South Asia’s largest nation, India, a regional superpower gradually moving towards being a world power is already pushing for greater maritime security engagement, with its southern island neighbors Sri Lanka and the Maldives under its ‘Neighborhood First’ foreign policy doctrine. Using the diplomatic window strengthening the maritime mandate is thus vital for the small islands like Sri Lanka, the Maldives and to the Indian subcontinent. Moreover, for India, the extended island neighbors’ geo-strategic position to its South, links West Asia to East Asia through important sea-lanes is strategically significant.
The three neighbours possess vast sea spaces under the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of the world’s third largest ocean. The significance of this vast expanse of sea was underlined during the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s address to the Sri Lankan Parliament in November 2015 stating that: “The 21st century would be shaped by the currents of the Indian Ocean. Shaping its direction is a responsibility for the countries in the region.”

India is considered as an emerging power in the world, which could influence the future of the South Asian region. Although India faced many odds with Sri Lanka and the Maldives at the beginning of their modern diplomatic history, they have emerged as the most stable states in South Asia in the past seven decades. Furthermore Sri Lanka and the Maldives will be vital island partners that India can undoubtedly develop its relationship with, which will be based on historical and cultural factors.

**Trilateral Maritime Security Cooperation**

In a way, it is true that in certain episodes of India, Sri Lanka, Maldives trilateral history positioned their external policy settings in such a way to expand its own security preferences. Therefore, the emphasis on the maritime Security policy was a key to safeguarding the territorial integrity of these nations. Since 2013 this agenda of the collective approach has been further strengthened through the India, Sri Lanka, and Maldives tripartite maritime security agreement. Harmoniously, this treaty has been a symbol of broad consensus in favor of a shared vision, among the three Indian Ocean neighbors. Some of the clearly visible focus areas in the Tripartite Maritime Security Agreement include: strengthening of coordination of maritime Search and Rescue (SAR), enhancing cooperation in Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA), provision of Long Range Identification and Tracking (LRIT) services, and Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) training and Merchant Ship Information System (MSIS) software by India. This maritime Security alliance in future can be a diplomatic turning point for India to go beyond these three nations in strengthening India’s foreign policy towards its extended South Asian neighbors.

**India**

Over the past few years, India expanded its maritime security coverage with its southern neighbors Sri Lanka and Maldives. Further the expansion of the Indian maritime defence forces and the commissioning of the next generation INS Vikramaditya aircraft carrier in 2013, and additions of destroyers, submarines and battleships to the Indian Navy in the past four decades has resulted in a stronger position for India to ensure a greater stability in the South Asian region. Also, India has increased its defence budget to $57 billion and modernized its maritime competences. For India, the Andaman, Nicobar, Lakshadweep islands and the International Maritime Boundary Line (IMBL) that demarcates Indian and Sri Lankan waters are also key strategic points on India’s southern maritime boundaries that are responsible for stabilizing the security environment of the Indian Ocean. Since the formation of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), India’s policy makers realized that one of the most important means of expanding the diplomatic footprint is through regional integration. Thus, out of the eight South Asian neighbors there is a prospective for Sri Lanka and Maldives to be India’s closest and long term partners. For India to strengthen its neighborhood first policy, it should take a close consideration into these southern neighbors domestic matters when framing its foreign policy agenda.

**Sri Lanka**

The small island state of Sri Lanka lies only twenty-two nautical miles away from the southern coastal tip of the Indian subcontinent, which is economically and politically important for the stability and the security of the region. Accordingly the line, which demarcates the India and the southern island neighbor, is termed as the International Maritime Boundary Line (IMBL). In recent years, a new line of thinking towards expansion of maritime security capabilities through Sri Lanka’s” defence budget has emerged. Notably, out of total allocation, Sri Lanka’s” defence budget accounts for 7 per cent. In the Island nation’s” budget the government has allocated around $2 billion that has been set aside for defence. As a result of the expanding defence budget development of fast attack crafts, special arrow boat squadron, amphibious vessels, high frequency surface wave radar system, and the commissioning of several Offshore Patrol Vessels (OPV) are some of the Naveal assets acquired during the course of five years. Since Sri Lanka is having a massive national security budget, big nations...
like India can directly benefit by selling the defence capacities to Sri Lanka. Also the Sri Lankan government had also ordered two-advanced Offshore Patrol Vessels (OPV)s worth $150 million from India. Therefore, these initiatives can lead towards initial interdependency policies between the large and the small nations like Sri Lanka.

The Maldives

In the contemporary world, the island nation of Maldives is a key for India’s security policy as they have a shared interest with India in promoting peace and stability in the region. The double chain of twenty-six natural ring like atolls of Maldives lie only 500km off the coast from both India and Sri Lanka, has strategic chokepoints at either end of the Indian Ocean, where every day a little over a fifth of the world’s oil, passes daily. Maldives despite being a very small nation is absolutely a significant buffer zone that divides the Indian Ocean from the east to the west, that present within the nearby boundary of the Indian strategic maritime defense orbit. Furthermore India’s Southern neighbor has endured a rapid progressive transition process as it has included the Marine Corps, Special Forces and Airborne Units into the current structure of the Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF). Moreover the Maldivian Coast Guard Services has several fast attack crafts, landing crafts and an offshore patrol vessel to provide maritime defence services to atolls. In the Indian Ocean, south of Maldives the 35 sq.km US Navel base of Diego Garcia with the presence of around 30,000 U.S. defence personnel occupies a key geopolitical position in furthering maritime security policy in the Indo-Pacific region.

Conclusion

Numerous regional policy proposals have been afloat to promote maritime security cooperation with Indian ocean littoral states, through far reaching changes to the trilateral sub regional diplomatic structure. The current Tripartite Maritime pact could aim to act as one of the building blocks to add value to regional security and stability. India has nothing to lose and more to gain through the trilateral maritime security pact with Sri Lanka and the Maldives. The Tripartite Maritime Security Treaty has a long way to go before they reach the status of steadiness as the closest and long-term partners.

(Pic courtesy- Srimal Fernando)

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