



# ASSESSING SRI LANKA'S NATIONAL RESPONSES TO MARITIME NTS CHALLENGES

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# SOUTH ASIAN FUTURES FELLOWSHIP

THE SOUTH ASIAN FUTURES FELLOWSHIP ANNUALLY SUPPORTS EARLY CAREER RESEARCHERS BASED IN THE SOUTH ASIAN REGION, INTERESTED IN EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF GEOPOLITICS ON REGIONAL COOPERATION. FELLOWS ARE AT DIFFERENT STAGES OF THEIR CAREERS WITH EXPERTISE ON NON-TRADITIONAL SECURITY ISSUES; THEY PARTICIPATE IN WORKSHOPS, PRODUCE POLICY PIECES, AND ARE PROVIDED THE OPPORTUNITY OF A 1-MONTH RESEARCH RESIDENCY IN A SOUTH ASIAN CITY. DURING THIS RESIDENCY THEY WORK AT A PARTNER THINK TANK, ENGAGE WITH EXPERTS, AND CONDUCT FIELD STUDY ON A TOPIC OF THEIR INTEREST. THE FELLOWSHIP PRODUCES, AND ENGAGES WITH, REGIONAL NARRATIVES AND FACILITATES KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE ON SHARED CHALLENGES IN AN EVOLVING GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT IN THE SOUTH ASIAN REGION.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MOHIT MUSADDI WORKS AS A SENIOR RESEARCH ASSOCIATE, FOCUSING ON INDIA-BANGLADESH AND INDIA-MYANMAR RELATIONS AT THE INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL AND CULTURAL STUDIES (ISCS), KOLKATA. HE IS ALSO A FELLOW AT POLITEIA RESEARCH FOUNDATION (PRF), HYDERABAD. MOHIT WAS PREVIOUSLY A SENIOR CONSULTANT FOR THE ASIA-PACIFIC REGION IN THE INFORMATION SERVICES DEPARTMENT AT SF GROUP, LONDON. HE MONITORED SECURITY AND RISK DEVELOPMENTS ACROSS 22 COUNTRIES IN THE REGION, ALONG WITH PIRACY AND OTHER SECURITY-RELATED INCIDENTS ACROSS THE SOUTHEAST ASIA MARITIME REGION. FROM 2017 TO 2021, MOHIT WAS A RESEARCH ASSOCIATE AT THE DELHI POLICY GROUP (DPG). AT DPG, HE WAS A PART OF THE ORGANISATION'S BBIN AND BIMSTEC PROJECTS, COVERED DEVELOPMENTS IN BANGLADESH, BHUTAN, MALDIVES, MYANMAR, NEPAL AND SRI LANKA FOR THE MONTHLY PUBLICATION DPG INDIA STRATEGIC REVIEW AND WAS THE LEAD RESEARCH ASSOCIATE FOR THE INDIA-JAPAN TRACK 1.5 DIALOGUES/ INDIA-JAPAN INDO-PACIFIC FORUM FROM 2018-2020. HE HAS AN MA IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS FROM THE WAR STUDIES DEPARTMENT OF KING'S COLLEGE LONDON. MOHIT'S AREAS OF INTEREST INCLUDE DEVELOPMENTS IN INDIAN FOREIGN POLICY, SOUTH ASIA STUDIES, TRADE AND CONNECTIVITY, HUMAN SECURITY AND TERRORISM AND TRANSNATIONAL CRIMES.

## **Assessing Sri Lanka's National Responses to Maritime NTS Challenges**

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

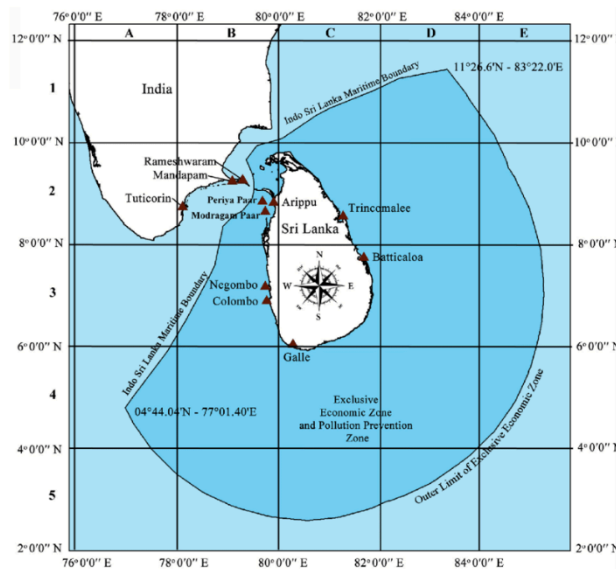
Oftentimes, maritime security is viewed by nation-states through a defense-oriented lens, with greater emphasis on protecting territorial waters and addressing external threats through military might. While this focus highlights the need to defend against significant external dangers, it often misses the broader, multifaceted nature of maritime security. Instead of confining the concept purely to defense, there is a pressing need to include effective management of the ocean's environment and resources as part of our views of maritime security in South Asia.

The analysis provided by Lieutenant Commander Rohan Joseph, which categorizes maritime security into three aspects, is helpful as we re-conceptualize what maritime security means for this part of the world.<sup>1</sup> First there is the military dimension, which includes monitoring passages, activities in exclusive economic zones (EEZs), monitoring and enforcement of environmental laws, and monitoring fishing incursions by foreign ships in EEZs. It is designed to strengthen, preserve, and safeguard territorial sovereignty, as well as maintain coastal stability and security. Second is the environmental dimension, which focuses on preservation and protection of the marine environment. The third aspect is the food dimension, which serves to protect, conserve and enhance the country's marine assets. Keeping this conceptualization in mind, a country's naval capabilities, originally developed for national defense, can be applied more holistically to tackle a wider range of non-traditional security (NTS) issues, including illegal fishing, climate change, and human trafficking, among others. When such an approach is adopted, it has allowed nations to ensure the security of their maritime domains more comprehensively.

### **II. Sri Lanka's Maritime Domain and NTS Challenges**

The Indian Ocean is home to 38 littoral states, 24 ocean territories, and 17 landlocked countries, covering over 35% of the world's population and 40% per cent of the coastline.<sup>2</sup> Almost 100,000 ships transit the Ocean annually, while the region contains over 50% of global oil and gas reserves. Sri Lanka is a key player, located in the middle of the Indian Ocean, with a 1,204-km long coastline.<sup>3</sup> The country is strategically located along the East-West trade route and the Port of Colombo is one of the largest and busiest ports in

South Asia, serving as a major transshipment hub. Apart from Colombo, Sri Lanka also has ports in Galle, Trincomalee, and Hambantota. The Port of Trincomalee is the second-largest natural harbor in the world, whereas Galle is located along the Southwest coast. The Hambantota Port is a deep-water port currently leased to China for a 99-year period.



*Sri Lanka's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)*

**Source:** *Maritime Boundaries Geodatabase, Flanders Marine Institute*

Approximately 33% of Sri Lanka's population lives near the coastline, and over 70% of its industrial and tourist infrastructure has been concentrated in its maritime and littoral areas.<sup>4</sup> The country's strategic location, while being advantageous for trade and maritime connectivity, also makes it susceptible to several traditional and non-traditional security issues. Traditional threats include geopolitical competition, maritime boundary disputes, potential arms race and proliferation of weapons and protection of critical maritime infrastructure, among others. On the other hand, non-traditional security threats are broader in scope, transnational in nature, and require cooperative security measures.

A critical challenge confronting Sri Lanka's maritime security architecture is the issue of illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, which threatens both marine biodiversity and the livelihoods of coastal communities. The depletion of fish stocks due to unauthorized fishing activities, particularly by foreign fleets, has placed immense strain on Sri Lanka's fisheries sector. In 2012, the "European Council 'yellow-carded' Sri Lanka for failing to

properly monitor its fishing fleet, punish vessels guilty of illegal fishing, or develop robust fisheries law to deter IUU fishing”.<sup>5</sup> This sanction was upgraded to a ‘red-card’ in 2015, thereby banning imports of fisheries products from Sri Lanka.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the recurring issue of transboundary fishing violations, particularly in contested waters, has further complicated maritime relations with neighboring states, most notably India. The practice of bottom trawling by Indian fishers illegally entering Sri Lankan waters is a source of concern for Colombo, leading to hundreds of arrests every year by the Sri Lankan Navy.<sup>7</sup> In addition to economic losses, IUU fishing also undermines sustainable marine resource management, necessitating enhanced regulatory enforcement and cooperative governance mechanisms.

Further, environmental and climate-related threats continue to pose significant risks to Sri Lanka’s maritime domain. As an island nation, the country is acutely vulnerable to climate change-induced phenomena such as rising sea levels, coastal erosion, and extreme weather events, all of which have far-reaching implications for maritime security, economic resilience, and disaster preparedness. The Global Climate Risk Index has consistently placed Sri Lanka in the top 10 countries at risk of extreme weather events.<sup>8</sup> The increasing frequency of natural disasters such as cyclones, monsoonal flooding, and storm exacerbates vulnerabilities within coastal communities and critical infrastructure.<sup>9</sup> Estimates suggest that nearly 80% of the population is vulnerable and lacks adaptive capacities, potentially causing a 3.86% decline in GDP by 2050.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, environmental degradation resulting from oil spills, marine pollution, and industrial waste disposal continues to strain Sri Lanka’s maritime governance frameworks.<sup>11</sup> The absence of robust and comprehensive legislation capable of addressing environmental incidents has exposed significant gaps in inter-agency coordination, legal preparedness, and crisis management infrastructure, hindering Sri Lanka’s ability to effectively respond to maritime and environmental challenges.

Beyond these immediate concerns, Sri Lanka must also consider new and emerging NTS threats. The increasing digitization of ports and maritime infrastructure has heightened vulnerabilities to cyberattacks, threatening trade security and port operations. Gray-zone activities, including foreign surveillance and naval encroachments, add complexity to Sri Lanka’s maritime governance, given its strategic location. Cyberattacks targeting automated transportation and loading management systems, electronic data such as cargo tracking, and financial transactions pose significant threats to trade security and economic stability.<sup>12</sup>

These multifaceted NTS challenges underscore the need for a robust and adaptive maritime security framework that moves beyond traditional, state-centric responses toward a more integrated and cooperative approach. While Sri Lanka has undertaken initiatives to strengthen its maritime security institutions, the persistence of enforcement gaps, jurisdictional overlaps, and capacity constraints continues to hinder effective threat mitigation. Addressing these vulnerabilities requires a combination of domestic institutional reforms, strengthened inter-agency coordination, and enhanced engagement with regional and international partners.

The purpose of this piece is to assess Colombo's national response mechanisms, its regional and international cooperation frameworks in the context of the NTS challenges it faces, and suggest policy recommendations for strengthening capabilities to address these challenges.

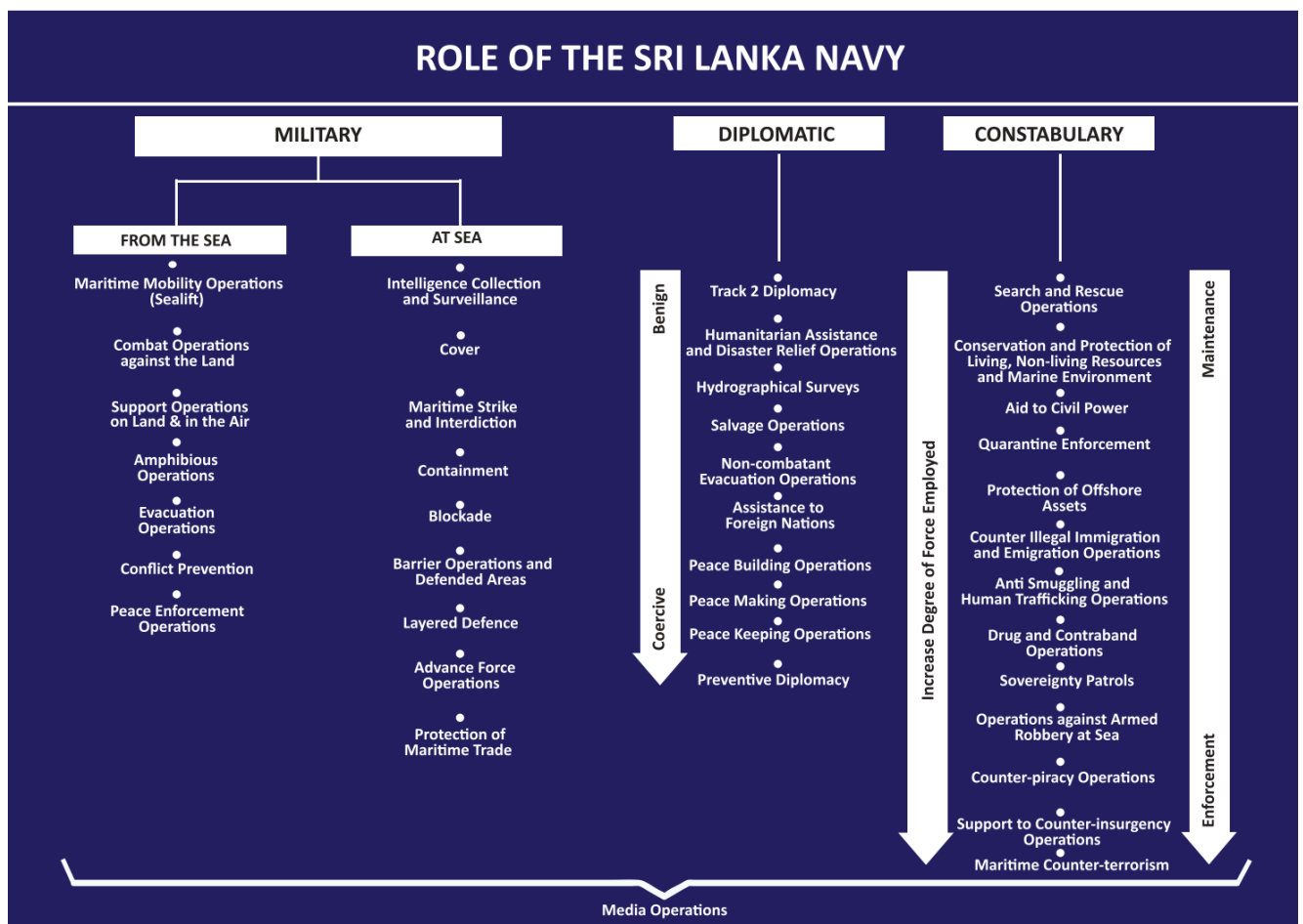
### **III. INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES IN GOVERNING SRI LANKA'S MARITIME DOMAIN**

Sri Lanka has a network of maritime-related institutions, legal frameworks and capacity-building initiatives to address challenges at sea. These include an institutional setup, naval capabilities, public-private partnerships and maritime laws and policies. However, despite these frameworks, significant structural and operational limitations hinder the country's ability to effectively combat NTS threats. The Sri Lankan Navy (SLN), the Coast Guard, and various government agencies operate within overlapping and often inconsistent mandates, leading to inefficiencies in addressing challenges such as illegal fishing, drug trafficking, maritime disasters, and environmental degradation. The continued militarization of maritime governance, bureaucratic inefficiencies, legal loopholes, and insufficient regional coordination further exacerbate the country's vulnerabilities to such threats.

#### ***A. Sri Lankan Navy***

The EEZ of Sri Lanka is eight times the size of its landmass<sup>13</sup>, while its regional rescue responsible area and shared rescue operation and response areas are 27 times its geographical size.<sup>14</sup> The SLN is the country's primary maritime defense force, and the first responder to humanitarian and disaster relief (HADR) assistance at its immediate shores and beyond. While the Navy's traditional role has been defense, its ambit has widened to include NTS challenges, more so after the end of the civil war in 2009. The SLN utilizes its fleet, which includes Advanced Offshore Patrol Vessels (AOPVs) and Offshore Patrol Vessels

(OPVs), for counter-narcotics operations on the high seas. Meanwhile, Fast Gun Boats (FGBs), Coastal Patrol Vessels (CPVs), Fast Attack Craft (FACs), and other vessels are engaged in similar efforts within Sri Lanka’s coastal waters to enhance maritime security across the littoral areas and the EEZ.<sup>15</sup> These operations aim to curb the entry of drugs and other illegal substances into the country. Even though the SLN is responsible for a maritime area significantly larger than Sri Lanka’s landmass, its fleet size and technological capabilities remain inadequate for sustained surveillance and interdiction missions.<sup>16</sup> The Navy’s role in counter-narcotics and anti-smuggling efforts is constrained by legal ambiguities regarding its jurisdiction over civilian maritime crime. While it can intercept vessels at sea, prosecutorial authority lies with civilian agencies, causing delays and inefficiencies in legal proceedings. Moreover, intelligence-sharing between agencies remains weak and a lack of centralized maritime domain awareness prevents coordinated responses to evolving threats.<sup>17</sup>



*Source: Maritime Doctrine of Sri Lanka*

## **B. Sri Lanka's Coast Guard**

The Department of Coast Guard is relatively new, and was incorporated post-war in July 2009, with its operational activities beginning in March 2010.<sup>18</sup> The Coast Guard functions under the Sri Lankan Ministry of Defence. It has been “empowered with legal authority to search and arrest ships, craft and personnel engaged in illegal activities in maritime zones of Sri Lanka and constitute legal proceedings against the offenders”.<sup>19</sup> The Sri Lanka Coast Guard (SLCG) operates as a civilian law enforcement body and its duties include enforcing maritime law, safeguarding fisheries, preventing pollution, and responding to environmental disasters. Apart from the Navy and the Coast Guard, Sri Lanka established a Marine Corps in November 2016, who are also adept at land operations.<sup>20</sup>

Nevertheless, the SLCG has limited capabilities to conduct operations in blue waters (open oceans) and instead conduct their operations, primarily in Sri Lanka's inland waters (green waters).<sup>21</sup> The Coast Guard remains critically underfunded and lacks the personnel, patrol vessels, and surveillance technology necessary for comprehensive coverage of Sri Lanka's vast maritime domain.<sup>22</sup> Unlike other regional coast guards, it has not developed adequate aerial reconnaissance or rapid-response capabilities. Given that the SLCG operates under the Ministry of Defence rather than an independent civilian authority, its ability to function as a neutral maritime law enforcement body is undermined. Militarization of the coast guard reduces its credibility in handling issues like illegal fishing and maritime pollution, which require a regulatory rather than a security-focused approach.<sup>23</sup>

## **C. Government Level**

At the government level, Sri Lanka's Maritime Disaster Agency and Maritime Disaster Centre are responsible for managing natural disasters. The Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC) with its headquarters in Colombo responds to distressed boats and ships in Sri Lanka's search and rescue region.<sup>24</sup> Sri Lanka also has several communication networks, including commercial GSM (global systems for mobile communication) and military communication networks, deployed across the country.<sup>25</sup> The SLN is also equipped with satellite communications. Moreover, the Irrigation Department of Sri Lanka maintains a Flood Monitoring System on the cloud to disseminate information regarding floods.<sup>26</sup> As legal mechanisms, several acts—such as the Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Act, Marine



Pollution Prevention Act and the Disaster Management Act, among others—are designed to address various NTS threats.

However, these agencies suffer from institutional weaknesses that limit their capacity to address NTS threats effectively. There is a lack of inter-agency collaboration, with each institution following its own mandate without an integrated framework for information sharing or joint operations, leading to redundant efforts and inefficient resource use.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the existing legal frameworks suffer from weak enforcement, and corruption and political influence frequently hinder regulatory compliance, particularly in industries like fishing and shipping.<sup>28</sup>

Despite participating in regional maritime initiatives, Sri Lanka's engagement remains limited in scope. The country lacks structured mechanisms with neighbouring states and international partners for intelligence-sharing, joint operations, and coordinated responses to transnational threats.<sup>29</sup>

#### **IV. SRI LANKA'S REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION ON NTS MARITIME ISSUES**

##### **Colombo's Strategic Partnerships for Maritime NTS Issues**

The prosperity of nation-states is inherently tied to their ability to engage in cooperative frameworks with other countries bilaterally as well as through multilateral forums. Being an island nation, it is imperative for Colombo to interact closely with regional and extra-regional powers and partner with them to address NTS threats. This section explores Colombo's cooperative frameworks with India, the US, Australia, Japan, the EU, and the United Nations.

##### ***A. Cooperation with India***

As part of India's Neighbourhood First Policy and the SAGAR (Security and Growth for All) vision, New Delhi has been assisting Sri Lanka in combatting NTS threats through maritime exercises, training and capacity building, intelligence sharing and technology transfer. The two countries conduct an annual bilateral maritime exercise SLINEX to jointly undertake multi-faceted maritime operations.<sup>30</sup> It focuses on anti-piracy, anti-smuggling, and search-and-rescue (SAR) operations. The two countries are also involved in other exercises, including in the multilateral domain. The Indian Navy also regularly conducts training for

their Sri Lankan counterparts to tackle issues such as human trafficking and narcotics smuggling. For instance, in February 2024, two Indian Coast Guard ships conducted a training exercise for Sri Lankan coast guard on visit, board, search and seizure (VBSS), fire-fighting and damage control and maritime pollution response.<sup>31</sup>

The Indian government provides aid to assist in Sri Lanka's capacity building. In June 2024, India committed a grant of USD 6 million to enhance Sri Lanka's MRCC by setting up advanced software systems to strengthen Colombo's capacity in SAR missions.<sup>32</sup> Further, a Maritime Rescue Sub Centre (MRSC) will be established at Hambantota, and further sub-units, based at Trincomalee, Arugambay, Batticaloa, Kallarawa, Point Pedro, Galle, and Mullikulam.<sup>33</sup> India has also donated a 4,000-tonne floating dock, valued at USD 19.81 million for the Sri Lankan Navy to be stationed in Trincomalee.<sup>34</sup> In June 2024, Indian Coast Guard Ship (ICGS) Sachet delivered essential spare parts worth USD 1.2 million on gratis for the Sri Lankan Coast Guard Ship (SLCSG) Suraksha.<sup>35</sup> To improve maritime surveillance, India has provided a Dornier-228 aircraft to Sri Lanka, useful for coastal surveillance operations, search and rescue (SAR) missions, and monitoring and controlling maritime pollution.<sup>36</sup> Such measures will strengthen the Sri Lankan Navy and enhance cooperation for maritime security.

Due to the close proximity of the territorial waters of India and Sri Lanka, particularly in areas like the Palk Straits and the Gulf of Mannar, it is not uncommon for fishermen to accidentally stray into each other's waters. To address this recurring issue, both nations have established mechanisms to manage cases where fishers from either side cross the International Maritime Boundary Line. India and Sri Lanka set up a Joint Working Group (JWG) on Fisheries in 2016 that is focused on patrolling and prevention of incidents at sea.<sup>37</sup> The JWG works towards expediting the transition towards ending the practice of bottom trawling<sup>38</sup> and framing procedures for repatriating fishermen arrested by both sides. Nevertheless, the fisheries issue has somewhat threatened to overshadow bilateral cooperation in this sector. For instance, in August 2024, the fishermen association in Rameswaram launched an indefinite strike following the death of a fisherman and the detention of two others by the Sri Lankan Navy.<sup>39</sup>

### ***B. Third Country Cooperation***

Sri Lanka also engages with countries, such as the United States, Japan, China and Australia as well as the European Union (EU) to address their NTS threats. Cooperation with neighbors, including Maldives and Bangladesh, is also important for Colombo to tackle issues of mutual concern.

Australia has been at the forefront of assisting Sri Lanka in their efforts to combat people smuggling operations for over a decade. The two countries have engaged in close cooperation to pursue legal methods of migration, while equipping the Sri Lankan Navy and Coast Guard in detecting illegal vessels and better monitoring the maritime domain.<sup>40</sup> Canberra has gifted 4,200 GPS trackers to survey boats used by people smugglers.<sup>41</sup> In August 2024, Australia announced that it will donate hydrographic equipment to improve maritime safety.<sup>42</sup> Hydrographic survey is important for the island nation to ensure safety of navigation, effective management and conservation of maritime resources.<sup>43</sup> In 2023, the Australian government gifted a former Royal Australian Air Force Beechcraft KA350 that has helped enhance the country's aerial maritime surveillance capabilities.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, in 2013, it had gifted two patrol boats to assist efforts in combatting people's smuggling operations.<sup>45</sup> The cooperative arrangements, involving the police, immigration authorities, and the military has helped Australia and Sri Lanka address the threat of human smuggling.

The United States-Sri Lanka partnership in NTS has focused on enhancing cooperation in increasing maritime domain awareness (MDA) capabilities through intelligence sharing, training, and providing patrol boats to the SLN.<sup>46</sup> They have also jointly conducted maritime exercises such as the Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) exercise held in April 2024, which also included a Women Symposium to "promote the vital roles women play in peace negotiations, conflict management, and resolution".<sup>47</sup> USAID has provided Sri Lanka nearly USD 26.8 million in 2021 and 2022 through emergency and early recovery, risk reduction, and resilience (ER4) interventions.<sup>48</sup>

Japan has been another critical partner in Sri Lanka's efforts to enhance maritime security. It has provided Sri Lanka with vessels, coast guard training, and technological assistance to improve its capabilities in managing such threats as maritime piracy and illegal fishing.<sup>49</sup> Tokyo's support also extends to environmental security, helping Sri Lanka with disaster relief mechanisms, coastal preservation efforts and training on oil spill responses, as part of its broader regional security contributions in the Indian Ocean.<sup>50</sup>

Sri Lanka and the EU have a Joint Commission to discuss matters of economic and development cooperation. The EU is one of the largest export markets for Sri Lanka, while also providing key humanitarian and developmental assistance to the island nation. In terms of dealing with NTS issues, the EU has focused on assisting Sri Lanka in dealing with the impacts of climate change. The 26<sup>th</sup> Joint Commission meeting, held in February 2024, highlighted the need for the two to work bilaterally and in multilateral fora, on issues of climate financing, climate change and environmental protection.<sup>51</sup> The EU has provided Sri Lanka with over EUR 760 million (USD 838 million approx.) in developmental and humanitarian assistance, including for issues such as post-tsunami reconstruction, assistance to conflict-affected people, and for mitigating climate change through the promotion of sustainable consumption and production.<sup>52</sup>

Sri Lanka also has bilateral cooperation with European nations to address NTS threats. In 2023, Colombo approved a French-funded move to establish a satellite system for detecting oil spills caused by ships within the country's waters.<sup>53</sup> This is after the country witnessed two marine disasters within a year as the MT New Diamond caught fire and burned intermittently for a week in September 2020, while X-Press Pearl MV spilled 25 tonnes of nitric acid in May 2021, highlighting the deficiencies in Sri Lanka's capacity to prevent, manage, and mitigate large-scale maritime disasters.

### ***C. Sri Lanka's NTS maritime issues and the UN***

The United Nations (UN) has been at the forefront in assisting Sri Lanka address its NTS maritime issues through various agencies and initiatives, focusing on areas such as maritime piracy, human trafficking, illegal fishing, environmental protection, and disaster risk reduction. Overall, UN's assistance in dealing with NTS maritime issues in Sri Lanka targets security threats as well as sustainability, legal frameworks, and disaster preparedness.

In line with the UN's Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 14, the UN has provided technical and financial assistance to Sri Lanka for the conservation and sustainable use of marine biodiversity. This support aims to protect marine ecosystems and enhance the sustainable use of marine resources, which are vital to Sri Lanka's economy and environmental health.

The UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has worked with Sri Lanka to address IUU fishing. The FAO has provided technical assistance in fisheries management, sustainable

practices, and compliance with international regulations, particularly through initiatives like the Port State Measures Agreement (PSMA).<sup>54</sup> FAO is assisting Colombo replace the Fisheries Act 1996 with a new Act that will provide measures to combat IUU fishing.<sup>55</sup> This helps Sri Lanka align its fishing industry with global standards, reducing the risks of illegal fishing and overexploitation of marine resources.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has supported Sri Lanka in tackling maritime human trafficking and smuggling. While piracy in the Indian Ocean has generally been less of a direct threat to Sri Lanka compared to other countries like Somalia, the UNODC has supported Sri Lanka in maritime law enforcement. For instance, the UNODC's Global Maritime Crime Programme (GMCP) has worked with Sri Lanka to bolster MDA capabilities through a series of training programmes.<sup>56</sup> These initiatives aim to equip Sri Lanka's maritime agencies with the skills and knowledge necessary to effectively address maritime threats and enhance overall maritime security.<sup>57</sup> These efforts also focus on strengthening border control, improving detection, and enhancing legal frameworks to combat organized crime linked to maritime trafficking.

The UN Environment Programme (UNEP) has worked with Sri Lanka on addressing marine pollution, coastal erosion, and climate change impacts. Initiatives focus on strengthening capacities to use Strategic Environmental Assessment for development plans and programs, protecting the marine environment from threats like oil spills and plastic pollution, among others.<sup>58</sup> The UN's involvement includes capacity-building, policy support, and promoting sustainable coastal management to enhance Sri Lanka's resilience to environmental threats. The UN has also assisted in improving Sri Lanka's preparedness for maritime disasters such as tsunamis and cyclones. The UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR), in collaboration with the International Maritime Organization (IMO), has helped build Sri Lanka's capacity for maritime disaster risk management.<sup>59</sup> This includes early warning systems, response mechanisms, and building resilience to coastal disasters, vital for both economic and human security.

Colombo is also a member of other multilateral fora for dealing with traditional as well as non-traditional maritime security threats. Sri Lanka is currently serving as the Chair of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) until 2025. The organization has 23 member states along with 11 dialogue partners and focuses on six priority areas, including Maritime Safety

and Security, Fisheries Management, Disaster Risk Management and Blue Economy, among others.<sup>60</sup> It is also a member of BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation), which deals in sub-sectors such as blue economy along with agriculture, fisheries and livestock, among others.

## **V. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

NTS threats do not generally require a military force response. Instead, these issues require interventions from the concerned law enforcement agencies and for the military to be the first responder in an emergency. Even though Sri Lanka may exercise sovereign rights over a substantial ocean area, maritime borders are less obstructive, lacking effective surveillance and investigative mechanisms due to the vastness of their EEZs.<sup>61</sup> Addressing these challenges requires a holistic and multi-dimensional approach that strengthens institutional coordination, enhances operational capabilities, and fosters public-private partnerships. Sri Lanka must adopt a forward-looking strategy that integrates national security imperatives with international cooperation to mitigate NTS threats effectively. In this context, the following policy recommendations outline critical steps that can bolster the country's maritime security framework and improve its ability to respond to emerging threats.

### **A) Developing a comprehensive National Security Strategy (NSS)**

Sri Lanka needs to develop a comprehensive National Security Strategy (NSS), which is inclusive of the country's traditional and non-traditional security threats in the maritime realm and beyond. This must complement the existing Maritime Strategy of 2025 and the Maritime Strategy of 2030 (and beyond) and must have clear objective mechanisms.<sup>62</sup> The NSS must also identify potential areas of concern in the future, and must formulate detailed action plans to deal with the same. Such a strategy will inspire confidence among stakeholders and international partners, while preparing the government and the military to effectively tackle Sri Lanka's non-traditional security challenges.

### **B) Establishing a National Maritime Single Point of Contact**

To address institutional weaknesses, Sri Lanka must foster greater inter-agency collaboration among maritime institutions. To effectively combat NTS threats in the Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka must consider establishing a National Maritime Single Point of Contact. Sri Lanka's key

maritime authorities—such as the Marine Environment Protection Authority (MEPA), National Aquatic Resources Research and Development Agency (NARA), and the Sri Lanka Ports Authority—are inadequately equipped and understaffed to address oceanic challenges.<sup>63</sup> A new regulatory authority with clearly defined responsibilities for maritime safety could better coordinate the nation’s responses to maritime emergencies and administer Sri Lanka’s international maritime obligations. Moreover, establishing integrated frameworks for information sharing and joint operations will reduce redundancy and improve resource efficiency. Regular inter-agency meetings and joint training exercises can facilitate better communication and coordination in responding to NTS threats.

### **C) Using the Sri Lankan Armed Forces More Efficiently**

A critical aspect of adapting to the evolving security landscape is the ongoing ‘rightsizing’ of the Sri Lankan military.<sup>64</sup> By 2030, the government aims to reduce the navy to 30,000.<sup>65</sup> This resizing will allow for a more flexible force structure that is better equipped to handle NTS threats. In an interview with the author, Admiral Samarasinghe stressed that the Sri Lankan sailors lack “situational experience”, and that the rightsizing must allow for the Navy to improving the quality of their sailors through more training programs and also by putting them out at sea.<sup>66</sup> Samarasinghe has urged the SLN to acquire more versatile naval assets, including landing crafts and tugboats which will be useful to assist other vessels in case of disasters. Acquiring multi-role vessels would improve SLN’s power projection, enabling effective responses far beyond Sri Lanka’s immediate shores.<sup>67</sup> The SLN must also acquire sea-going helicopters as part of being first respondents to HADR operations.<sup>68</sup>

### **D) Enhancing Asymmetric Warfare Capabilities**

In response to new and emerging NTS threats, the SLN must enhance its asymmetric warfare capabilities by incorporating innovative technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI). Such capabilities would strengthen Colombo’s response against a range of challenges in cyber and related domains.<sup>69</sup> The SLN must also be a part of more naval exercises with friendly nations, particularly in the NTS domain, specifically designed to practice response strategies against piracy, drug smuggling, and natural disasters like floods and cyclones among others. Such exercises must also be regularly conducted among different agencies of the SLN.

### **E) Engaging PMSCs for NTS Challenges**

The deployment of private maritime security companies (PMSCs) offers an important example of how public-private partnerships can potentially play a significant role in addressing maritime challenges, including non-traditional security threats like piracy, smuggling, illegal fishing, and environmental protection. Such partnerships can leverage the expertise, resources, and operational flexibility of the private sector while benefitting from the regulatory authority, intelligence, and strategic oversight of government bodies.

PMSCs can be deployed for enhancing MDA capabilities, providing specialized training to address issues of illegal migration and IUU fishing and implementing cybersecurity measures to protect critical ship systems. Nevertheless, the high costs of PMSCs as well as their adherence to national laws and international standards must be taken into prior consideration.<sup>70</sup> Even beyond the role of PMSCs, greater public-private initiatives across NTS domains are required.<sup>71</sup>

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

The maritime security landscape in Sri Lanka is characterized by a complex interplay of traditional and non-traditional security challenges that necessitate a comprehensive and multifaceted approach. The strategic location of Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean positions it as a critical player in regional trade and security dynamics. However, this advantage also exposes the nation to various threats, including geopolitical competition, illegal fishing, human trafficking, and environmental degradation.

The analysis underscores the importance of reconceptualizing maritime security beyond a purely defense-oriented framework. By integrating military, environmental, and food security dimensions into national strategies, Sri Lanka can leverage its naval capabilities to address a broader spectrum of non-traditional security issues. This holistic approach is essential for effectively managing the country's extensive maritime domain, which is vital for both its economy and ecological sustainability.

Addressing Sri Lanka's maritime security challenges requires an integrated approach that encompasses military readiness, environmental stewardship, and effective resource management. By implementing these policy recommendations, Sri Lanka can enhance its capacity to safeguard its maritime domain while contributing to regional stability and security in the Indian Ocean.



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