



On the Maritime Superhighway: US-Sri Lanka Naval Cooperation by Sean Quirk and Maile Plan

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On March 7, 2017, the expeditionary fast transport *USNS Fall River* (T-EPF-4) pulled into Hambantota, Sri Lanka to begin *Pacific Partnership 2017*. This annual training mission is the largest humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR) exercise in the Indo-Pacific. It was fitting to begin in Sri Lanka – located right alongside the Indian Ocean’s maritime superhighway between Asia and the Middle East.

Twenty-five years of brutal civil war prevented Sri Lanka from looking far beyond its shores. With the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) – also known as the Tamil Tigers – in 2009, Sri Lanka is now geopolitically positioned to reap the benefits of the free flow of trade to and through its territory.

Representatives from the US Navy, Sri Lanka Navy, Center for Naval Analysis (CNA), and Kotelawala Defence University (KDU) convened in Honolulu, Hawaii from Jan. 19-20, 2017 to discuss recent and future efforts to enhance US-Sri Lanka naval cooperation. Five major nontraditional security threats loom for both navies: natural disasters, terrorism, piracy, human and drug trafficking, and illegal/over-fishing. Bilateral training has grown more robust since the end of the Sri Lankan civil war, and Sri Lanka hosted seven US Navy port visits between February 2016 and February 2017. Additionally, the US Navy will partner with the Sri Lanka Navy for the bilateral *Coordinated Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT)* naval program in 2017. The US Coast Guard and the nascent Sri Lanka Coast Guard have also begun talks on sharing best practices in maritime governance.

Sri Lanka’s central location in the Indian Ocean offers potential for cargo and naval refueling; piracy, trafficking, and terrorism interdiction; and humanitarian and emergency aid. Such efforts benefit all countries that depend on trade and enhance Sri Lanka’s security by maintaining stability in its surrounding seas. Collaborative efforts to create bilateral or multilateral information-sharing centers will help build maritime domain awareness in the Indian Ocean. These networks will help Sri Lanka and international partners monitor piracy, trafficking, and terrorism in South Asia.

The United States can also learn from Sri Lankan counterparts in the realm of asymmetric maritime warfare and antiterrorism training. The Sri Lanka Navy is battle-hardened after three decades of fighting against the LTTE, which operated vessels

including suicide boats, fast-attack craft, and makeshift submarines. The LTTE Navy, also known as Sea Tigers, employed fast and effective tactics similar to the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps Navy (IRGCN) to fight the stronger Sri Lanka Navy. These lessons in modern maritime warfare were paid for with the blood of Sri Lankan sailors. It would be a mistake to pass on an opportunity to better understand these battles and learn how to prevent future bloodshed. Indeed, Sri Lanka has an asymmetric warfare course incorporating lessons learned from the civil war, and at least one US naval officer has completed the training. More extensive collaboration with hundreds of sailors, such as through a *CARAT* exercise or a port visit, would better capture the wealth of knowledge Sri Lankan sailors can offer.

The United States is not alone in its recognition of Sri Lanka’s potential international role. Other powers, most notably China, recognize that Sri Lanka is home to some of the Indian Ocean’s most strategically valuable real estate. Chinese development of port facilities in the southern city of Hambantota and Chinese People’s Liberation Army-Navy (PLAN) port visits to Colombo have been well advertised in the media. Conference participants, however, stressed Sri Lanka’s effort to demonstrate no undue influence by any foreign state. The Chinese do not hold any exclusive rights over the new Hambantota facilities; the recent port visit by *USNS Fall River* (T-EPF-4) demonstrates just that.

Sri Lanka’s dependency on these strategic waterways should motivate it to champion international compliance with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and international law, which underpins everything from maritime resource management to freedom of navigation. Chinese port construction ironically expanded Sri Lanka’s dependency on and strategic interest in freedom of navigation. Since Sri Lanka is an inherently maritime nation sitting at some of the world’s most critical sea lines of communication (SLOCs), it disproportionately benefits from peacetime trade, protected global commons, and international maritime law. Sri Lanka should thus stand up to all those who stand in the way of freedom of navigation as defined under UNCLOS.

Prospects for a US-Sri Lanka strategic partnership are bright. Pacific Command (PACOM) Commander Adm. Harry Harris visited Sri Lanka for the Galle Dialogue 2016 in Colombo, the first US four-star officer to visit in almost a decade. In his keynote address, he emphasized that “location without stability and security is a hollow place.” Sri Lanka’s newfound internal security and stability make it a location of deep significance. Optimism for future cooperation now pervades the US-Sri Lanka relationship. The future is most promising in the maritime realm, where the world’s strongest navy can exercise with a burgeoning maritime power. The Sri Lanka Navy’s evolution from a coastal “brown-water” navy to

a regional “green-water” navy is well underway. The US Navy should be there, sailing right alongside.

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