

⁴ "India announces \$500 million infra project, \$250 million financial aid for Maldives" | The Indian Express | September 2021 | <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-announces-500-million-infra-project-250-million-financial-aid-for-maldives-6553755/>

⁵ "Colombo Hosts India-Maldives-Sri Lanka Maritime Security NSA Trilateral Meeting" | The Diplomat | November, 2020 | <https://thediplomat.com/2020/11/colombo-hosts-india-maldives-sri-lanka-maritime-security-nsa-trilateral-meeting/>

Security Advisors Level Meeting - their first dialogue in six years. During this dialogue, three observer countries – Bangladesh, Seychelles and Mauritius – also took part and are now likely to gain permanent membership in the conclave within this year. The Deputy National Security Advisors (DNSA) discussed the developing security concerns

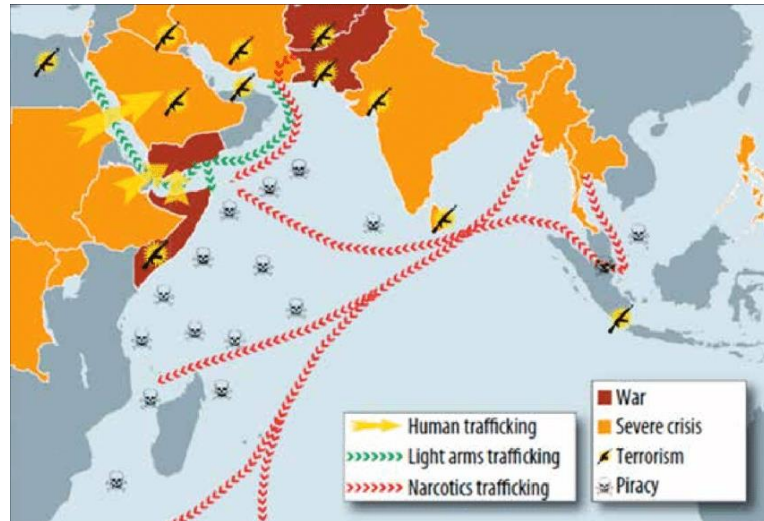


Figure 2: Major Security Concerns in the Indian Ocean

gradually evolving in the Indian Ocean. Among these concerns, maritime safety and security, human trafficking, smuggling of arms and drugs along maritime routes, cybersecurity issues, terrorism and violent extremism, humanitarian assistance and disaster response (HADR) are common concerns among these six nations.

In the 5th DNSA Level Meeting that occurred in Colombo during August 2021, the focal point of the Colombo Security Conclave was extended from just maritime security threats to an initiative consisting of “4 Pillars” – Security Cooperation including areas of Maritime Security; Human Trafficking and Organized Crime; Cybersecurity; and Counter-terrorism and Radicalization. The enrollment of the three new countries into the grouping was also discussed in this meeting. The mini-lateral conclave between the six countries will surely shape up a momentum to fill the vacuum in the Indian Ocean Region existing for centuries.

Significance for India, Sri Lanka and the Maldives

The Colombo Security Conclave will have both individual and collective perks for the nations as the security threats in the Indian Ocean are gradually on the rise. In August 2021, Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi had the privilege of being the first Prime Minister of India to chair at the UN Security Council session where he crafted to focus on the much valuable issue of maritime security. He specifically talked about his five points framework for maritime security, which emphasizes removing trade barriers, peaceful settlement of maritime disputes, promoting mutual trust and confidence, joint counter-terrorism measures and conservation of marine resources. The five-point framework of India’s maritime security, having many similarities with their SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) policy, is

completely reflected in the '4 Pillars' of Colombo Security Conclave.⁶ The importance of the Indian Ocean Region for India is immense for its resources as well. 70% of India's oil imports are linked with the Indian Ocean, including 90% of its total trade. A leadership role in securing the maritime aspect along with other Indian Ocean countries will create a great



Figure 3: Choke Points, Strategic Pipelines, and China's String of Pearls

opportunity to establish a secured dominance for India at such a crucial part of this world with such geostrategic dynamics.

The Maldives and Sri Lanka, on the other hand, is in dire need of infrastructural development projects. The Maldives have directly collaborated with India in multiple million-dollar infrastructure projects, while Sri Lanka still maintains a neutral state with India and China. Apart from their developments, both countries need significant assistance in combating smuggling, trafficking, terrorism, and cybersecurity. Colombo Security Conclave gives them a perfect platform to collaborate and ensure security over these major issues under the shelter of a great regional power like India. Other factors like current security measures and their provisions, the extended use of the latest technology, bilateral cooperation resulting in effectiveness and sustainability of such security measures among nations in the region will also help in the maritime security for these island nations.⁷

Besides the strategic threats, terrorism has been one of the major threats in this region. Starting from the off-shore oil tankers attack to the attack on Mumbai from the shore in 2008, the region has been prone to terrorism threats as the most prominent terrorist groups operating near the Indian Ocean Region. There lie several non-traditional security threats too, which include

⁶ "Statement by the President of the Security Council" | Ministry of External Affairs, India | August 2021 | <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/34152/Statement+by+the+President+of+the+Security+Council>

⁷ "Colombo Security Conclave' further promotes region's maritime security" | Ministry of Defence, Sri Lanka | August 2021 | https://www.defence.lk/Article/view_article/3822

climate change and other factors causing a rise in sea levels, transnational crimes like piracy, arms, people, drug trafficking), breaking of disease and famine, illegal aspects like IUU fishing, and maritime natural hazards, such as tsunamis, floods and cyclones. Considering all these emerging threats in the Indian Ocean, collaborative support can greatly deal with these major security factors.⁸

Importantly, there have been plenty of talks to expand the three observers - Bangladesh, Mauritius and Seychelles - as members of the CSC, which s gives it a wider regional context in the Western Indian Ocean. It will help to enhance the framework of maritime security cooperation on a much larger scale.

Bangladesh's Perspective and the CSC

The inclusion of Bangladesh in the conclave as a full member will extend the cooperation more exclusively towards the north-eastern part of the Bay of Bengal. Bangladesh has been facing a few maritime security threats in recent years with the influx of Rohingya refugees since 2018. There has been a notable rise in Human and Drug trafficking through the Cox's Bazar region of Bangladesh directly linked with the Bay of Bengal. The upsurge of extremist groups in the region also puts Bangladesh at the risk of radicalization through the Indian Ocean region. Terrorism and cybersecurity are two major concerns which are still difficult for Bangladesh to deal with 'alone' in such circumstances.



Figure 4: *The Geopolitical Importance of Bangladesh in the Indian Ocean Region (Source: World Atlas)*

⁸ "Maritime security threats in the Indian Ocean" | Shiv Kumar Singh | FenixEdu | August 2018 | <https://fenix.letras.ulisboa.pt/courses/ipa-pg-846873061497899/ver-artigo/maritime-security-threats-in-the-indian-ocean>

That is one of the prime reasons Bangladesh was very eager to join the Colombo Security Conclave.

Bangladesh imports have increased drastically in recent years, where around 50 billion dollars worth of goods is imported every year. The majority of these goods are traded through the three major sea ports – Chattogram, Mongla and Payra. With each year amount of imports and exports are gradually increasing through these sea routes. Chattogram port has been one of the ports with great strategic interest for Beijing and has worked relentlessly in collaboration for years. Considering Bangladesh's economic aspects with such heavy reliance on trade, the CSC will play a great role in developing mutual trust and confidence in tackling the maritime security threats collectively and ensuring maritime connectivity among the nations to ensure a secure and stable trade route through the seas.

The country has been prone to natural disasters as well. Every year, Bangladesh faces major disasters generating from the Bay of Bengal, exclusively floods and cyclones, that hampers thousands of people living in the coastal region. Mutual security measures in tackling such natural disasters will also help develop the livelihood of people regularly losing food and shelter due to such disasters.

Bangladesh is also one of the major stakeholders in the Bay of Bengal region and has been involved in various regional collaborations like BIMSTEC, BCIM, SAARC, etc. But the Colombo Security Conclave gives Bangladesh an edge over dealing with the security threats through the maritime route that is on the verge of a rise. Bangladesh, like Sri Lanka, has maintained a very balanced relationship with both India and China, two great powers of the region. With time, both India and China will inevitably be trying to increase their influence in the Indian Ocean Region, making the CSC a ‘must join’ grouping for Bangladesh to collaborate with all the major powers in Asia, especially in the context of maritime security.⁹

Conclusion

The Colombo Security Conclave is indeed one of the much-needed initiatives to fulfil the security vacuum existing in the Indian Ocean Region for centuries. If the major concerning pillars like maritime security, terrorism, trafficking, and cybersecurity can be dealt collectively with such regional groupings, in that case, such initiatives should be welcomed in red carpet fashion. Still, also rigorously, it should be kept in mind that the focus must not be centric

⁹ “Colombo Security Conclave – Bangladesh's Perspective” | Md Mufassar Rashid | Eurasia Review | September 2021 | <https://www.eurasiareview.com/17082021-colombo-security-conclave-bangladeshs-perspective-oped/>

towards pushing back the influence of China alone. The conclave must avoid the controversies that the recent QUAD-China debate has faced for years. It is high time that multilateral bodies as such focus on the regional security of its member states. Such an example will create much prosperity in establishing stable maritime security in the Indian Ocean and developing a strategic leadership of India in the region. The Indian Ocean countries like Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, which maintains a balanced relationship between the two giants, must focus on developing as much alliance in strengthening the security and infrastructure of the nations through the means of such regional groupings.

The question remains whether this conclave will help the nations build mutual trust in strengthening maritime security or act as a buffer to raise tensions between India and China for geopolitical rivalries.¹⁰

¹⁰ "Colombo Security Conclave – Bangladesh's Perspective" | Md Mufassar Rashid | Eurasia Review | September 2021 | <https://www.eurasiareview.com/17082021-colombo-security-conclave-bangladeshs-perspective-oped/>