**Headline:** Sri Lanka’s Defence Agreement with India and the Prospects for Peace in the Indian Ocean

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**[Article Body:]**

In 1964, during the second summit of the Non-Aligned Movement in Cairo, Prime Minister of Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) Sirimavo Bandaranaike proposed that the Indian Ocean be turned into a ‘zone of peace’ that was free of military bases and nuclear weapons. In the context of heightened militarisation during the Cold War, this proposal was supported by Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru.

Sixty-one years later, the two countries have entered into a memorandum of understanding on defence cooperation. This is against the backdrop of a new wave of militarisation in the Indian Ocean, including India’s own participation in the Quad (a group consisting of the US, Australia, and Japan), which is a component of the US Indo-Pacific Strategy to contain China in a New Cold War.

On 5 April, a defence MOU was exchanged between Sri Lankan Defence Secretary H.S. Sampath Thuyacontha and Indian Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri during an official visit by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Sri Lanka. Thuyacontha said that the agreement, which was not discussed in the Sri Lankan Parliament, will be valid for five years.

During a joint press statement with Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Dissanayake, Modi said that he welcomed the ‘important agreements made in the area of defence cooperation’, without elaborating further on their contents. Meanwhile, Misri asserted that ‘the security interests of India and Sri Lanka are interlinked’.

News of the intent to sign a defence agreement first broke in Indian media on 28 March, with the Press Trust of India framing it as ‘a move that comes amid China's relentless attempts to increase its military influence over Colombo’. While official statements from both parties do not echo this anti-China framing, it nonetheless raises concerns over the prospect of the two nations being drawn further into a New Cold War.

**India and the Quad**

India is a founding member of the Quad, a group first established in 2007, suspended in 2008 following the withdrawal of Australia, and re-established in 2017. The group exhibits strong security dimensions, as the countries have engaged in joint military exercises, such as the Malabar Naval Exercise, which India hosted in 2024.

India is set to host the Quad summit this year, the first to be held since Donald Trump was elected president for a second term. In July 2024, Republican senator Marco Rubio – currently Trump’s secretary of state – tabled a bill in Congress to grant India status on par with NATO members when it comes to arms exports. While the bill has not made much headway in Congress, its basic agenda appears to be moving forward in other forms.

In February 2025, following a meeting between Modi and Trump in Washington, the two leaders announced an initiative called the ‘U.S.-India COMPACT (Catalysing Opportunities for Military Partnership, Accelerated Commerce and Technology) for the 21st Century’. This includes a 10-year defence framework to facilitate the transfer of technology, expand the co-production of arms, strengthen military interoperability, and ‘[support and sustain](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/2025/02/united-states-india-joint-leaders-statement/#:~:text=Finally%2C%20the%20leaders%20committed%20to,and%20disaster%20relief%20operations%20along) the overseas deployments of the US and Indian militaries in the Indo-Pacific’.

India’s drift into the US military-industrial complex and the New Cold War on China risks exacerbating tensions in Asia. However, India has at times also displayed what it terms ‘strategic autonomy’ by taking an independent stance on issues such as the Russia-Ukraine conflict. In 2024, Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar rejected calls by Japan for establishing an ‘Asian NATO’, arguing that India has ‘a different history and a different way of approaching’ foreign affairs.

**Sri Lanka and the Indo-Pacific Strategy**

Since the end of its civil war in 2009, Sri Lanka has increasingly been drawn into the US Indo-Pacific Strategy. According to the US State Department’s 2022 Integrated Country Strategy for the country, the top mission objective is to ‘increase Sri Lanka’s interoperability with the United States and like-minded strategic partners’.

This has manifested in greater military cooperation between the two countries, as well as arms sales from the US to Sri Lanka. According to data from Stockholm-based research institute SIPRI, some 36% of arms transfers to Sri Lanka between 2009 and 2024 were from the United States. These transfers included mainly helicopters and patrol ships.

In 2024, Sri Lanka played a role in the US-led Operation Prosperity Vanguard against the Ansar Allah government in Yemen. The latter has been attacking Israeli-affiliated ships in the Red Sea in retaliation for the genocide in Gaza. The Sri Lankan navy ship SLNS Gajabahu, which was deployed for the operation, was originally a US Coast Guard vessel commissioned in 1966 and donated to Sri Lanka in 2018.

More recently, a visit by US Indo-Pacific Commander Admiral Samuel J. Paparo in March indicates the continued importance of Sri Lanka to the US strategy in the region. During his visit to the country, Paparo met with President Dissanayake and Foreign Minister Vijitha Herath. In a speech delivered at the National Defence College in Colombo, Paparo said that ‘increased military cooperation among authoritarian nations’ was creating challenges that necessitated ‘strengthening democratic partnerships’.

Less than 2,000 kilometres south of Sri Lanka, the US has parked at least six B-2 stealth bombers at its base in Diego Garcia, in the [occupied Chagos Islands](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chagos_Archipelago). These bombers are used to attack targets in Yemen and also present an existential threat for Iran. For the US, control over the Indian Ocean is key for power projection onto both East and West Asia.

**Zone of Peace**

The Indian Ocean peace proposal was pushed onto the agenda of the twenty-sixth session of the UN General Assembly in 1971 by Sri Lanka, with the support of the United Republic of Tanzania (then led by Julius Nyerere). This led to the adoption of UN resolution 2832 – the ‘Declaration of the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace’. The declaration sought to ensure:

1. Warships and military aircraft would not use the Indian Ocean for any threat or use of force against any littoral or hinterland state.
2. The right to free and unimpeded use of the zone by the vessels of all nations would be ensured.
3. International agreement would be reached for the maintenance of the Indian Ocean as a zone of peace.

As the second Trump administration continues to intensify a New Cold War, peace in the Indian Ocean is once again at stake. India’s engagement with the Quad and Sri Lanka’s entrapment in the Indo-Pacific Strategy threaten to fan the flames of war in the region. However, history has shown that with social mobilisation and principled leadership on either side, Sri Lanka and India could instead fight for peaceful development and cooperation in the Global South.