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India, Sri Lanka & Maldives: A Maritime Troika Leads the Way

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India, Maldives and Sri Lanka have recently signed an agreement on Trilateral Cooperation on Maritime Security (TCMS) to address common maritime security threats and challenges and enhance security through cooperative measures. The Outcome Document released at the end of the National Security Advisor level talks held in July 2013 highlights the intention of the 'maritime troika' i.e. India, Maldives and Sri Lanka to enhance maritime security in the southern Arabian Sea through Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA), Long Range Identification and Tracking (LRIT), Merchant Ship Information System (MSIS) and Automatic Identification System (AIS).

The troika also decided to enhance Search and Rescue (SAR) coordination including training, develop marine oil pollution response cooperation, expand the contents of the bilateral exercises, exchange information on illegal maritime activities through the established channels of communications, and establish a sub-group on policy and legal issues related to piracy. These are significant initiatives and need to be viewed from the geographical-commercial-strategic-environmental-legal matrix.

First, the maritime troika is critical for international shipping transiting through the Arabian Sea. The troika states are strategically located astride the sea lane that connects the Strait of Hormuz to Straits of Malacca. The sea area between India and Maldives is not a choke point per se but is fairly wide and can be termed high seas strategic passageways where the bulk of merchant traffic funnels in/out. The high density of merchant traffic through these waters can potentially witness accidents and pollution including dumping of waste that would have immense impact on the marine environment with dire consequences for the tourism and fishing industry, particularly that of the Maldives.

Second, is the scourge of Somali sea piracy that has now come close to the shores of Maldives and India. There have been a number of incidents of capture of Somali pirates in Maldivian waters and has exposed the vulnerability of the island state to piracy.

Third, the troika states have witnessed terrorism from the sea. In 1988, there was an attempt to overthrow the Maldivian government by some Sri Lanka based dissidents who came from the sea with mercenaries but were later captured by the Indian navy. In Sri Lanka, the LTTE (a terrorist group that has now been decimated) had developed a powerful maritime combat capability with full control over the northern waters of Sri Lanka. In 2008, India witnessed terrorism from the sea after terrorist embarked on fishing boats landed at waterfronts in Mumbai.

Fourth, the current security architecture of Maldives and Sri Lanka is inadequate to deter, detect and defeat maritime security threat and challenges. At functional-operational level, the troika navies have bilateral mechanism for engaging in naval exercises, ship visits, training, transfer of naval hardware, and sharing of intelligence. India and Maldives have signed agreements to deploy maritime patrol aircraft to enhance MDA as also monitor the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) for illegal activities. The two navies conduct joint naval patrols in Maldivian waters and have established a mechanism for intelligence sharing. As part of capacity building, India has also provided fast attack craft to the Maldives and assisted in setting a network of coastal radars. Likewise, India and Sri

Lanka have a number of similar arrangements aimed at naval capacity building.

Fifth is the issue of legal training to prosecute pirates. For instance, Maldives had sought international help to develop legal capacity to prosecute the 40 Somalis pirates in its jails. The US Naval Investigation Service and Interpol provided training on ways to conduct investigation into piracy and the method of interviewing pirates and probe such cases.

The TCMS is a robust tool available to the troika to address maritime security threats and challenges in a holistic manner. It also helps expand the defensive maritime perimeter of the troika further seawards. In this context, it has been noted that India is working closely with its maritime neighbours and that “The Indian Navy has been mandated to be a net security provider to the island nations in the Indian Ocean Region. We would like to assure our maritime neighbours about our unstinted support for their security and economic prosperity,”

Finally, it would be useful to explore the possibility of extending the TCMS to the Malacca Strait Sea Patrol (MSSP), a maritime security initiative by Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand. It involves combined and coordinated aerial surveillance under the Eyes in the Sky (EIS) programme, Intelligence Exchange Group (IEG) and a number of operational security measures to enhance safety and security of shipping in the Straits of Malacca. A close coordination between TCMS and MSSP would add to sea lane security from southern Arabian Sea to west of South China Sea.

Bypassing the Malacca Strait: China circumnavigating ‘Risk-Prone’ Conduit to secure Energy Contingencies

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In May 2013, China will be linked directly to the Bay of Bengal in the Indian Ocean by virtue of a gas pipeline running from Kyaukpyu port in Myanmar to China’s Yunnan Province. This will mark the completion of the first in a number of projects aimed towards circumnavigating the Malacca Strait as an energy conduit for China. This article examines existing and long-term considerations to determine as to why China is pursuing this agenda, and why the Malacca Strait is perceived to be ‘risk-prone’.

The Malacca Strait links economies and enables the fulfilment of energy needs. Joining the Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean, it is one of the busiest commercial shipping pathways in the world, and is home to the busiest port. Littoral states including Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia, are dependent on business in the Strait to sustain their GDPs. User nations, including China and Japan, depend on the smooth functioning of the Malacca Strait for foreign energy sources and economic trade routes. The status quo serves both; however, the long-term implications of three key areas, logistics, security, and power strategies, need to be considered.

The Strait offers a route that is faster and more economic than alternate pathways around the Indonesian islands. The infrastructure, with respect to berthing and refuelling, is well established