

# LANKA'S MARITIME SECURITY

JAPAN SEEKS BALANCE WITH CHINA

Japan and Sri Lanka are celebrating 65 years of diplomatic relations this year, but their bilateral ties have rarely seemed more...

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## Lanka's maritime security

Japan seeks balance with China

... important – especially in relation to maritime security in the Indian Ocean.

The two countries launched a dialogue on maritime security and other oceanic issues in January, following a 1.83 billion yen (\$16.3 million) aid package from Japan in June 2016 designed to boost Sri Lanka's maritime security and crime-fighting capacity.

The Japanese Embassy in Colombo said the dialogue was aimed at ensuring that the Indian Ocean remains open, stable and governed by the rule of law. "The dialogue has become a wonderful step for developing such cooperation," the embassy told the *Nikkei Asian Review*.

But analysts say that Japanese strategy in the region is also spurred by worries about the expansive

reach of China, which has become increasingly belligerent in maritime affairs. Abhijit Singh, head of maritime policy at the New Delhi-based Observer Research Foundation, said Tokyo is "certainly" concerned about Beijing's growing investment in Sri Lanka and its influence over the government in Colombo.

"The last thing Japan would like to see is a Chinese vassal state in the eastern Indian Ocean – and that, too, so close to the critical searoutes," Singh said. "It is gradually beginning to take greater interest in hard military security as well, [although] the military aid is presently rudimentary and not on a scale meant to attract undue attention."

For Sri Lanka, foreign assistance is welcome.

Defense Secretary Karunasena Hettiarachchi said the island state's surrounding seas are 27 times larger than the country itself, so it needs whatever aid it can get to police the area. "We require international support from countries such as Japan to secure and strengthen our maritime boundary, as well as strengthen our capabilities in search and rescue," he said in an interview.

People trafficking and drug smuggling are major problems for Sri Lanka, with many undocumented migrants traveling illegally by sea from the island to countries such as Australia. Since 2009, Sri Lankan police and the Australian authorities have intercepted 89 vessels transporting more than 4,500 migrants without visas, according to the Sri

Lanka Police.

Narcotics are also smuggled from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Latin America. In March 2016, drug dealers used fishing trawlers to transport a 101kg consignment of drugs into the country. Later in the year, purported "sugar" containers were seized with huge loads of cocaine from Brazil, according to the Police Narcotics Bureau.

Apart from marine security, Japan has also been involved in socioeconomic projects in Sri Lanka, including infrastructure improvements and providing access to electricity and clean water. From 2013 to 2015, Japan granted a total of \$143.5 million to Colombo for development-related projects.

(*Nikkei Asian Review*)