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# An Analysis of Defense and Security Cooperation Challenges between India and Sri Lanka (2014–2025)

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### ABSTRACT

This paper aims to analyse India's role in international security formation from the post-Cold War era to the contemporary Indian Ocean. It will analyse India's strategic defence partnerships with Sri Lanka, focussing on military hardware, training, and counter-terrorism mechanisms. The paper will evaluate defence dialogues, military intercourse, and counter-terrorism cooperation to understand how these have improved India's security situation at home and globally. India and Sri Lanka have long-standing security cooperation, focussing on maritime security, countering terrorism, and addressing transnational crime, with India providing assistance in maritime security and disaster relief. India's 'Neighbourhood First' policy and S.A.G.A.R. vision are centred on Sri Lanka. The foundation of bilateral relations is citizen interaction and a shared cultural heritage, and these relationships are mature and diverse. India-Sri Lanka has maintained high-level bilateral relations, with Prime Minister Modi visiting Sri Lanka three times since 2014. External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar visited Sri Lanka seven times since 2019, meeting with President the 75th Independence Day celebrations and the dedication of the Jaffna Cultural Centre.

Former Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe visited India in June and July 2023, holding discussions with Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The visit resulted in the adoption of a vision document, agreements in renewable energy, dairy cooperation, digital transactions, and participation in India's Voice of Global South Summit. The Kachathivu island dispute between India and Sri Lanka has resurfaced, with the Indian Prime Minister questioning its relinquishment. This article explores the historical context, Indo-Sri Lanka Treaty, current status, and implications.

**Key word** - S.A.G.A.R. vision, defense partnerships, . . India's 'Neighbourhood First' counter- Terrorism

### Introduction

Strong bilateral ties in international relations are frequently built on the promise of reciprocal respect for security and sovereignty. Given the close historical, cultural, and geopolitical ties between the two countries, this remark is quite important for India. Sri Lanka's geopolitical location at a critical point in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) enhances its contribution to regional security and stability. In light of growing external influences and regional geopolitical competition, India must work with Sri Lanka to protect its marine and territorial interests.

India and Sri Lanka have long-standing historical, cultural, and economic ties, characterized by shared Buddhist heritage and Tamil connections. Post-independence, they faced nation-building challenges and security concerns. The relationship now focuses on mutual economic development, maritime security, and regional threats. Maintaining Sri Lanka's neutrality is crucial for countering external influence, especially in the IOR. Enhancing engagement can deter adversarial forces. Maritime security aligns with India's strategy, and collaboration in underwater surveillance and anti-piracy strengthens regional security.

### Literature review

1. The Asian Security Studies Review explores the security situation in the Palk Bay region, focusing on the relationship between India and Sri Lanka.
2. Rajesh Rajagopalan's "Security" is discussed in Bhupinder S. Chimney and Siddhartha Mallavrapu's 2015 book, International Relations: Perspectives for the Global South.
3. Arvind Gupta's 2018 book, "How India Manages its National Security," explores the country's approach to managing its national security. The text provides a conceptual analysis of the security dilemma in safety studies, specifically focusing on the concept of security.

4. S Jaishankar's book, *The Indian Way: Strategy for an Uncertain World*, was published by HarperCollins in 2020.
5. Marko Juttinen's 2018 article "Kautilya's Foreign Policy Analysis: Sino-Indian Dynamics in South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region" explores the dynamics between the two countries. The text explores India's security identity from 1947-1998, focusing on ideological parameters, challenges, and priorities. It also discusses India's national security challenges, including the Armed Forces, and its evolving identity from a subcontinental power to the Asia-Pacific region. The sources provide valuable insights into India's security landscape.
6. Kanti Bajpai's "Global Terrorism" and Arjun Subramaniam's "Challenges to Protect India from Terrorism" provide valuable insights into the global threat of terrorism.
7. Stefan Tankel's work on Pakistan's approach to Islamic extremism, understanding jihadists as products of their environment, and India's jihadism highlight the growing threat of terrorism.
8. Rakesh Kumar's article "India and South Asia: Geopolitics, Regional Trade and Economic Growth Spillovers" explores the impact of regional trade and economic growth on these regions. The article explores China's national security argument, global impact of unfinished reforms, India's cyberspace security, Sino-Indian security dilemma, India's maritime strategy, China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative, and counter-intervention in Chinese military strategy.

### **RESEARCH GAP**

One notable research gap in the study of historical perspectives of India-Sri Lanka relations is the limited exploration of the India & Sri Lanka review defence & security cooperation the bilateral relationship. While existing research often focuses on defence & security cooperation, and political dimensions, there is a need to delve deeper into the role of shared history, language, religion, and cultural ties in shaping the relationship between these two countries. Understanding how these elements have influenced public perceptions, grassroots diplomacy, and societal attitudes could provide valuable insights into the nuances of the relationship and offer a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics between India and Sri Lanka.

### **LIMITATION OF THE STUDY**

This study may be subject to misconceptions present in historical narratives, which may influence the interpretation of events and their significance, potentially confusing the representation of the relationship between India and Sri Lanka.

Interpretations of historical events and agreements, as well as their implications, can vary among researchers and historians, leading to differing perspectives and potential inconsistencies in analysis.

The scope of study may be limited, focussing primarily on official documents, diplomatic exchanges, and traditional historical reports, which may undergo alternative perspectives and fundamental perspectives that may offer a deeper understanding of the relationship.

Historical analysis can focus primarily on past events, potentially ignoring the contemporary dynamics and future trajectories of relations between India and Sri Lanka, which are important for understanding the complexities of the present and predicting future challenges.

### **OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY**

This study explores the Maritime security Issue's between India and Sri Lanka. The Mitra Shakti military exercise between India and Sri Lanka aims to strengthen their relationship through tactical operations in counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:**

This study examines the historical perspectives of India and Sri Lanka using secondary sources like articles, books, journals, research papers, and websites. Primary sources include respondents based on age, gender, and nationality, while secondary sources include published research papers, reference books, political commentary, biographies, dissertations, and newspaper editorials. Data collection tools include observation and questionnaires.

### **The significance of the Study**

Sri Lanka's strategic and security interests are at stake due to its geographically attractive location in the Indian Ocean. However, the conflicting interests of India and China has put the pearl of the Indian Ocean in jeopardy. This paper discusses Sri Lanka's approach to balancing good relations with these two superpowers, assessing the importance of support from both countries. The paper suggests that Sri Lanka's professional position can significantly benefit its development. Sri Lankan ports is strategic and economic, with plans to build the Trincomalee port to counter China's presence.

Sri Lanka's political situation is influenced by its strategic location in the Indian Ocean, and India's increasing security personnel in Sri Lanka's armed forces is a concern.

## **List of Joint Military Exercises of the Indian Army**

The following table provides you with a list of important Indian bilateral army exercises.

<b>Exercise Name</b>	<b>Participant Nations</b>
Sampriti	India & Bangladesh
Mitra Shakti	India & Sri Lanka
Maitree Exercise	India & Thailand
Vajra Prahar	India & US
Yudh Abhyas	India & US
Nomadic Elephant	India & Mongolia
Garuda Shakti	India & Indonesia
Shakti Exercise	India & France
Dharma Guardian	India & Japan
Surya Kiran	India & Nepal
Hand in Hand Exercise	India & China
SIMBEX	India & Singapore
Shakti Exercise	India & France
CORPAT	India & Thailand

### ***Collaboration in Defense and Security***

India and Sri Lanka have a robust defence relationship, involving training, joint exercises, military equipment supply, high-level visits, and goodwill visits, with an annual Defence Dialogue to review and enhance cooperation. India is the largest foreign training provider to Sri Lankan Armed Forces, participating in bilateral exercises like SLINEX and MITRA SHAKTI, and the multilateral MILAN naval exercise hosted by the Indian Navy. Sri Lanka Navy installed Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC) under GOI grant, and IN Dornier Aircraft successfully conducted maritime surveillance since Aug 2022. Indian and Sri Lankan Armed Forces engage in high-level visits, cultural exchanges, and counter terrorism cooperation, with India acting as a 'first responder' in Sri Lanka's waters. India has renewed its strategic partnership with Sri Lanka, following a four-decade gap since the 1987 Indo-Sri Lanka Accord. The new agreement, signed during Prime Minister Modi's visit, includes agreements on energy, digital infrastructure, and development projects, many centered in the Tamil-majority North-East. The renewed pact is part of India's "Neighbourhood First" policy and "Vision MAHASAGAR," designed to counter China's growing influence in the Indian Ocean region.

On November 12, 2004, during the India-Sri Lanka Summit in New Delhi, an agreement was made for India and Sri Lanka to conduct joint military exercises. 'Mitra Shakti' is an annual joint training exercise between the Indian Army and the Sri Lankan Army that has been going on since 2012. The pact expands upon previous accords from 1998 and 2003, which were mainly focused on improving interoperability and fortifying military connections between the two militaries. The "Mitra Shakti" exercise focuses on coordinated counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations in both urban and rural settings.

The second Mitra Shakti took place in 2014 in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

· Mitra Shakti III took place in 2015 in Pune, India

India and Sri Lanka completed their joint training exercise "Mitra Shakti-2015" after 14 days, focusing on domestic terrorism, interoperability, and tactical operations. The exercise demonstrated their determination to eliminate terrorism.

Mitra Shakti IV in 2016 at Ambepusa, Sri Lanka

India and Sri Lanka are preparing for the fourth edition of the joint military exercise 'Mitra Shakti 2016', which aims to enhance interoperability of operations under the UN mandate. The exercise will take place from October 24 to November 6, 2016, at the Sinha Regimental Center in Ambepusa, Sri Lanka. The exercise will involve familiarizing each other with their methods, weapons, equipment, and command and control systems, with the goal of enhancing interoperability during Counter Insurgency/Counter Terrorism operations. The eighth Mitra Shakti exercise, conducted in October 2021, focused on counter-terrorism and insurgency operations in semi-urban areas, with an all-arms team of 120 participants.

Exercise Mitra Shakti is conducted annually as part of military diplomacy and interaction between the Indian and Sri Lankan armies. The joint exercise for the year 2018-19 will be conducted in Sri Lanka from 26 March to 08 April 2019.

Exercise Mitra Shakti-2019, the seventh edition of the exercise, aims to improve interoperability and operational efficiency between India and Sri Lanka's armies as part of the United Nations Peacekeeping Force. The exercise focuses on sub-unit level training on counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism operations, highlighting the strength of India-Sri Lanka's military cooperation and engagement. The exercise incorporates UN peacekeeping dynamics and improves military and diplomatic cooperation among participating nations.

The eighth edition of India-Sri Lanka Joint Training Exercise, Mitra Shakti, began on October 5, 2021, at the Combat Training School in Ampara, Sri Lanka.

The ninth edition of the joint military exercise "Mahashay Mitra Shakti-2023" began in Aundh, Pune, from 16m to 29thm November 2023. The exercise aims to conduct sub-conventional operations under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, including coordinating counter-terrorism operations. Both sides will practice tactical operations, Army Martial Arts Routine, Combat Reflex Shooting, and Yoga. The exercise will involve drones, counter unmanned aerial systems, helicopters, and joint drills to secure helipads and evacuate casualties. The exercise aims to enhance defense cooperation and strengthen bilateral ties.

The Indian Army and the Sri Lankan Army will begin the 10th edition of their joint exercise "Mitra Shakti" in Maduroa, Sri Lanka's southern province. A unit of 120 soldiers from the Indian Army's Rajputana Rifles (Raj Riff) will join the exercise starting with the Gajaba Regiment of the Sri Lankan Army. August 12, 2024.

**List of Mitra Shakti Exercises (Year-Wise)**

2014 (Mitra Shakti-II)	Colombo, Sri Lanka
2015 (Mitra Shakti-III)	Pune, India
2016 (Mitra Shakti-IV)	Ambepussa, Sri Lanka
2017 (Mitra Shakti-V)	Pune, India
2018 (Mitra Shakti-VI)	Sri Lanka
2019 (Mitra Shakti-VII)	Pune, India
2021 (Mitra Shakti-VIII)	Sri Lanka
2023 (Mitra Shakti-IX)	Pune, India
2024 (Mitra Shakti-X)	Maduru Oya, Sri Lanka.



India and Sri Lanka signed a new Memorandum of Understanding on Defence Cooperation during Modi's state visit in April 2025. The MoU aims to boost bilateral defence cooperation for five years, involving military exchanges, joint exercises, capacity building, humanitarian assistance, naval port calls, and discussions on defence industry. India and Sri Lanka have signed a defense MOU, recognizing their interconnected national security. The agreement will structure defense cooperation initiatives, involve high-level visits, joint exercises, capacity building, and increased port calls. The two countries also agreed to work on the Colombo Security Conclave and Indian Ocean Security Cooperation. Sri Lanka's Defence Secretary, Sampath Thuyacontha, announced a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with India, based on the 2023 Defence Dialogue. The agreement, which will last five years, allows for termination with three months' notice.

The SLINEX-20 was the eighth annual maritime exercise between Indian and Sri Lankan navies, held off Trincomalee, aiming to enhance interoperability and share best practices.

SLINEX 2009 naval exercise between India and Sri Lanka aimed to enhance interoperability, maritime operations training, and strengthen ties through joint boarding, anti-piracy drills, and search and rescue operations.

SLINEX 2011, a joint naval exercise between the Indian and Sri Lankan Navy, took place off Trincomalee from September 19-23, 2011, aiming to enhance interoperability, promote trust, and safeguard maritime interests.

SLINEX, initiated in 2012, is a bilateral naval exercise between India and Sri Lanka aimed at enhancing interoperability, maritime operations, disaster relief capabilities, and strengthening regional maritime security.

SLINEX 2013, a joint naval exercise between India and Sri Lanka, took place off Goa coast from November 4th to 7th, 2013, aiming to enhance interoperability and strengthen maritime ties between the two navies.

The 2014 SLINEX was a naval exercise between India and Sri Lanka, aimed at enhancing interoperability, mutual understanding, and exchanging maritime best practices off the Trincomalee coast.

The India-Sri Lanka naval exercise, SLINEX 2015, took place from October 27 to November 15, 2015, involving Indian and Sri Lankan ships in harbor and sea phases, including complex operations like anti-piracy drills.

The 2016 SLINEX exercise, spanning three phases, emphasized maritime security, peacekeeping, search and rescue, firing, helicopter operations, and aircraft carrier operations, promoting joint training and cooperation.

The 2017 SLINEX exercise, the seventh in a series of bilateral maritime exercises between India and Sri Lanka, aimed to enhance interoperability and cooperation between the two navies.

SLINEX 2018 was the sixth joint naval exercise between Indian and Sri Lankan Navies, held in Trincomalee, Sri Lanka, from September 7-13, 2018.

The SLINEX 2019 exercise, held in Visakhapatnam, India, aimed to enhance cooperation, strengthen trust, and improve operational effectiveness between Indian and Sri Lankan navies through drills like helicopter exercises and gun firing.

The SLINEX 2022 naval exercise between India and Sri Lanka aimed to enhance interoperability and mutual understanding through both harbor and sea phases.



The SLINEX-23 exercise was a bilateral naval exercise between the Indian and Sri Lankan Navy, held in Colombo from April 3-8, 2023.

The India-Sri Lanka Navy conducted two bilateral maritime exercises, SLINEX-23 and SLINEX-24, in Colombo and Visakhapatnam, respectively, to enhance interoperability, improve mutual understanding, and exchange best practices in maritime operations.

### ***India Sri Lanka security challenges***

Chinese influence, maritime issues, and worries over the 13th Amendment present security challenges for both India and Sri Lanka. disagreements among fisherman, China's increasing influence in Sri Lanka, China's increasing investments in Sri Lanka, including the Hambantota Port, has raised concerns about its growing influence and potential impact on India's strategic interests in the region. India and Sri Lanka face non-traditional security threats like maritime security, drug smuggling, transnational crime, natural disasters, climate change, cyber security, terrorism, and weapons proliferation, requiring transparency and cooperation for regional stability.

The significance of Kachathivu Island.

Navigation, maritime trade and security are significantly affected by the island's location in the Palk Strait. India's ability to monitor and control maritime activity along this vital route is affected by any sovereignty over the islands.

Katchatheevu is home to the temple of San Antonio, a popular destination for Indian fishermen in Tamil Nadu. It serves as a cultural bridge connecting the two countries.

The viability of Tamil Nadu's fisheries depends largely on the marine resources found in the sea near Katchatheevu. Therefore, the occupation of local fisheries depends on access to those resources.



### ***History of Kachathivu Island***

Ram Setu, a bridge connecting Sri Lanka and India, was built 125,000 years ago. The island, originally called Kachchi, has been under Sri Lankan authority since the Portuguese, Dutch, and British periods. The island has been used as a fishing field by both nations, but ownership conflicts persist even after independence. Katchatheevu Island, formed by a 14th-century volcanic eruption, was initially ruled by the Jaffna kingdom of Sri Lanka. After independence, both countries claimed ownership and fishing rights. In 1974, an agreement defined the maritime boundary.

The Katchatheevu Island dispute is a dispute between India and Sri Lanka over fishing rights. Despite India's claim, the island was handed over to Sri Lanka through a maritime agreement in 1974. The Indian fishermen continued to fish in the waters, leading to their arrest by the Sri Lankan authorities. The problem has inflamed political and nationalist tensions, with the government of the state of Tamil Nadu advocating the island's return. The island is home to the church of San Antonio.

The Katchatheevu Island issue is a territorial dispute between India and Sri Lanka over sovereignty and fishing rights. India ceded the island to Sri Lanka in 1974 and 1976 under the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord, allowing Indian fishermen to enter the island without a visa. However, a 1976 supplementary agreement prohibited fishing in everyone's exclusive economic zone without a permit, which caused controversy in Tamil Nadu. The Indian government claims that the status of the island was resolved in 1974.

Kachathivu, a small, uninhabited island in Sri Lanka, is known for its St. Anthony's Church and attracts followers from India and Sri Lanka. The 1974 Indo-Sri Lankan Maritime Treaty recognized Kachathivu as part of Sri Lanka, allowing Indian pilgrims to visit the island's Catholic shrine and fishermen to fish. However, the validity of the transfer was challenged in the Supreme Court of India. The 1976 Supplementary Agreement aimed to define maritime boundaries and exclusive economic zones for both countries. The number of Indian fishermen arrested by the Sri Lankan Navy in the waters off Kachathivu Island varies from year to year. The issue has resurfaced in Indian politics, with the Prime Minister criticizing the opposition party for devolution of the island in 1974. Indian fishermen have been arrested along the Sri Lankan side of the International Maritime Boundary (IMBL) in the Palk Strait and the Gulf of Munnar along with firing by the Sri Lankan Navy on Indian fishing vessels. In 1974, India and Sri Lanka concluded an agreement to protect their marine resources and fishing rights in the Indian Ocean. However, the 1976 agreement superseded the 1974 agreement, which failed to specify the fishing rights of Tamil Nadu fishermen. The ongoing conflict is largely due to uncertainty surrounding the 1976 agreement.

### ***Kachathivu Island Issue***

In 2023, Sri Lankan authorities arrested 240 Indian fishermen, with 220 Tamil Nadu fishermen also arrested. The issue of fishing disputes and arrests continues, with reports of Indian fishermen being arrested for allegedly fishing in Sri Lankan waters, causing tension between the two countries. The Kachathivu Island dispute involves Indian and Sri Lankan fishermen, who claim the 1974 treaty has failed to serve their interests. The Indian government ceded the island to Sri Lanka, while Sri Lanka considers it an integral part of their territory. Fishermen from Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka both demand historic fishing rights and access to traditional fishing grounds. Legal experts and international organizations focus on maritime law and bilateral relations. Kachathivu Island, a 14th-century volcanic eruption in the Palk Strait, is part of the Madras Presidency. Both countries have notified treaties under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), but the 1974 treaty allows for a consistent equidistance line and assigns maritime space to one side for the benefit of the other. The International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) has jurisdiction over disputes between Sri Lanka and India. India, the world's second-largest fish producer, is not complying with international regulations to protect marine biodiversity due to state government approval of trawler fleets. The Kachathivu Island dispute has significant implications beyond territorial sovereignty. It affects the fishing community, causing socio-economic hardship and diplomatic friction. The dispute also impacts India's bilateral relations with Sri Lanka and regional security. The conflict affects local economies and marine diversity, necessitating sustainable management of resources. Overfishing and unsustainable practices contribute to these issues. In 2023, Sri Lankan authorities arrested 240 Indian fishermen, with 220 Tamil Nadu fishermen also arrested. The issue of fishing disputes and arrests continues, with reports of Indian fishermen being arrested for allegedly fishing in Sri Lankan waters, causing tension between the two countries. India introduced trawlers in the Palk Bay in the mid-1960s, causing fish loss and migration to Sri Lanka. Bottom trawling has affected marine ecology and led to fishermen becoming wage laborers. The dispute between India and Sri Lanka has caused national security concerns, job losses, and environmental damage. The delimitation of the Palk Bay region in 1974 led to the International Maritime Boundary Line Agreement, which ceded the island of Kachathivu to Sri Lanka, causing livelihood concerns for Indian and Sri Lankan fishermen. The Kachathivu Island issue, which was handed over to Sri Lanka through agreements in 1974 and 1976, has resurfaced during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's state visit. Opposition parties, including Congress and DMK, have been pressuring the government to resolve the dispute. Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu MK Stalin has written to the Prime Minister, calling for the return of the island, which has become a serious concern for Indian citizens and fishermen. The Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly passed a resolution to reclaim the island to protect the traditional fishing rights of Indian fishermen in the Palk Bay region.

### **Conclusion**

Sri Lanka's strategic location in the Indian Ocean attracts interest from India and China, altering global geopolitics and economics. However, maritime security challenges, including conflicts over fishing rights and illegal goods smuggling, pose a dilemma. Coordination between the two nations is crucial to address maritime terrorism, piracy, and marine pollution. The Kachathivu Island dispute, involving territorial disputes and fishing rights, threatens their relationship. A long-term cooperative strategy with defined policies, maritime management, and humanitarian considerations is needed to preserve peace.<sup>i</sup>

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