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The RIMPAC Exercise and Evolving United States-Sri Lanka Military Relations

The Sri Lankan navy was invited to be part of the world's largest maritime exercise, the Rim of the Pacific Exercise, this year. The invitation followed a period of continuous military engagement between the United States (US) and Sri Lanka in the last few years. The growing US engagement in Sri Lanka is viewed as a shift of Washington's policy towards the island nation, almost a decade after the latter ended its conflict with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam through a military victory. Against this backdrop, this paper examines the evolution of the bilateral military relations between the two countries since the Maithripala Sirisena-Ranil Wickramasinghe government came into power.

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Introduction

As the world's largest international maritime exercise, the Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) Exercise brings together navies from the countries in the Pacific Rim – usually the allies of the United States (US) – to train and strengthen coordination in joint exercises. Started during

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the second half of the Cold War, it was initially a simulation of responding to security threats perceived to be emerging from the Cold War situation. The exercise concentrates more on high-end warfare, simulating responses to large-scale air attacks on Blue carrier vessels and anti-submarine warfare practice. The allies, namely, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom, regularly participated in the exercise along with the US. Over the years, the invitations were extended to other friendly nations in the Pacific and beyond.

The RIMPAC has evolved to be an exercise at the low-medium warfare. In the recent years, its focus has concentrated more on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and limited anti-surface warfare. It has earned recognition as an exercise that provides training opportunities for non-US navies, and to improve information sharing and exchange capabilities.

Defense experts view RIMPAC 2018, which took place from 27 June to 2 August 2018, as “more than just the exercise”,² for unlikely navies – those which are asymmetrical in their technologies and with diverse combating experiences – trained together as one team. Described as “a unique training opportunity that helps the participants foster and sustain the cooperative relationships that are critical to ensuring the safety of sea lanes and security on the world’s oceans”,³ RIMPAC 2018 was held for the 26th time, with the participation of 26 countries, 47 surface ships, five submarines, 18 national land forces, 200 aircrafts and 25,000 personnel.⁴

Apart from its traditional participants, the US navy invites some countries to be a part of the exercise every year. This year, the invitation was extended to Brazil, Israel, Sri Lanka and Vietnam – all, apart from Brazil, participated in the exercise.⁵ While Israel’s participation comes as no surprise, both Vietnam and Sri Lanka’s participation is noteworthy, for their first foray into the RIMPAC symbolises other developments in bilateral relations between the US and the small Indian Ocean countries.

² Peter Layton, “RIMPAC 2018 Kicks Off, Laden With Geopolitical Symbolism”, *War on the Rock*, University of Texas, 5 July 2018. <https://warontherocks.com/2018/07/rimpac-2018-kicks-off-laden-with-geopolitical-symbolism/>. Accessed on 6 July 2018.

³ “U.S. Navy Announces 26th Rim of the Pacific Exercise”, *America’s Navy*, 30 May 2018, http://www.navy.mil/submit/display.asp?story_id=105789. Accessed on 5 July 2018.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Megan Eckstein, “Brazil Drops Out of RIMPAC 2018 Exercise in Southern California”, *USNI News*, U.S. Naval Institute, 3 July 2018. <https://news.usni.org/2018/07/03/brazil-drops-rimpac-2018-exercise-southern-california>. Accessed on 5 July 2018.

Against this backdrop, this paper provides an overview of the development of bilateral relations, especially military interactions, between the US and Sri Lanka, which could have led to the invitation to Sri Lanka to the world's largest biennial military exercise.

Sri Lanka-US Relations: An Overview

While Sri Lanka and the US formally established diplomatic relations in 1948, commercial and people-to-people partnership between the two countries goes back to 1787, when New England sailors first anchored in Sri Lanka's harbour.⁶ Historical evidence reveals that traders and missionaries travelled to Sri Lanka from time to time since then. Of many such visits, the visit by Colonel Henry Steel Olcott is remembered with respect and gratitude even till today, due to his contribution in the reawakening of Buddhism.⁷

The bilateral relationship developed after Sri Lanka's independence in 1948, with the US becoming one of the first countries to recognise independent Sri Lanka (then Ceylon). Since then, their bilateral relations have gone through highs and lows, and have sustained the test of time.

Bilateral relations between the two countries are based on shared democratic traditions. The US policy "supports efforts to reform Sri Lanka's democratic political system in a way that provides for full political participation of all communities."⁸ According to the US Department of State, Washington's priorities for Sri Lanka are to seek an increase in human and economic security, improve public confidence in local and regional authorities, promote political reconciliation and land reform, facilitate community reintegration, uphold military and police professionalism and respect for human rights, and strengthen the Sri Lankan government's counterterrorism, port and border security, civilian authority, and demining

⁶ Committee on Foreign Relations United States Senate, "Sri Lanka: Recharting U.S. Strategy After the War," One Hundred Eleventh Congress First Session, (December 2009).

⁷ Under the British colonial rule, Sinhala Buddhists were discriminated in terms of education and employment opportunities, and were forced to convert into Christianity. Colonel Olcott was instrumental in inspiring the Buddhists to fight for their legitimate rights. His initiation of Buddhist educational institutions for the locals is noteworthy.

⁸ Ibid.

capabilities.⁹ The US has also provided over US\$2 billion (S\$2.73 billion) in development assistance to Sri Lanka since 1948.¹⁰ Since 1956, the USAID Mission in Colombo and the congressionally-funded Asia Foundation have channelled financial assistance for numerous programmes and projects to uphold the above priorities.

As the US State Department explains, Washington's foreign assistance to Sri Lanka focuses on economic competitiveness in the global marketplace, creating and enhancing economic and social opportunities for disadvantaged groups.¹¹ According to the External Resource Department of Sri Lanka, the US has also extended loan facilities in the past for food importation, agriculture, hydro power generation, fertiliser importation, watershed management, township development, Mahaweli development, defense and health.¹²

The US is Sri Lanka's top export market. In 1999, Sri Lanka shipped 39.9 per cent of its total exports to the US. In 2001, the exports to the US made up 41.44 per cent of its total exports, and 36.7 per cent in 2002. The proportion of exports declined to 22.3 per cent in 2009 and 21.4 per cent in 2011, due to the financial crisis. However, they increased to 26.65 per cent in 2016. The Sri Lanka Board of Investment states that the majority of US companies in the island operate with an estimated investment of more than US\$500 million (S\$684.5 million).¹³

The robustness of the relationship between the two countries relied on the political party in power in Sri Lanka. During the early post-independent years, Sri Lanka was ruled by the United National Party (UNP), which is known to have followed a pro-Western foreign policy. As such, the governments, led by the UNP, displayed close ties with the US. With the emergence of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) as the second strong force in the Sri Lankan political sphere, the successive governments have followed a "non-aligned" foreign

⁹ U.S. Department of State, Congressional Budget Justification for Foreign Operations, FY2012, Annex: Regional Perspectives.

¹⁰ U.S. Department of State, Congressional Research Service, *Sri Lanka: Background, Reform, Reconciliation, and Geopolitical Context*, 2017, CRS Report Prepared for Members of the Congress.

¹¹ K. Alan, Kronstadt, "Sri Lanka: Background and US Relations," Library of Congress Washington DC Congressional Research Service, (2008). also see Vaughn Bruce and Severn Anderson, "Sri Lanka: Background and US Relations", Congressional Research Service Report for Congress, The Library of Congress, updated on 16 May 2005.

¹² Department of External Resources, Ministry of National Policies and Economic Affairs, *Performance Report 2017*, Colombo.

¹³ Santosh Singh, *Us Policy towards Nepal, Bangladesh And Sri Lanka*, 1992-2003. Lulu. com., p. 153.

policy, yet, somewhat tilted towards the eastern power-bloc.¹⁴ Hence, the Sri Lanka-US bilateral relations, especially in trade and military, flourished during the UNP government.¹⁵

Bilateral relations between Sri Lanka and the US flourished during the times of Prime Minister Wickremesinghe's governments but faced obstacles and relative decline when the country was ruled by successive SLFP governments. For instance, Wickremesinghe's meeting with President George Bush at the White House in July 2002 was the first visit to Washington by a Sri Lankan leader since 1984.¹⁶ Further, Sri Lanka and the US signed the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) during this visit.

With the change of government in 2005 and with the accession to power by President Mahinda Rajapaksa, bilateral relations between the US and Sri Lanka suffered a setback, due to their difference in the approach to ending Sri Lanka's protracted conflict between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The US' view was that the conflict should not end with a military victory and that Sri Lanka should reinstate the stalled peace talks. However, considering the past experience of the Sri Lankan government's peace talks with the LTTE, President Rajapaksa was adamant that the LTTE should be militarily defeated. This perspective created a friction in the bilateral relations between the two countries. Sri Lanka received constant pressure from the US during the last stage of war that, at one point, the US suggested its readiness to send US marines to evacuate the LTTE leadership trapped in the conflict zone.¹⁷

Following the end of the war, the US indicted Sri Lanka of alleged human rights violation and sponsored several resolutions at the Human Rights Council against Colombo.¹⁸ This drift brought major economic cost to post-conflict Sri Lanka as the US allies withdrew funding

¹⁴ Shelton U. Kodikara, "Major Trends in Sri Lanka's Non-Alignment Policy after 1956," *Asian Survey* 13, no. 12 (1973): 1121-1136. See also: A. Jeyaratnam Wilson, "Sri Lanka's Foreign Policy: change and continuity", *The Ceylon journal of historical and social studies* 4, no. 1/2, (1974): 52-61., S. A. K. Madanayaka, "Unique Features of Foreign Policy of UNP Regimes (1948-1965) and Bandaranaike Regimes (1956-1965)," (2016).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Kronstadt, (2008). Also see Vaughn Bruce and Severn Anderson, "Sri Lanka: Background and US Relations", Congressional Research Service Report for Congress, The Library of Congress, updated on 16 May 2005.

¹⁷ R. Hariharan, "Leadership Impact on India-Sri Lanka Strategic Security Dynamics", *Scholar Warrior*, (2013): 95

¹⁸ It is interesting to note that the US had already designated the LTTE as a Foreign Terrorist Organization in 1997. A US defense assessment team provided training need assessment and discussed integrating measures for intelligence, law enforcement, legal and diplomatic efforts against terrorism in 2002, during Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinghe's government.

support to the country. Colombo lost the support of its traditional donors, forcing it to look for new development partners. One particular instance of US intervention in Sri Lanka's external financing was when the Treasury Department abstained on the US\$2.6 billion (S\$3.55 billion) International Monetary Fund loan to Sri Lanka, highlighting humanitarian concerns.¹⁹ An evaluation of the foreign aid statistic reports of the External Resource Department of Sri Lanka for the period of 2002 and 2009 explains how the country's traditional development partners, such as the Asian Development Bank and Japan, reduced their financial support and how Sri Lanka sought funding opportunities from China.

While the bilateral relations between the US and Sri Lanka was delimited during the period in which the Rajapaksa government was in power, the political change in Sri Lanka, following the presidential elections in 2015, brought new hope of a revival in the relationship. As was expected, the US welcomed the new political change in the island nation under the coalition government of President Maithripala Sirisena and Wickremesinghe – a close friend of Washington.²⁰

The US sponsored a resolution, 'United Nations Human Rights Council [UNHRC] Resolution 30/1: Promoting Reconciliation, Accountability and Human Rights in Sri Lanka, in 2015'. However, this time, the resolution was co-sponsored by Sri Lanka. It was the first time in history that a country co-sponsored a resolution tabled against it. This resolution was later reaffirmed in a further UNHRC Resolution 34/1 in March 2017. Sri Lanka's decision to co-sponsor the resolution was accepted by the US as a step taken in amending the strained relations between the two countries.

Following these new developments, there is significant improvement in bilateral economic and diplomatic relations. According to the FY2017 Congressional Budget Justification for Congress for Foreign Operations, the US has provided US\$3.9 million (S\$5.33 million) to Sri Lanka in 2015. In December 2015, the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) Board of Directors selected Sri Lanka as eligible for the development of a threshold programme, which supports a government's efforts at reform. In June 2018, Caroline Nguyen, the Managing

¹⁹ Committee on Foreign Relations United States Senate, "Sri Lanka: Recharting U.S. Strategy after the War," One Hundred Eleventh Congress First Session, 2009.

²⁰ Statement of Ambassador Alice Wells, Acting Assistant Secretary, Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs of the U.S. Department of State before the HFAC Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific, reveals the improvement made between the two countries.

Director of the MCC, visited Sri Lanka for further discussions on the MCC compact-large-scale five-year grant programme. The US and Sri Lanka adopted a Joint Action Plan to boost bilateral trade at the 12th US-Sri Lanka TIFA meeting in April 2016. US exports to Sri Lanka increased by 4.7 per cent from 2014 to 2015 and were valued at US\$372 million (\$509.2 million).²¹ The Open Skies Agreement, which was initially signed in 2002 during Wickramasinghe's term, was amended to strengthen the facilitation of the movement of cargo goods global express delivery, cargo network bilateral connectivity and competitiveness.

The two countries initiated a bilateral Partnership Dialogue, with the inaugural dialogue taking place in Washington DC in 2016 with the objective of establishing a framework to pursue bilateral relations. The progress made following the dialogue can be viewed from the numerous visits by the US officials and trade delegations to Sri Lanka in the pursuit of strengthening diplomatic and economic relations (Table 1).

Table 1: Visits by US Officials/Delegations to Sri Lanka after 2015 January

Year	Visit by US Officials
May 2018	A bipartisan delegation from US House of Representatives
September 2017	Alice Wells, Acting Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs
August 2017	A bipartisan delegation from US of House of Representatives
February 2017	A delegation of the members of the House of Representatives of the Congress
September 2016	Michela J Delaney, Assistant US Trade Representative for South and Central Asia
July 2016	Nisha Biswal, Assistant Secretary of State Tom Malinowski, Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia
February 2016	Michael Delaney, US Trade Representative for South and Central Asia
December 2015	US Deputy Secretary Defense Tom Shannon, Counselor of the US Department of State Nisha Biswal, Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia
May 2015	Secretary of State John Kerry
April 2015	Nisha Biswal, Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia
February 2015	Nisha Biswal, Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia Atul Keshap

Source: Website of the US Embassy in Sri Lanka and other multiple sources

²¹ U.S. Department of State, *Sri Lanka: Background, Reform, Reconciliation, and Geopolitical Context*, 2017.

Since the Sri Lankan Presidential Elections in 2015, the number of American diplomatic visits to Colombo has increased significantly. Within a month of the new government, Nisha Biswal, Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia visited Sri Lanka. Since her maiden visit in July 2016, she has visited Sri Lanka six times within a period of 20 months. During her testimony before the House of Foreign Affairs Subcommittee in May 2016, Biswal mentioned that the diplomatic relations between Sri Lanka and the US are at an all-time high.²² Secretary of State John Kerry's visit in May 2015 marked the first visit by a US Secretary of State to Sri Lanka in a decade.

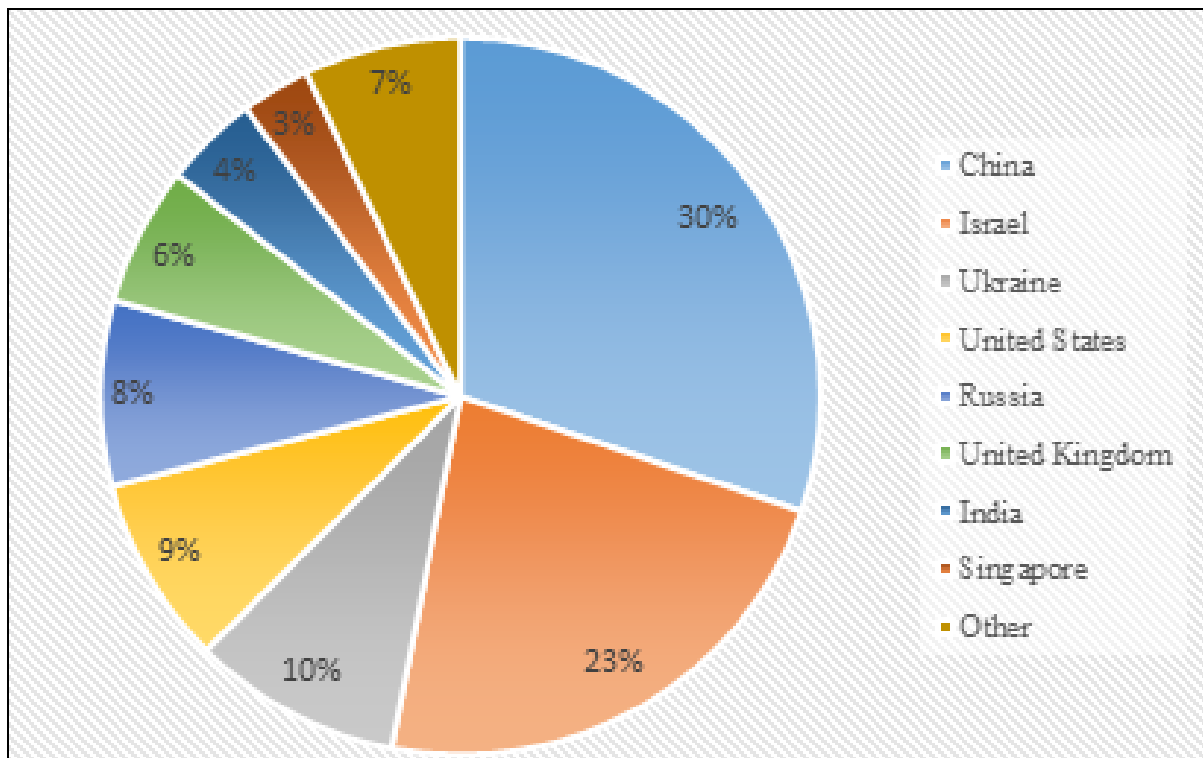
The influx of the US diplomats to Sri Lanka after the government change mirrors the situation in 2002 when Wickremesinghe became the head of the parliament.

US-Sri Lanka Military Relations and Recent Developments

In general, the US has always maintained limited military relations with Sri Lanka. Compared to Sri Lanka's military relations with India, Pakistan and China, its relations with the US were insignificant. The US was not a prominent training destination for the Sri Lanka's military, nor was it a major arms supplier. As Figure 1 reveals, Sri Lanka's military hardware comes mostly from China and Israel. The training offered for Sri Lankan officers was restricted to the International Military Exchange and Training programme. Apart from that, there were few joint military exercises and training sessions between the two countries.

²² Nisha Desai Biswal, *Testimony*, FY 2017 Budget Priorities for South Asia, 11 May 2016.

Figure 1: Military Equipment Suppliers of Sri Lanka, 1950 to 2017



Source: Stockholm Peace Research Institute

Despite being the world's largest arms trader, the US was never a major arms supplier to Sri Lanka. According to the Stockholm Peace Research Institute, all-time arms trade for Sri Lanka from the US between 1950 and 2017 stood at only US\$193 million (S\$264.23 million). Sri Lanka had requested for arms and ammunitions from the US on several occasions since the beginning of the conflict in the North. However, it did not receive any positive response until 1994, with the US indicating that it would only supply non-lethal military equipment on a case-by-case basis to Sri Lanka.²³ After years of request, in 1994, the US Special Forces provided small arms training to the Sri Lankan military.

It was in 1995 that US military engagement with Sri Lanka began to show a gradual change. Several suicide bombings, including an attack on two air force aircrafts in April 1995, highlighted the increasingly critical security condition in the island. Following this incident, the US agreed to provide non-lethal assistance to Sri Lanka's military to fight the separatist war. American air force officers met with their Sri Lankan counterparts to assist in meeting the terrorist threat. In July 1995, Sri Lanka was included in the Pacific Command's Extended Relations Programme in which Sri Lanka security forces received advanced training. Since

²³ Singh, p 156.

then, there was a gradual development of bilateral military cooperation between the two countries.²⁴

As of 1996, the US' military engagement policy towards Sri Lanka changed to that of 'deeper cooperation'. The US permitted the sale of offensive armaments, approved Israeli request to sell six Kafir Jets and sold three Fast Patrol boats to the Sri Lankan navy in 1996.²⁵ Washington launched Operation Balanced Style, a military programme to train Sri Lankan commando troops to fight terrorism, through which the US elite commandos were sent to the Wirawila forest to train the Sri Lankan troops. Furthermore, Sri Lankan officers were offered training at the prestigious US military academy at West Point. However, according to the US Pacific Command statement released on 16 August 1996, these exchanges are the US' routine military-to-military exchanges with the island nation.²⁶

The significant improvement in military relations between Sri Lanka and the US after the succession of Wickremesinghe as prime minister is noteworthy. In parallel to enhanced diplomatic relations between Sri Lanka and the US in 2002, there were similar visits by US military officials to Sri Lanka and port calls by American ships. For instance, in September 2002, a US defense assessment team examined the Sri Lankan military's training needs and discussed integrating intelligence, law enforcement, legal and diplomatic efforts against terrorism. Between 2002 and 2004, the US also signed an agreement with Sri Lanka to provide demining training. During their visit to Sri Lanka to discuss planned peace talks with the separatist LTTE, a high-level US delegation, led by Assistant Secretary for South Asian Affairs Christina Rocca, affirmed the US' commitment to support Sri Lanka in its fight against terrorism. Most importantly, the only significant direct military hardware transfer occurred in June 2004 when the US Coast transferred the donated USCG Cutter 'Courageous' offshore patrol vessel, which was renamed SNLS P-621 Samadura, to the Sri Lankan navy.²⁷

However, a change in the US policy of military engagement with Sri Lanka cannot only be accounted by the long-lasting friendship Wickremesinghe had with the US. For instance,

²⁴ Ibid, pp 155-156.

²⁵ Ibid, p 157.

²⁶ Singh, p 157.

²⁷ "Admiral Sandagiri Accepts Transfer Of Former U.S. Coast Guard Vessel 'Courageous'", *Embassy of Sri Lanka in Washington DC*, Government of Sri Lanka, 24 June 2004. http://www.slembassyusa.org/press_releases/summer_2004/admiral_Sadagiri_accepts_24jun04.html. Accessed on 6 July 2018.

when the USCG Cutter *Courageous* was transferred to Sri Lanka, the government had already changed in Colombo, with Rajapaksa as the prime minister. Also, the USS *Blue Ridge* made a port call to Colombo in February 2005. The US' change of policy towards Sri Lanka has to be understood in relation to the changing international security environment. Following the September 11 attack in the US in 2001, the fight against terrorism became a primary priority of the Bush administration. Thus, it only made sense for the US to support Sri Lanka's fight against terrorism.

As such, Sri Lanka saw multiple visits by the US officials to the island after 2001 to meet with Sri Lankan military commanders. Even Rajapaksa admitted, at one point, that Sri Lanka received intelligence support from the US military in its fight against terrorism. He explained that the US had alerted Sri Lanka about the presence of 'floating arsenals' on the high seas that helped the Sri Lankan navy destroy the LTTE arms supply ships in 2007.²⁸

Even so, the differing perspectives between the US and Sri Lankan governments on the solutions to the LTTE issue led to a deterioration in bilateral relations so much so that it resulted in the US banning the sale of military hardware to Sri Lanka, and later sponsoring several resolutions against Sri Lanka on alleged human right crimes at the UNHRC. As a result, the later years of Rajapaksa's rule saw a decline in the military-to-military exchanges between the two countries.

It is only after the succession of Sirisena and Sri Lanka's prime minister in January 2015 that there was improvement in relations between the two countries. During a visit by the US Ambassador to the United Nations, Samantha Power, to Colombo, it was reported that the US underscored military relations beyond foreign military sales and the International Military Education Training programme.²⁹

As a result of the new economic and diplomatic developments, Sri Lanka welcomed numerous high-level military officials from the US and hosted seven port calls from the US navy since 2015 till today (Tables 2 and 3).

²⁸ Shamindra Ferdinando, "US Helped Destroy Some LTTE 'Floating Arsenals'-President", *The Island*, Upali Newspapers. <http://www.island.lk/2009/11/11/news15.html>. Accessed on 6 July 2018.

²⁹ Daya Gamage, "U.S. wants 'enhanced' military relations with Sri Lanka" *Asia Tribune*, World Institute for Asian Studies, November 25, 2015, <http://asiantribune.com/node/88220>. Accessed on 9 July 2018.

Table 2: Visits by Military Officers to Sri Lanka after January 2015

Year	Visit by the Military Officials
October 2017	US Pacific Fleet Commander Admiral Scott Swift spoke at Galle Dialogue
September 2017	Major General James S Hartsell of the US Pacific Command participated at the Indian Ocean Conference 2017
November 2016	Pacific Command (PACOM) Commander Adm. Harry Harris Jr visited to participate at the Galle Dialogue 2016
May 2016	Major General Steven R Rudder, Director of Strategic Planning and Policy for US Pacific Command
April 2016	Rear Admiral Colin J Kirlan, Commander of US Special Operation Pacific visited

Source: Multiple web sources

Table 3: Naval Port Visits since 2016

Year	Naval Port Visits
May 2018	USNS Mercy Hospital Ship in Trincomalee
October 2017	USS Nimitz arrives in Colombo
June 2017	USS Lake Erie arrives in Colombo
March 2017	USNS Fall River (T-EPF-4) arrives in Hambantota
January 2017	USS Hopper (DDG 70) arrives in Colombo
July 2016	USS New Orleans in the North
March 2016	USS Blue Ridge (LCC19) arrived in Colombo

Source: Multiple web sources

Admiral Harris' visit (Table 2) in 2016 was the first visit of a US four-star officer to the island in almost a decade.³⁰ Since then, there has been continuous representation from the US at the Galle Dialogue. Sri Lanka initiated the Galle Dialogue in 2009 as a platform to bring academics and practitioners to discuss maritime issues in the Indian Ocean. Over the years, it has emerged as an important event for consultation and dialogue among Indian Ocean littoral states. While some view the Galle Dialogue as a reflection of the changing nature of the power equation in the Indian Ocean region,³¹ the level of the delegation sent from each country reflects the nature of maritime relations Sri Lanka has with them. The high-level US representation at the Galle Dialogue, therefore, signifies the growing close relations between the two countries.

³⁰ Sean Quirk & Maile Plan, "On the Maritime Superhighway: US-Sri Lanka Naval Cooperation", PacNet No. 24, *Centre for Strategic Studies*, 22 March 2017. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/pacnet-24-maritime-superhighway-us-sri-lanka-naval-cooperation>. Accessed on 9 July 2018.

³¹ Abhijit Singh, "Sri Lanka's Quest for Strategic Prominence in the Indian Ocean", *The Diplomat*, 9 December 2016. <https://thediplomat.com/2016/12/sri-lankas-quest-for-strategic-prominence-in-the-indian-ocean/>. Accessed on 10 July 2018.

In November 2016, Sri Lanka formed its first Marine Corps modelled after the US Marine Corps, following which the inaugural Sri Lanka Marine Corps received official training from the US Marine Corps from 22 to 25 November 2016. According to reports, marines and sailors of the 11th Marine Expeditionary Unit and Makin Island Amphibious Ready Group arrived in Trincomalee in the USS Somerset (LPD 25) to participate in a Theatre Security Cooperation exercise.³²

In August 2016, the US air force's Operation Pacific Angel conducted joint humanitarian assistance mission in the north of Sri Lanka, renovating schools and providing medical services. In December 2016, the US maritime patrol aircraft, Red Lancers of Patrol Squadron Ten (VP-10), during its routine visit to the Indo-Pacific region, visited Sri Lanka for a week and worked with the Sri Lankan air force and navy in safeguarding the international shipping lanes.

The visit of the USNS Fall River to Hambantota between 6 and 18 March 2017 was the first-ever US' pacific partnership goodwill mission to Sri Lanka. During this goodwill visit, the US marines, along with the Sri Lankan navy, conducted multiple multinational efforts, including health clinics, renovation of hospitals and schools, and education programmes on disaster relief and response and women's role in peace and security.

The USS Nimitz carrier strike group's visit to Colombo on 28 October 2017 was the first by a US carrier strike group since USS Kitty Hawk visited in 1985.³³ The visit of USS Kitty Hawk drew attention as a symbol of then-Sri Lanka President J R Jayawardana explicitly drifting away from India in his foreign policy approach. In a context where Sri Lanka's foreign policy under Rajapaksa was criticised as alienating the West and India, and tilting towards China, the arrival of a carrier strike group was symbolic of the rebalancing of its foreign policy.

³² Adam Miller, "Newly Formed Sri Lankan Marine Corps Gets 241 Years Of Experience In Under A Week", *Marines*, 5 December 2016. <https://www.marines.mil/News/News-Display/Article/1019663/newly-formed-sri-lankan-marine-corps-gets-241-years-of-experience-in-under-a-we/>. Accessed on 9 July 2018.

³³ Shanaka Jayasekara, "SL Foreign Policy Might Lead to Indo-Lanka Accord Two", *The Island*, Upali Newspapers, 23 August 2011. http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code_title=33066. Accessed on 9 July 2018.

The RIMPAC and its Significance

Against the backdrop of flourishing Sri Lanka-US relations, the invitation extended to the island nation to participate in the world's largest multilateral exercise does not come as a surprise. There is also little doubt that this initiative has larger significance.

Over the years, Sri Lanka and the US military have conducted multiple joint exercises from time to time. In 1995, Sri Lanka was included in the Pacific Command military exercise. Back in 2003, between January and March, Sri Lanka and the US held joint military exercises with training focusing on arms operation and medical techniques.³⁴ In July the same year, the Sri Lankan navy participated in the multilateral search and rescue exercise off the coast of Madras. However, as it was with other aspects of the bilateral relations, military-to-military relations saw a decline during Rajapaksa's rule.

Following the change of government, the Sri Lankan military got the opportunity to be a partner of multiple bilateral and multilateral US training exercises, which specifically focused on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (Table 4).

Table 4: Joint Military Exercises/Programmes

Year	Joint Military Exercise/Exchange Programmes
March 2017	Pacific Partnership 2017
April 2017	USS Comstock (LSD 45) Exchange Program
September 2017	Pacific Airlift Rally
October 2017	Coordinated Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT)
May 2018	Pacific Partnership (Multilateral Disaster Response Prepared Mission in the Indo-Pacific)

Source: Multiple web sources

For instance, the Pacific Airlift Rally, held between 11 and 15 September 2017, is a biennial exercise, which focuses on airborne training for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. Sri Lanka co-hosted this event after 2011. The USS Comstock (LSD 45) participated in a one-week military exchange programme with the Sri Lankan navy on disaster relief efforts and coordination. The Pacific Partnership exercises have been taking place with Sri Lanka for two consecutive years. Against this backdrop, Sri Lanka's participation in the RIMPAC signifies the extended bilateral military cooperation between the two countries.

³⁴ Vaughn and Anderson (2005).

It is also a fact that Sri Lanka's RIMPAC is laden with geopolitical symbolism. The RIMPAC exercise itself is not just a showcase of the US' soft power to the world, but it is also symbolic of the US' interest in partnering with navies for its cooperation. Sri Lanka's strategic position in the Indian Ocean is well acknowledged in the international community including in the US. As such, Sri Lanka's participation in the Indian Ocean security affairs is greeted with this understanding. Moreover, it is a fact that Sri Lanka has excelled in asymmetric warfare and has proven combatting experience and expertise during its three-decades of war. Thus, it is evident that the US military too can benefit from close interaction with the Sri Lankan military.

The US disinviting China for the RIMPAC 2018 despite Beijing's previous participations in 2014 and 2016; and inviting Vietnam to make their debut at the RIMPAC is symbolic of Washington's complicated relations with East Asia. Similarly, being called China's ally during the Rajapaksa government, Sri Lanka scoring an invitation, therefore, might be Washington's way of sending a message that Colombo is no longer the "pearl" of China's so-called String of Pearls. It also symbolises how the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government has managed to re-align its foreign policy and amend relations with the Western powers.

Conclusion

The US-Sri Lanka bilateral relations have always been characterised by the shared democratic values of both countries. However, the robustness of the relationship is owing to the party in power in Sri Lanka. In general, the UNP-led governments seem to share close ties with the US during their time in government.

The development of diplomatic and economic relations has always been followed by increased military-to-military engagement. In general, the recent military engagements have focused cooperation in disaster relief and humanitarian assistance. However, the invitation to the RIMPAC exercise changes this pattern. As the RIMPAC focuses on joint exercises beyond disaster relief and emergency response, and includes combatting exercises, this event symbolises an extended development in Sri Lanka's military cooperation with the US. It also symbolises that the US sees common interests with Sri Lanka in the maritime security sphere.

The RIMPAC also indicates future efforts of enhancing bilateral military cooperation between Washington and Colombo. Both Sri Lanka and the US have the opportunity to partner in natural disaster incidents, piracy, human and drug trafficking, and illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing in the Indian Ocean waters. Both Sri Lanka and the US share a common interest in the freedom of navigation and the security of the sea lines of communication in the Indian Ocean.

While Sri Lanka can learn from the US' military operations, emergency response and disaster relief experiences, Sri Lanka too can provide knowledge on its combatting experience and anti-terrorism strategies. With three decades of experience in asymmetric maritime warfare, Sri Lanka is now evolving from a coastal navy to a green water navy. Thus, it is an opportunity for both countries.

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