

Australia and Sri Lanka Deepen Naval Cooperation

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Summary

Australia's [biggest](#) ever defence engagement with Sri Lanka in March 2019 marks the steady expansion of intra-regional security cooperation in the Indian Ocean. It also brings into bold relief Australia's widening naval footprint in the Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka's critical location at the heart of the littoral and Colombo's growing value as a maritime partner.

On 11 March 2019, a Joint Task Force of four Royal Australian Navy ships, the Royal Australian Air Force and 1,000 military personnel [arrived](#) in Sri Lanka for the Indo Pacific Endeavor (IPE) 2019 Exercises. Air Commodore Richard Owen, Commander of the Task Force, described this first stop in the IPE19 mission as important given the history of Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean. The expanding naval engagement between Canberra and Colombo reflects the diversification of maritime relationships across the Indo-Pacific that has emerged as a new geopolitical theatre.

The IPE19 exercises is aimed at increasing Australia's interoperability and coordination of humanitarian and security responses with Indian Ocean countries, as it will carry out a series of maritime activities during port visits to Sri Lanka, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam over a three-month period.

While HMAS Canberra and HMAS Newcastle docked at Colombo port, HMAS Parramatta and HMAS Success charted towards the port of Trincomalee. The navies of Sri Lanka and Australia [engaged](#) in nautical maneuvers, helicopter exchanges, disaster and humanitarian relief operations. The Royal Australian Air Force aircraft visited Mattala airport.

The exercises mark Canberra's [biggest](#) defence engagement with Sri Lanka. Until now, Australia-Sri Lanka strategic relations were centered on cooperation to stop people smuggling. Over the years, the focus of bilateral engagement expanded from the non-traditional to the more strategic. Australia [stated](#) in its 2016 Defense White paper that "Sri Lanka's location on a vital maritime corridor in the Indian Ocean has seen Australia gradually increase defence cooperation, including establishing a resident Defence Adviser in Colombo."

Canberra's pivot to the Indian Ocean is not a new phenomenon. Its interest the Indian Ocean was reflected in its initiative to promote the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) in the late 1990s. There now seems to be a shift from sporadic and isolated engagement to a more coherent approach in the Indian Ocean region under the framework of the Indo-Pacific. The Defense White paper explicitly [stated](#) that Australia's security depends on a "stable Indo-Pacific region and a rules-based global order". The 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper demonstrated Australia's interest in naval cooperation with Sri Lanka by [stating](#): "We

will deepen joint exercises and build maritime domain awareness with India and collaborate on maritime safety and security with other Indian Ocean partners, like Sri Lanka.”

Sri Lanka, in turn, has a growing interest in deepening naval and maritime engagement with Canberra. Since the end of the civil war, Colombo has begun to look beyond its South Asian identity and enhance its Indian Ocean identity. As Sri Lanka’s then-Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera [said](#) in 2015: “Reclaiming our Indian Ocean identity helps us and others unlock the tremendous opportunities for attracting FDI, accessing markets and developing our tourism industry.”

Over the last decade, Sri Lanka has been stepping up its maritime engagement in the Indian Ocean. It has hosted an increasingly popular annual ‘Galle Dialogue’ on regional maritime cooperation since 2010. As the Indian Ocean reemerges as a critical strategic space, it was perhaps inevitable that Sri Lanka would rediscover its geographic centrality in the region. As great powers joust for influence in the Indian Ocean, it was also inevitable that Colombo will draw greater political attention than before.

It is the rivalry between India and China that framed Sri Lanka’s new maritime profile. The handing over of the Hambantota port to China on a 99-year lease created a lot of anxiety in New Delhi on China entering its sphere of influence. These concerns are further aggravated with the Chinese investment in the Colombo Port City project.

India has stepped up its own naval engagement of Sri Lanka by recently conducting the 4th edition of SLINEX maritime exercise. So have the US and Japan. The United States Indo-Pacific Command engages the Sri Lankan military on capacity building, humanitarian assistance and peacekeeping operations. Japan increased its efforts by sending the biggest warship, the Kaga helicopter carrier, to Sri Lanka last year.

Australia is a treaty ally of the US and has drawn quite close to Tokyo and Delhi lately. It is a member of the quadrilateral alliance with the US, India and Japan. Its intensified engagement with Sri Lanka must be seen against this background. The visit of Australian ships, HMAS Parramatta and HMAS Success, to Trincomalee underlines the growing international focus on this strategically located port city on the eastern coast of Sri Lanka. India and Japan, as well as Singapore, have expressed their interest in developing Trincomalee. Now Australia too appears to be signaling its interest.

The expansion of Australia’s security cooperation with Sri Lanka is symbolic of the growing number of bilateral, trilateral and plurilateral engagements in an increasingly competitive geopolitical environment in the Indian Ocean. For Canberra, it is about widening its strategic footprint in the littoral while for Colombo, it is about leveraging its central location in the Indian Ocean.

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