

Sri Lanka is an Open Door to the Indian Ocean

[Proceedings Magazine - September 2017 Vol. 143/9/1,375](#)

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Engaging with the Sri Lanka Navy—here, that nation’s Marine Corps takes part in an amphibious capabilities demonstration—offers the U.S. Navy both Indian Ocean access and training opportunities.

U.S. maritime engagements with India can be best described as a security cooperation courtship that never gets past the first date. On the surface, this budding partnership looks promising. The U.S. and Indian militaries participate in executive steering groups (ESGs), military cooperation groups, and other high-level meetings. At the conclusion of these “dates,” both sides agree to an impressive array of engagements, and these are codified in the minutes that both heads of delegation sign. Unfortunately, when the time comes to execute the agreed upon actions, the U.S. components often get the dreaded “Don’t call us; we’ll call you.”

If India is not ready, willing, or able to play in the maritime security cooperation game, what is the benefit of trying to force it? India will play when it is ready. In the meantime, an open door to the Indian Ocean region (IOR) is staring the Sea Services square in the face: Sri Lanka.

Surfaces and Gaps

Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1, “Warfighting,” tells us that by avoiding surfaces and exploiting gaps we are “more likely to yield decisive results.” This philosophy is instilled in every Marine Corps officer and is a key component to our maneuver warfare doctrine. It has not, however, been a key component in our maritime theater security cooperation efforts in the Indian Ocean.

In our “Pivot to the Pacific,” India is a “surface” with respect to security cooperation. The Indian military is extremely professional and capable, but it is hamstrung by an almost insurmountable bureaucracy. Yet we continue to throw time and resources at this surface and hope the situation will improve. Only India can address its rigid and unresponsive processes, but our unwavering devotion to mutual engagement is not giving it any incentive to do so.

Sri Lanka represents a “gap” in security cooperation, in the most positive sense. It is providing us an “open door” to amphibious force development in the Indian Ocean. The Sri Lanka Navy has just formed a Marine Corps, and it wants our help with doctrine and training. Its Sailors and Marines are professional, battle-hardened, and want to emulate the U.S. Marine Corps. ¹U.S. Sea Services also can learn from the Sri Lankans, especially from their experience in opposed, amphibious landings against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Developing this relationship represents a win-win for both the United States and Sri Lanka and provides Marine expeditionary units and amphibious ready groups (MEUs/ARGs) access and training areas in Trincomalee, the “finest natural harbor in the Indian Ocean.” ²

Sri Lanka’s Strategic Importance

Sri Lanka sits on the international sea lines of communication in the Indian Ocean. Directly off the coast of Colombo passes 30 percent of the world’s container traffic, 30 percent of the world’s oil traffic, and 90 percent of China’s oil. ³

The nation’s strategic importance in the Indian Ocean region is undeniable yet seemingly underappreciated in U.S. foreign policy. Until recently, U.S. policy toward Sri Lanka engagement had been punitively restrictive. In essence, we disapproved of the way Sri Lanka fought a decisive battle against the LTTE (a terrorist organization) to bring an end to its three-decade-long civil war. The way in which the LTTE was crushed raised human rights concerns with the U.S. Department of State. One entity that chose not to judge Sri Lanka was China. It has invested heavily in this strategic country and has gained an “undeniable economic foothold.” ⁴

Thankfully, China’s foothold is not a political one. Sri Lanka maintains close ties with India, and it desires to strengthen its relationship with the United States, especially in the area of defense professionalization. Sri Lanka represents the most promising option for both immediate and sustained U.S. maritime access to the IOR. It is imperative the United States raise Sri Lanka in importance and priority with respect to security cooperation. If we do not, we run the risk that China will become its defense partner of choice.

It does seem as if the United States is beginning to appreciate Sri Lanka's strategic importance. The relationship has improved significantly since January 2015 when President Maithripala Sirisena was elected. He embarked on a reconciliation and reform agenda, and many of the U.S. policy restrictions on security assistance are being steadily lifted. Opportunities for engagements are increasing.

U.S. Pacific Command (USPACOM), for example, is addressing the rebalance to the Indo-Asia-Pacific in part by maintaining a "network of like-minded allies and partners"—one of which is Sri Lanka. ⁵In November 2016, Admiral Harry B. Harris Jr. attended Galle Dialogue 2016 in Sri Lanka and stated:

Sri Lanka is a welcome and significant contributor to the system. For example, Sri Lanka is conducting U.N. peacekeeping operations in Lebanon, Mali, Central African Republic, and South Sudan. . . . I believe that Sri Lanka could be a convening power to discuss freedom of navigation in the Indian Ocean. ⁶

Building a Marine Corps from Scratch

Since the end of the civil war, the Sri Lanka Navy has been exploring ways to keep from losing personnel structure, particularly in its Navy Patrolmen units. It also has realized it has an operational need for an amphibious capability, especially in the areas of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, U.N. peacekeeping operations, and maritime security.

Forming a new Marine Corps was the Sri Lanka Navy's way to address both its structure issues and operational demands. The catalyst for the decision came from two 2015 Marine Corps Forces Pacific/Fleet Marine Forces Pacific engagements: the USPACOM Amphibious Leaders Symposium (PALS) and the Key Leader Engagements (KLEs) in Colombo, Sri Lanka. The director of Sri Lanka Naval Land Operations attended PALS-15 in Hawaii. At this inaugural event, he gained an appreciation for amphibious capability and how it could be used by Sri Lanka. Lessons he learned from PALS-15 dovetailed into Key Leader Engagements that occurred between Sri Lanka Navy leadership and Brigadier General Edward Banta at the November 2015 Marine Corps Ball in Colombo. These engagements resulted in the Sri Lanka Chief of Navy's decision to develop up to two battalions of Sri Lanka Marines. ⁷

In January 2016, the Sri Lanka Navy made its first overtures to the U.S. Marine Corps for assistance. In the year since then, the Sri Lanka Navy/Marine Corps and the U.S. Sea Services have completed numerous successful engagements in both Sri Lanka and the United States. These engagements were not planned out years in advance, but rather weeks and sometimes days in advance. This budding relationship provided the MEUs/ARGs with previously untapped training areas in the Indian Ocean. These areas, particularly Trincomalee, could prove invaluable in maintaining the training and readiness of the MEUs/ARGs as they make the long transit to the Central Command area of operations.

A Tale of Two Port Calls

In November 2016, the 11th Marine Expeditionary Unit and the Makin Island (LHD-8) Amphibious Ready Group were transiting the Indian Ocean and had planned port calls in India and Sri Lanka. The India port call was planned more than nine months in advance, and the Sri Lanka port call was planned just one month in advance. One port call never happened, and one was an incredible success.

India's port call never happened, even though the engagement was codified in the minutes of the Indian Army ESG nine months earlier and at the Indian Navy ESG seven months earlier. This was not only a lost training opportunity for our maritime forces, but also a waste of U.S. resources. Maritime planners who attended the ESGs were doing so at the expense of other projects. ESGs incur hundreds of thousands of dollars in man hours, not to mention the cost of travel and per diem.

The main reason India's port call did not occur was that U.S. maritime planners are not allowed direct liaison authority with any Indian Army or Navy planners. All correspondence must go through intermediaries, which does not allow for any flexibility and makes coordination difficult, if not impossible. These restrictions are imposed on planners from India and may indicate India's willingness, or lack thereof, to conduct security cooperation.

Sri Lanka's port call happened. The USS Somerset (LPD-25) and the embarked 11th MEU's Battalion Landing Team (BLT) 1/4 trained with the Sri Lanka Navy/Marine Corps in Trincomalee 22-25 November 2016. Both sides benefited. U.S. Marines trained with the Sri Lankans on land and the U.S. Navy trained with them on ship. This engagement was planned just a month prior to execution.

The reason the Trincomalee port call was so successful is that both Sri Lanka and the U.S. Sea Services wanted it to happen. It represented a true partnership. When a partner wants to engage, obstacles seem to disappear. Not only was direct liaison authority with the Sri Lanka Navy/Marine Corps granted, it was encouraged. This was an indicator of Sri Lanka's desire to engage.

Push on Open Doors

Maritime engagement with Sri Lanka is an open door to the Indian Ocean region. The door for engagement with India is ajar, but it still has the security chain on. In a period of reduced manpower and resources, the U.S. Sea Services cannot afford inefficiency in security cooperation engagements; we increasingly are compelled to show "bang for the buck." Engagements with Sri Lanka are showing immediate results—the biggest of which is access and training opportunities for transiting MEUs/ARGs. The government of Sri Lanka and the Sri Lanka maritime services value the growing relationship with the United States, and they demonstrate this value through actions.

In contrast, maritime engagements with India are showing little fruit. The planning alone is costing hundreds of thousands of dollars. The Indian government and its military are saying all the right words but backing up those words with little action.

Strategic guidance tells us to foster access to the Indian Ocean region, not just India. Sri Lanka is that access and wants to play with us. When we put all our efforts into India, we usually end up playing by ourselves.

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1. Jacob F. English, Deputy Defense Attaché for Sri Lanka, email message to author, 9 December 2016.
 2. James Manor and Gerald Segal, “Causes of Conflict: Sri Lanka and Indian Ocean Strategy,” *Asian Survey* 25, no. 12 (December 1985), 1165.
 3. Jacob F. English, Deputy Defense Attaché for Sri Lanka, email message to author, 9 December 2016.
 4. Jacob F. English, Deputy Defense Attaché for Sri Lanka,, email message to author, 9 December 2016.
 5. Commander, U.S. Pacific Command, “United States Pacific Command Guidance,” 12 August 2016.
 6. U.S. Embassy Colombo, “U.S. Welcomes Sri Lanka Contribution to Security in the Indo-Asia-Pacific Region,” U.S. Pacific Command, 29 November 2016, www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/1015066/us-welcomes-s...
 7. VADM Ravindra Wijegunaratne, Sri Lanka Navy, interview with author, 20 January 2016; and Commodore Udeni Serasinghe, Sri Lanka Navy, interview with author, 20 January 2016.

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The Indo-Asia-Pacific and U.S. Policy

The strategic importance of the Indian Ocean region in U.S. foreign policy continues to grow. *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense* stresses the need to rebalance to the Indo-Asia-Pacific. In this rebalancing, India is stated as being the “regional economic anchor and provider of security in the broader Indian Ocean region.” This distinction, however, does not constrain regional security cooperation efforts to only India. *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership* further states, “Across the globe we will seek to be the security partner of choice, pursuing new partnerships with a growing number of nations.” U.S. policy stresses the

importance of efficient and cost-effective approaches to security cooperation: “Whenever possible, we will develop innovative, low-cost, and small-footprint approaches to achieve our security objectives, relying on exercises, rotational presence, and advisory capabilities.”¹

The intent one can glean from this guidance on the Indian Ocean region is that the end-states of “freedom, stability, and prosperity” are paramount, not the ways and means to get there.

The 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) reinforces the rebalance to the Pacific and directs that we “deepen our engagement in the Indian Ocean region to bolster our rebalance to Asia.” The QDR illustrates the importance of the rebalance, noting that “by 2020, 60 percent of U.S. Navy assets will be stationed in the Pacific.”² Reallocation of U.S. Navy assets suggests that our Indo-Asia-Pacific end-states will be met primarily through maritime means.

A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower states: “America’s economy and security are inextricably linked to the immense volume of trade that flows across the Indian and Pacific Oceans.” The importance of this maritime domain will “dictate a growing reliance on naval forces to protect U.S. interests and maintain an enduring commitment to stability of the region.”³ An implied task from this statement is that U.S. Pacific Command and its maritime components, Pacific Fleet and Marine Corps Forces Pacific/Fleet Marine Forces Pacific, need to plan for increased access to forward naval bases.