



SRI LANKA NEEDS A ‘COMPREHENSIVE NATIONAL MARITIME SECURITY STRATEGY,’ URGENTLY

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As a small island nation situated in the heart of the Indian Ocean, maritime security constitutes a fundamental component of Sri Lanka’s overall national security architecture. Despite this strategic importance, Sri Lanka has yet to articulate its maritime security interests in any official government policy document or to develop a comprehensive maritime security strategy. Although various state institutions have independently attempted to address maritime security concerns, the absence of a coordinated and integrated approach highlights the urgent need for a structured national maritime security framework. Developing such a strategy requires a systematic assessment of current and emerging maritime threats, an evaluation of existing capacities, and the identification of additional resources and capabilities necessary to counter these challenges effectively.

The Challenge: Disconnect between Ambitions and Capabilities

The responsibility for Sri Lanka’s maritime security is shared among various stakeholders, including the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Ports, Shipping, and Aviation. Additionally, several military and civilian agencies play crucial roles in maritime governance, such as the Sri Lanka Navy, Coast Guard, and Air Force, along with the Department of Immigration and Emigration, the Marine Division of the Police, Sri Lanka Customs, the Sri Lanka Ports Authority, the Department of Coast Conservation and Coastal Resource Management, the Ministry of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources, the Marine Environment Protection Authority, the Merchant Shipping Secretariat, and the Ocean Affairs, Environment & Climate Change Division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Despite their involvement, these agencies operate with limited coordination, resulting in fragmented and reactive responses to maritime threats. Furthermore, the absence of a national defence strategy hinders efforts to clearly define and prioritise maritime security interests, making a “Comprehensive Maritime Security Strategy” essential.

Sri Lanka's maritime security threats are predominantly non-traditional. These include maritime terrorism, human trafficking, drug and arms smuggling, illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, maritime accidents, environmental disasters, illegal migration, and a wide array of transnational maritime crimes. Addressing these complex threats requires a forward-looking and coherent national maritime security strategy that outlines clear roles and responsibilities for all stakeholders, ensures effective coordination, and promotes the timely and efficient allocation of resources. Moreover, constraints such as limited capabilities, a struggling economy, and institutional weaknesses present significant challenges for small states like Sri Lanka seeking to enhance their maritime capabilities. The strategies employed by larger, more powerful states may not be similarly applicable to Sri Lanka.

In 2020, the Sri Lanka Navy proposed a modernization plan titled '[Maritime Strategy 2025](#),' which aimed to acquire advanced naval platforms, such as Frigates and Fast Missile Vessels. While these missile vessels are suitable for conventional naval warfare, their relevance to Sri Lanka's immediate security environment, dominated by non-traditional threats, is questionable. However, these larger platforms could enhance maritime presence in contested waters, particularly during combined operations in the Gulf of Aden.

Furthermore, the ongoing economic crisis has rendered the implementation of this plan impractical. This disconnect between strategic ambitions and available resources underscores a deficiency in effective long-term capability planning and reveals a broader shortcoming in strategic maritime thinking. In response to these challenges, the Navy submitted a '[Proposal for Sri Lanka Navy's Strategy 2030 and Beyond](#)' to President Wickremesinghe's administration in 2024 as part of the state's maritime security approach, and it is currently under review. While this represents a positive step forward, it must be integrated with inputs from other stakeholders to develop a truly comprehensive maritime strategy, as the Sri Lanka Navy cannot bear this responsibility alone.

The Solution: A Coherent National Maritime Security Strategy

Historically, Sri Lanka demonstrated effective maritime threat management during the insurgency, through accurate threat assessments and targeted investments in counter-terrorism maritime capabilities. While maritime terrorism still remains a concern, the growing prevalence of non-traditional threats now demands a more comprehensive and integrated approach to maritime security. Currently, Sri Lanka's naval forces are ill-equipped for conventional engagements or regional maritime conflicts due to limited operational readiness and financial constraints.

One of the key challenges in enhancing Sri Lanka's maritime security is the highly centralised nature of operational authority within the Navy. While this structure has ensured a strong and unified maritime defence posture, it has sometimes limited the broader integration of other national stakeholders. Encouraging greater inter-agency

collaboration could bolster the country's overall maritime security architecture. For instance, the Sri Lanka Army, with its considerable workforce and operational experience, could assist with coastal and littoral operations. [In the current context of significant economic challenges, Sri Lanka faces major constraints on public spending.](#) Therefore, amidst economic constraints and ongoing efforts to strengthen governance, it is essential to foster cost-effective, cooperative solutions, whether low-cost or otherwise, to improve outcomes in an economically efficient manner, ensuring sustainable and resilient maritime security.

Enhancing maritime surveillance with modern platforms like [Sea Vision](#) is a positive approach. At the same time, integrating simple technologies such as night vision equipment, illuminating the beaches at night, and effective small boat operations along the coast are possible tactical-level strategies. Regional collaborations with agencies like the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the EU-funded initiative Critical Maritime Routes Indo-Pacific (CRIMARIO), along with the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), have significantly reduced national defence expenditures while improving maritime security, which is a commendable strategy. The threat of drug smuggling, for instance, poses an increasing national security risk as Sri Lanka is increasingly utilised as both a transit point and destination due to its proximity to the Indian subcontinent.

Current naval responses, which often rely on deploying large vessels to patrol the high seas, are resource-intensive and strategically ineffective for ensuring coastal security. A more viable alternative would be to strengthen coastal surveillance and improve inter-agency intelligence sharing. Large naval platforms may suit economically robust nations, but they necessitate continuous operations, extensive maintenance, and considerable human resources, burdens that are financially unsustainable for Sri Lanka. Information sharing occurs through regional fusion centres, yet there is limited physical monitoring of foreign naval presence to counter transnational maritime crimes. Given Sri Lanka's limited resources, leveraging cooperation with regional powers like India, whose navies are better equipped, could be a more effective strategy for managing broader regional threats.

Developing a 'Comprehensive Maritime Security Strategy' for Sri Lanka

Developing a coherent maritime security strategy is a complex and gradual process that requires strategic leadership, institutional continuity, and a clear understanding of both domestic and regional maritime dynamics. Such a strategy cannot be achieved within a single leadership tenure or through reactive, ad-hoc decision-making. It requires investment in strategic research, the development of policy expertise, and the establishment of institutional mechanisms that support long-term planning and implementation.

Formulating a "Comprehensive National Maritime Security Strategy" is imperative to address the growing complexity of maritime threats and the evolving geopolitical

environment. Such a strategy must clearly articulate the nation's maritime interests, identify both current and emerging challenges, define the roles and responsibilities of military and civilian stakeholders, and establish mechanisms for effective inter-agency coordination. Leadership from the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Ports, Shipping, and Aviation is essential to spearhead this initiative.

The development process must be informed by a deep understanding of maritime policy, strategic foresight, and operational realities, anchored in both maritime and military expertise. These are foundational elements for creating a coherent and actionable strategy. Moreover, the strategy must align with broader national security imperatives and economic development objectives, particularly in the context of Sri Lanka's aspirations within the Blue Economy framework. A well-formulated maritime security policy will not only enhance national resilience but also position Sri Lanka as a proactive and responsible maritime actor in the Indian Ocean region.

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