

India moves to strengthen strategic relations with Sri Lanka and the Maldives

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India's National Security Advisor Ajit Doval visited Colombo late last month to participate in a Trilateral Maritime Security Cooperation meeting. Secretary to the Ministry of Defence, Major General (Rtd.) Kamal Gunaratne, represented Sri Lanka, and Mariya Didi, the Minister of Defence, represented the Maldives at the meeting.

Revived after six years, the gathering, which involved India, Sri Lanka and the Maldives, further highlights the Modi government's efforts to strengthen strategic relations with its smaller neighbours.

New Delhi's moves take place under conditions where its strategic rival China is courting Colombo. Sri Lanka has become another focal point in the geopolitical struggle between India and the US, on one side, and China, on the other.

The main aim of Doval's visit was to encourage maritime cooperation in order to counter Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean region. Sri Lanka and the Maldives are strategically located adjacent to crucial sea lanes in the Indian Ocean.

The trilateral meeting discussed maritime cooperation on "domain awareness," humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and joint military exercises. The Sri Lanka Defence Ministry will coordinate all maritime security projects. The meeting also decided to establish a deputy-level working group that would meet biannually.

Since President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih came to power in 2018, the Maldives government has functioned as a proxy of New Delhi and Washington. New Delhi is now working to bring Colombo into line with US and Indian geo-political ambitions.

Washington has stepped up its activities in South Asia to strengthen its military and strategic partnerships against China.

In October, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited Sri Lanka and Maldives, following his trip to India with then US Defence Secretary Mark Esper. In November, India held the 2020 Malabar joint naval exercises with the US, Japan and Australia.

With the blessing of India, the US and Maldives signed the "Framework for U.S. Department of Defense-Maldives Ministry of Defence Defense and Security Relationship" agreement on September 10.

Under this deal, the two countries will "deepen engagement and cooperation in support of maintaining peace and security in the Indian Ocean," including military-to-military dialogue at senior level and joint activity. Stripped of the diplomatic jargon, Maldives is now integrated into Washington's war plans against China.

Last month's Trilateral Maritime Security Cooperation meeting was also used to further cement relations between Colombo and New Delhi on other key issues.

A Sri Lankan presidential statement on November 28 declared that the discussions were "highly fruitful" but provided no clear details. The *Citizen*, an Indian website, reported on November 30 that President Rajapakse was keen to honor the Memorandum of Cooperation on the Eastern Container Terminal (ECT) signed in May last year.

The long-pending tri-nation project—involving Sri Lanka, Japan and India—to develop and run the strategically located facility at Colombo port is due to commence. Under the agreement a Terminal Operations Company (TOC) is to be established to conduct all operations. Sri Lanka would retain a 51 percent ownership, with the other joint venture partners holding the remaining 49 percent.

With between 70 and 80 percent of Colombo port

traffic involving Indian transshipment, it is critical for New Delhi to have a foothold in Colombo port. The Chinese-owned Colombo International Container Terminal (CICI) is involved in the ECT.

The original ECT development proposal by India was announced in 2016 by then Sri Lankan Minister of Ports Arjuna Ranatunga, but was scuttled by President Maithripala Sirisena. Fifteen joint venture projects, with memoranda of understandings, were signed in 2017 and are still pending, raising concerns in New Delhi.

Rajapakse and Doval have reportedly agreed to the expeditious development of infrastructure projects with Indian assistance. Reeling under a growing foreign debt crisis, Rajapakse has called for increased investments, not loans, and is seeking financial assistance from Beijing, a point of contention with Washington and New Delhi.

During his visit, Doval also agreed to build low-cost housing, having already constructed some in Sri Lanka's Tamil-speaking North and East, and the central tea plantation areas.

Sri Lanka has boosted its political, military and economic relations with India in the past few months. On October 24, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Sri Lankan Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse held their first online bilateral summit. While Colombo requested a delay in debt repayments and a \$US1 billion currency swap arrangement, Modi was non-committal.

During his trip, Doval held an unscheduled meeting with Tamil National Alliance leader R. Sampanthan. According to the *Citizen* website, Sampanthan raised the Sri Lankan government's intention to abolish or weaken the provincial councils, which are central to the TNA's push for greater devolution.

The website reported that Doval and Sampanthan discussed economic development in the North and East but that they wanted talks on the provincial councils kept under wraps, because they did not want the issue "to come between the two countries."

While the provincial councils, which were part of the 1987 Indo-Lanka accord, do not address the oppression of the island's Tamil minority, any concessions to the Tamil elite are regarded as a "betrayal" by sections of the Colombo ruling elite, including the military hierarchy.

Apart from the Maldives and Sri Lanka, New Delhi has also increased its activities in Nepal, a country that has developed closer relations with China during the last few years.

On October 21, Kumar Goel, chief of the Indian external intelligence agency, Research & Analysis Wing, made a two-day trip to Nepal. This was followed by Indian army chief General Manoj Mukund Naravane's visit to Nepal for three days on November 4, and on November 26, Indian Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla visited Kathmandu for two days of talks.

India is a strategic partner of the US, and also part of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, (QUAD) with the US, Japan, and Australia. This anti-China military alliance has hardened in recent times and is working for joint military planning and action against China.

The belligerent stand of Washington against China has greatly increased the danger of an eruption of military conflict between the two-nuclear armed powers.



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