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# MARITIME CONNECTIONS BETWEEN NEW ZEALAND AND SRI LANKA: CONNECTED BY EMPIRE, SEPARATED BY DISTANCE

Bhagya Senaratne<sup>1</sup> and Germana Nicklin<sup>2</sup>

Smaller states do not receive the same attention as larger powers when discussing maritime security. Island-states are worthy of attention because of their sizeable, large maritime zones. New Zealand and Sri Lanka are such islands with significant maritime security interests and responsibilities, located adjacent to larger powers. They warrant an examination even though their geographical locations generate different maritime security dynamics and are vastly different in their land mass. Unfortunately, there is a dearth of literature pertaining to the bilateral relations. This highlights that there has been minimal emphasis on New Zealand-Sri Lanka bilateral relations even from an academic perspective. Therefore, we examine why New Zealand and Sri Lanka, which were intricately connected through the British Empire did not continue to maintain ties with one another, regardless of similarities between the two states. While distance and lack of awareness of the similarities have resulted in distanced relations, we argue that there is much to learn about smaller island-states from comparing our respective maritime interests.

Keywords: British Empire, Island-state, Maritime Security, Maritime Connections, New Zealand, Sri Lanka.

## Introduction

The dynamics of maritime security for smaller island states in the Indo-Pacific region receive some academic attention but less than that given to those of larger powers.<sup>1</sup> This could be because of geopolitical drivers that centre on military threats and capabilities.<sup>2</sup> This limited attention to island-states misses their importance as stewards of their exceptionally large maritime zones, often rich in resources compared with their land

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mass. Maritime security interests for these states tend to be non-traditional, more focused on illegal, unregulated, and unreported fishing (IUU), transnational crime, environmental degradation from pollution or overfishing and safety of life than on military engagement.

New Zealand and Sri Lanka are examples of island-states with significant maritime security interests and responsibilities, not the least of which is being close neighbours to the much larger powers of Australia and India, respectively. A comparison of these two states is therefore valuable for two reasons. First, their different geographical locations create different maritime security dynamics. One island is situated in the corner of the world, close to Antarctica and away from major shipping routes, whilst the other, is situated centrally in the Indian Ocean along global shipping routes. Second, even though the two islands are vastly different in size, they both have large maritime and search and rescue (SAR) zones, resulting in many similar issues compounding their maritime security.

There has been minimal emphasis on New Zealand-Sri Lanka bilateral relations even from an academic perspective.<sup>3</sup> To fill this gap, this article examines why New Zealand and Sri Lanka, which were intricately connected through the British Empire have not maintained strong ties with one another, regardless of similarities between the two states. While distance and lack of awareness of the similarities have resulted in distanced relations, this article argues that there is much to learn about smaller island-states from comparing these two states' respective maritime security interests. As such, it sets the scene for subsequent in-depth examination of particular aspects of those interests in the future.

The research is qualitative in nature with the two authors conducting desk research from their respective countries. Data was gathered from primary sources such as publications from the respective Navies, the agencies of Foreign Affairs, agencies of trade and commerce, Sri Lanka coast guard, parliamentary discussions, speeches, and United Nations data repositories. Secondary material such as reputed publications, journals and websites provided insight into the maritime security approaches of the two states.

Accordingly, this paper is divided into four main sections to examine the maritime connections between New Zealand and Sri Lanka. The first section provides insight into the common British connection, detailing the trade, military, and diplomatic links. Moreover, the section briefly touches upon the salient cultural features, as there is extraordinarily little literature that discusses the bilateral relations. This is followed by an overview of the maritime environments of the two island-states and their maritime security approaches. The penultimate section is an examination of the similarities and differences between the two states, such as from an economic and maritime security perspective. The fourth and closing section provides the conclusion and insight into avenues for future research.

### The British Connection

Sri Lanka and New Zealand share histories as former colonies of the British Empire. A lack of a direct sea route between the two island-states meant that in pre-colonial times, interactions between the two states did not exist. That changed with the expansion of the British Empire through British naval superiority. This 'empire' focus, which persisted until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, was about maintaining the freedom of the seas.<sup>4</sup> It placed Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) into the same imperial frame as New Zealand – a frame that was as economic as it was military. For example, the British Navy facilitated trade and travel, supporting civilian activities by “policing British shipping merchants and mobile subjects.”<sup>5</sup> British policing became even more important with the development of maritime technologies such as refrigeration and steam power, for these increased the volumes of people and goods movements throughout the imperial network.

Trade between Britain, China and South Asia flourished. Tea was a highly valued commodity, so much so that “in the 1860s and 1870s, New Zealand colonists were the most avid tea drinkers in the world.”<sup>6</sup> By the 1880s, direct tea trade between New Zealand and Ceylon entered the picture. For example, New Zealand's Union Steamship Company introduced routes to Colombo in 1888. As a result of this trade, New Zealanders started to import supplies of spices and curry powders to complement their diets.

Tea became a point of connection militarily as well as socially. According to K. M. de Silva, the British considered Sri Lanka an important node in their security considerations along with the rest of the dominion states of Australia and New Zealand.<sup>7</sup> It was this connection that enabled the Ceylon Planters Rifle Corps to join New Zealand troops in World War I. It was the first Sri Lankan contingent to head overseas during the First World War. This was a volunteer regiment from Kandy made up of tea and rubber planters. As early as the autumn of 1914, eight officers and 221 soldiers sailed to Egypt, and were attached to the 1st Battalion Wellington Regiment as a part of the Australia and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC).<sup>8</sup>

According to the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, there are approximately 16,000 Sri Lankans living in New Zealand.<sup>9</sup> *Te Ara: The Encyclopaedia of New Zealand* notes that “Sri Lankan emigration to New Zealand has its roots in the colonial past” with the gold rush attracting many of them in the 1860s.<sup>10</sup> This illustrates that, along with tea and spices, the bilateral exchange of people commenced due to the British connection. In addition to Sri Lankans immigrating to New Zealand, New Zealanders visited Sri Lanka, especially those searching for fresh opportunities.<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, at least 33 New Zealanders were born in Sri Lanka by 1874, highlighting the evolution of people-to-people ties between the two island-states.<sup>12</sup>

After the initial exchange of people, Sri Lankans travelled to New Zealand for training and education via the Colombo Plan in the 1950s. Thereafter, in the late 1960s and 1970s, many Sri Lankans migrated to New Zealand seeking better opportunities once borders opened for skilled migration.<sup>13</sup> There was an exponential growth in the number of Sri Lankans migrating to New Zealand in the wake of the Tamil insurgency in the 1980s. Accordingly, the 2018 census indicated over 16,830 Sri Lankans were living in New Zealand.<sup>14</sup>

Today, sports are the most visible cultural connector. Cricket, a sport both countries inherited from the British, is a cornerstone in the bilateral relations between the two countries. Moreover, the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade notes the two states are “making more sporting connections through rugby”, as Sri Lankans are showing an increased interest in the sport.<sup>15</sup> Simon Draper highlights that the two states “share similarities across sport and business”, and along with their broader geopolitical connections.<sup>16</sup>

Sri Lanka and New Zealand are still connected politically through the British Commonwealth. Since 2012, leaders of the two countries have visited each other to discuss a range of issues, inclusive of those related to the Commonwealth. See the table below:

The screenshot shows a web browser window with the URL [mfat.govt.nz/vn/countries-and-regions/asia/sri-lanka/](https://mfat.govt.nz/vn/countries-and-regions/asia/sri-lanka/). The page title is "New Zealand to Sri Lanka". Below the title is a list of visits:

- **2019:** Minister of Justice Andrew Little attended the Commonwealth Law Ministers meeting
- **2017:** Minister of Food Safety David Bennett visited Sri Lanka and met with a range of Ministers
- **2016:** Prime Minister Key visited Sri Lanka accompanied by a large business delegation
- **2014:** Minister for Primary Industries Nathan Guy visited Sri Lanka to promote New Zealand's co-hosting of the Cricket World Cup
- **2013:** Prime Minister John Key and Minister of Foreign Affairs Murray McCully visited Sri Lanka for the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting
- **2013:** Minister of Foreign Affairs Murray McCully visited Sri Lanka twice (June and August) to discuss a range of issues including bilateral trade and preparations for the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting
- **2012:** Minister for Primary Industries David Carter visited Sri Lanka to discuss the bilateral economic relationship

Below this list is a section titled "Sri Lanka to New Zealand" with the following visits:

- **2017:** Minister for Rural Economic Affairs P. Harrison visited New Zealand
- **2017:** Minister of Development Strategies and International Trade Malik Samarawickrama visited New Zealand and met with a range of New Zealand Ministers and stakeholders
- **2016:** Prime Minister Wickremesinghe visited New Zealand accompanied by four ministers and a business delegation
- **2015:** Minister for Tourism and Sports Dissanayake visited New Zealand for the opening of the Cricket World Cup. Minister Dissanayake was the first Minister from the new Sri Lankan government to visit New Zealand
- **2014:** Minister of External Affairs Peiris visited New Zealand, the first ever visit by a Sri Lankan External Affairs Minister to New Zealand

Source: *New Zealand Foreign Affairs & Trade*.<sup>17</sup>

An examination of this list shows some recent visits were Commonwealth-related rather than bilateral. The first round of Foreign Ministry Consultations between Sri Lanka and New Zealand was held only on April 8, 2021, nearly seven decades after diplomatic relations between the two states was established in 1955.<sup>18</sup> The bilateral consultations between the two states in the spheres of “trade, development cooperation, defence, people-to-people exchanges, and education to sports and tourism” illustrate the commonalities between the two that are yet to be harnessed.<sup>19</sup> The deliberations from April 2021 further illustrate that the two states have not harnessed the maximum potential from the bilateral relations. These consultations were followed in July 2021 by the establishment of a New Zealand High Commission in Colombo, with the appointment of H.E. Michael Appleton.<sup>20</sup> Sri Lanka is yet to reciprocate the gesture, even though it expressed its interest to do so back in 2016.

## **Maritime Environments**

### *New Zealand*

New Zealand is an archipelago with three main islands, situated in the South Pacific to the southeast of Australia. It has constitutional responsibilities for the defence and security of the Cook Islands to the northeast, Niue and Tokelau and counts its Ross Dependency claim in Antarctica as part of its territory. Its maritime zone<sup>21</sup> stretches from the Auckland Islands in the Southern Ocean to the top of the North Island. Yeoman, Fairgray and Lin describe New Zealand’s location as follows:

New Zealand’s isolated location on the southern edge of the Pacific Ocean means that the country controls a vast maritime area (seventh largest in the world) which contains substantial resources. At over 4,083,000 square kilometres the maritime area around New Zealand is more than 15 times larger than the land area (268,000km<sup>2</sup>). The nature of the coastal geography of New Zealand also means that the country has one of the longest coast lines in the world, at 15,134 kilometres there are only eight countries with more coastline.<sup>22</sup>

The time of year determines some of the maritime traffic. New Zealand is a popular destination for sailing boats to escape the Pacific cyclone season between September and April and get their boats serviced.<sup>23</sup> These boats travel from Fiji and New Caledonia in an arc down to the east coast of Northland, arriving at Opuia to complete their customs and biosecurity formalities.

New Zealand’s coastline presents a range of risks to sailors and governments alike, because of their lack of human populations and, on the West Coast, risks to maritime vessels. For example, New Zealand’s West Coast in the South Island is inhospitable to many marine craft, with Cook Strait being one of the most treacherous waterways in

the world.<sup>24</sup> In Northland, both coasts are high-risk areas for smuggling drugs and other illicit commodities; the east coast has many small coves, the west coast has the long, uninhabited stretch of Ninety Mile Beach.

Commercial shipping comprises 99% of the volume of New Zealand trade. Sea lines of communication are therefore critically important to New Zealand's economy, which has too small an internal trading market to sustain itself.<sup>25</sup> Unlike Sri Lanka, New Zealand is at the end of international trade routes. It is therefore subject to the schedules of the shipping lines for whom the long trip to New Zealand may in the future not be viable. Covid-19 has revealed New Zealand's vulnerability, with a June 2021 Sea Intelligence report noting significant lack of reliability of services.<sup>26</sup> New Zealand ports could become too small to accommodate larger twenty-foot equivalent units (TEU) container lines. In that event, Australia, New Zealand's closest sizeable neighbour, would provide the nearest large port hub at Sydney, which would be a feeder for all New Zealand's shipping. Australia is New Zealand's second largest trading partner, after China.

New Zealand's maritime vulnerability is highlighted by its dependence on telephone and internet connectivity with the world via the Southern Cross Cable network. This network connects New Zealand to Australia, Fiji, and the US, spanning 30,500km.<sup>27</sup> Any disruption in this network would severely affect New Zealand's economy.

### *Sri Lanka*

Sri Lanka is an island-state located near India and along the sea lines of communication (SLOCs), which is an artery for international trade and commerce in the Indian Ocean. The island attributes its long-standing maritime history and interactions with the international community to its central location in the Indian Ocean, equidistant to the Strait of Malacca and the Bab-el-Mandeb. Even though Sri Lanka is recorded in many historical documents, historians<sup>28</sup> indicate that Sri Lanka's role in international maritime affairs was predominantly due to three key determinants: first, its location astride the sea-lanes; second, its location in India's vicinity; and third, due to the monsoon.

Sri Lanka's importance hinges on the SLOCs immediately south of Sri Lanka's 12 nm territorial waters. These trade routes are used to transport raw material from the west to the east and finished goods from the Far East. It is estimated that 80 percent of the world's energy requirement transits through the waters of the Indian Ocean.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, countries have deployed their navies into the Indian Ocean to ensure their energy shipments are safe. Moreover, Sri Lanka is vulnerable to trafficking of arms and contraband due to its geographical location astride international sea lanes. This illustrates the locational importance of Sri Lanka, as countries expect assistance from Sri Lanka in safeguarding these commercial shipping routes.

As a maritime nation, Sri Lanka enforced the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in 1994. Thereafter, in May 2009, Sri Lanka made a submission to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) to extend the outer limit of the continental shelf beyond 200nm to claim an oceanic area almost equal to 25 times of its total land area with potential hydrocarbon reserves.<sup>30</sup> Accordingly, it is expected that Sri Lanka can expand its oceanic area beyond its present limitations, encapsulating a wider range of the Indian Ocean. This in turn would result in Sri Lanka having to monitor and secure a wider maritime area than its existing boundaries.

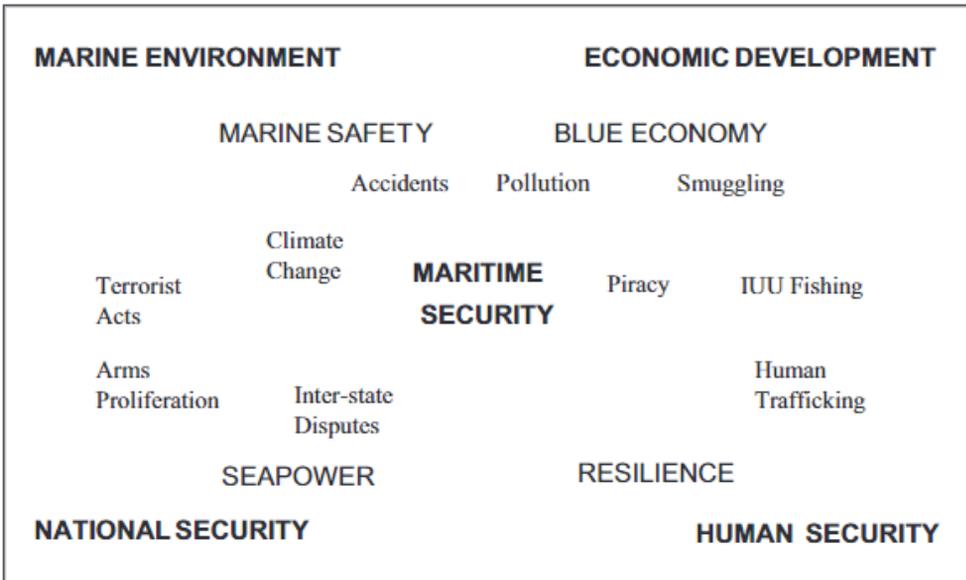
Sri Lanka's locational importance is historical. The sea lanes mentioned above were the same routes used during the Ancient Maritime Silk Route. At that time, Sri Lanka attracted ships, merchandise, and traders from China to Malaysia to the Middle East to the Roman Empire.<sup>31</sup> Despite the island's size, Sri Lanka has been at the centre of international maritime trade and commerce for over millennia illustrating that its location in the centre of the Indian Ocean has placed it squarely in the middle of international affairs.

Sri Lanka is located approximately 900km north of the equator in the northern hemisphere, barely hugging the shores of southeast India. A narrow strip of water – the Palk Strait – that is only 52km in width divides the two countries. Due to the proximity to India, historically, ships visiting India occasionally berthed in the island, either due to a mistaken identity or due to severe weather.<sup>32</sup> The British, for instance, found it convenient to integrate Sri Lanka into its sphere of influence because of its location close to India.

Monsoons are seasonal changes in the direction of the prevailing, or strongest, winds of a region. They are “seasonal exchange[s] of air masses between land and sea”, with the summer monsoons “pulling in air masses saturated with moisture from the Indian Ocean south of Asia”, duly associated with heavy rainfall.<sup>33</sup> While in the winter season, “the warmer air masses over the ocean pull[s] in dry air masses from Asia”, warm, moist air from the southwest Indian Ocean blows toward countries like India, Sri Lanka.<sup>34</sup> These climatic conditions and the monsoon winds were alien to the foreign sailors from the first millennium onwards, as the strong winds proved impossible to navigate. Unlike today, ships were not made of steel and there was limited understanding of the various climatic conditions of this region. This resulted in ships entering Sri Lanka due to the failure of their navigational equipment or battered ships and their men, coming ashore. Sailors that came to Sri Lanka stayed on during the monsoon season and traded with the people of the country, at times, even marrying Sri Lankan women.<sup>35</sup> Sri Lanka's proximity to India and the sea lanes including the monsoon climatic conditions resulted in Sri Lanka being a stopover for ships on their voyages from the east to the west and vice versa.

**Maritime Security interests and approaches**

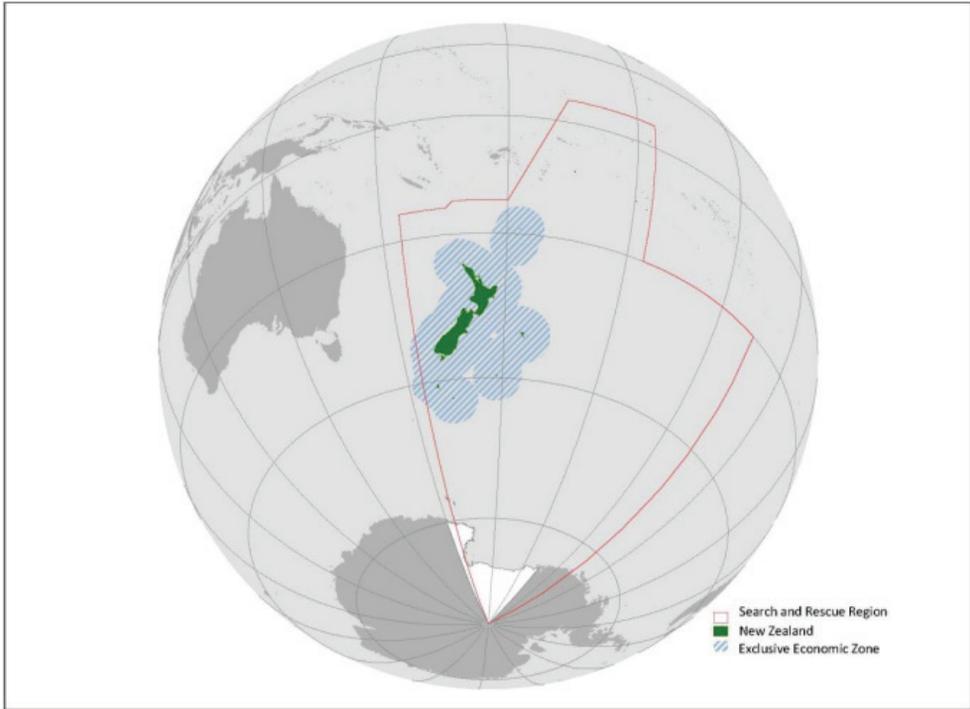
There is no single accepted definition of maritime security, as the context can determine how it is defined. However, there is wide acceptance that maritime security incorporates a range of interests. Christian Bueger’s maritime security matrix in Figure 01 situates these interests within different realms of government interest, highlighting that maritime security is an interconnected concept.<sup>36</sup> Bueger’s matrix provides a useful reference point for situating New Zealand and Sri Lankan maritime security interests. However, as will be made clear in the discussion below, this matrix does not include marine resource security, referencing only climate change and pollution.



*Figure 1: Maritime Security Matrix. Source: Bueger, 2019.*

*New Zealand*

A key focus of New Zealand’s maritime security approach is kaitiakitanga – stewardship.<sup>37</sup> The reason for this becomes clear given the nature of New Zealand’s maritime security interests, and the multiple agencies involved in managing them. These interests span protecting the environment and marine resources, protecting trade flows, intercepting smuggling, and illegal immigration, maintaining safety at sea, disaster relief and search and rescue. New Zealand is responsible for coordinating one of the largest maritime search and rescue zones in the world – over a 30 million square kilometre area stretching from the Ross Sea in Antarctica to Niue and Tokelau in the north. Figure 02 illustrates the extent of New Zealand’s maritime jurisdiction.



*Figure 2: New Zealand's maritime jurisdiction.*

*Source: New Zealand Search and Rescue, 2017.<sup>38</sup>*

New Zealand has no Coastguard. It secures its vast maritime areas primarily with assets from the Royal New Zealand Navy, with the priorities and tasking coordinated by the civilian-led National Maritime Coordination Centre.<sup>39</sup> With two offshore patrol vessels for Pacific support, two inshore patrol vessels for within the EEZ, and one Polar-class vessel that has capability for Southern Ocean patrols as well as combat operations and humanitarian aid, New Zealand's patrol and surveillance naval assets are surprisingly small, given the size of the maritime zone and its commitment to the South Pacific.<sup>40</sup> These assets, small in number as they are, are still greater than its combat capability of two frigates and two support vessels.

Within the Pacific region, more complex dynamics come into play. New Zealand has fisheries management obligations in relation to Pacific fisheries and security commitments under the Boe Declaration of the Pacific Island Forum, such as strengthening national and regional security approaches to the elements of security in the Pacific, viz. "human security, humanitarian assistance, prioritising environmental security, and

regional cooperation in building resilience to disasters and climate change<sup>41</sup> It also has marine resource security responsibilities under its commitment to the Convention for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR), which is part of the Antarctic Treaty system.<sup>42</sup> These responsibilities require diplomacy as well as sea power. Illegal fishing in the Southern Ocean is not just about protecting economic resources, but also about protecting marine resources for their own sake.

Relationships with Pacific Island nations and with the other colonial powers in the region – Australia, France, and the United States – take maritime security into the realm of foreign policy and geopolitics. New Zealand is a member of the Quadrilateral Defence Coordination Group or Pacific QUAD (also called the South-West Pacific Quad), a defence and security cooperative involving New Zealand, Australia, United States and France.<sup>43</sup> This arrangement provides significant capability and development assistance for Pacific Island states, including maritime surveillance and patrols for monitoring Pacific fisheries.<sup>44</sup> According to the New Zealand Maritime Security Strategy, one of New Zealand's key maritime threats is “a proliferation of maritime actors in the Pacific with quite different interests from New Zealand”.<sup>45</sup> This is a subtle reference to the growing presence and influence of larger powers in the region.

New Zealand's regional focus is not only because of its geographical location. Imperial Britain saw the potential of New Zealand as the heart of a Pacific empire. This vision, articulated by Sir George Grey, shaped New Zealand maritime connections in a fundamental way. The first step was the annexation of the Cook Islands in 1901. The resulting Realm of New Zealand led to negative colonial effects in the Pacific that New Zealand is still trying to redress, and it explains to some extent New Zealand's political positioning as a Pacific country. It is therefore not surprising that New Zealand's maritime activity is more Pacific than Asia.

Nevertheless, New Zealand's trading interests are strongly connected throughout Asia. Threats to the maritime trade routes along the Eastern coast of the Asian continent are therefore of critical interest.

### *Sri Lanka*

Like New Zealand, in the Sri Lankan context, Sri Lanka Navy leads surveillance of Sri Lanka's maritime boundaries, as it is entrusted with ensuring and maintaining the island's maritime border security. According to Sri Lanka Navy's Maritime Strategy 2025, the Navy needs to be prepared to counter traditional and non-traditional threats in the ocean space to yield the full potential of the natural resources in the ocean.<sup>46</sup> It is for this reason that the Sri Lanka Navy is seen addressing a range of security threats – pollution and trans-national organised crime – the island is confronted with. Sri Lanka Navy works closely with organisations such as the United Nations Organisation for Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and its local intelligence agencies to apprehend various transna-

tional organised crimes. For example, inter-agency coordination has enabled Sri Lanka to intercept approximately LKR 5,000 million worth of drugs in September 2021.<sup>47</sup> Previously, the Navy intercepted floating armouries in the high seas and the illegal smuggling of people. More recently, it has been able to apprehend the illegal smuggling of spices such as dried turmeric.<sup>48</sup> Sri Lanka's efforts at ensuring its maritime border security are bolstered by its fleet of four Advance Offshore Patrol Vessels (AOPV), four Offshore Patrol Vessels (OPV), and other craft. In October 2021, Sri Lanka acquired another AOPV from the U.S. Coast Guard.<sup>49</sup>

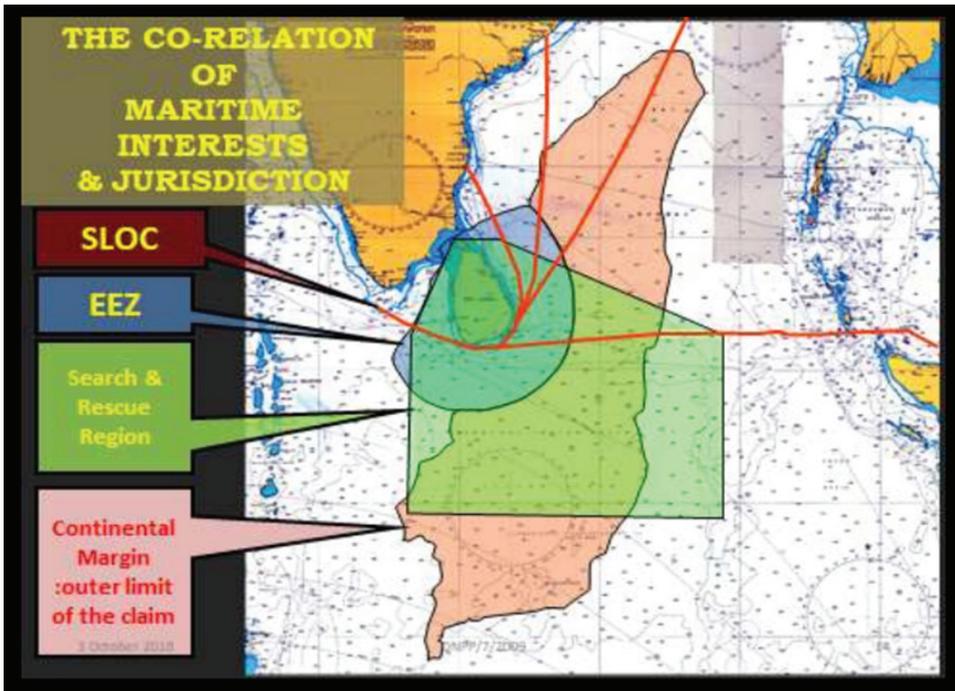


Figure 3: Sri Lanka's Maritime interests and jurisdiction. Source: Jayarathne, 2018.<sup>50</sup>

However, in contrast to New Zealand, Sri Lanka is equipped with a sizeable coast guard to safeguard the island's vast maritime resources. Accordingly, Sri Lanka Coast Guard (SLCG) is the law enforcement agency at sea. It has legal authority to search and arrest ships, craft and personnel engaged in illegal activities in maritime zones of Sri Lanka and constitute legal proceedings against the offenders. It further conducts search and rescue operations, assists, and conducts salvage operations in relation to vessels and cargo. According to the agreements with the International Maritime Organization

(IMO), “Sri Lanka’s Search and Rescue Region consists of a vast sea area and is almost twenty-seven times (27) the land mass [bordering] the Australian, Indian, Indonesian and Maldivian SAR regions.”<sup>51</sup> Moreover, SLCG conducts search and rescue operations for human beings, assists and conducts salvage operations in relation to vessels and cargo accidents at sea. Figure 3 above illustrates Sri Lanka’s SAR, EEZ and extended continental claim, which are much larger than the island’s land mass, thereby requiring significant maritime assets to ensure they are adequately safeguarded.

Sri Lanka is a member of several regional organisations that address maritime security concerns in the Indian Ocean, such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), for which it chaired the IORA Working Group on Maritime Safety and Security (WGMSS) for a period of two years, ending 2021. Moreover, Sri Lanka hosted the First Meeting of the IORA WGMSS in August 2019, which finalized the regional Work Plan drawn up for a period of two years (2019 – 2021).<sup>52</sup> Continuing its commitment to the Indian Ocean Rim Association, Sri Lanka assumed the Vice Chair of the Council of Ministers in January 2021, for a period of two years.<sup>53</sup> Sri Lanka will thereafter be appointed as the IORA Chair for a period of two years ending in 2025.<sup>54</sup> Sri Lanka has been presiding as the Chair of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) since 2018.<sup>55</sup> Additionally, Sri Lanka is a member of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS). These commitments illustrate Sri Lanka’s desire to engage with other stakeholders from the Indian Ocean and the need to safeguard the ocean for future generations.

### Similarities

The primary similarity between New Zealand and Sri Lanka is the geopolitical influence of large powers in their respective maritime neighbourhoods. Both countries’ large neighbours, India, and Australia, are also members of the British Commonwealth. This creates a consonant political connection to both Sri Lanka and New Zealand, but one that is highly mediated by their respective levels of power within their maritime region. Both New Zealand and Sri Lanka are small powers; India positions itself as a large power and Australia as a medium power. The resulting power differential requires caution. In the words of Patrick Köllner, “[i]n their dealings with great powers, small powers have to be prudent.”<sup>56</sup>

Indo-Lanka relations pre-date the British empire tracing back to 3<sup>rd</sup> century. However, the two countries had a close relationship during the British reign through the British East India Company. Sri Lanka is very conscious of threats emanating from India, as it has a history of South Indian invasions in ancient times.<sup>57</sup> India is Sri Lanka’s second largest trading partner after China. Accordingly, India is extremely conscious of Sri Lanka’s external relations, due to the island’s engagement with China. Moreover, Sri Lanka’s location makes it an involuntary partner in the power dynamics in the Indi-

an Ocean, at present, the power play between China, India, and the United States of America. This makes Sri Lanka more vulnerable to the Indian gaze, as India considers the Indian Ocean to be its backyard and intends to maintain its status as the regional hegemon. However, Sri Lanka is conscious of India's security and reassures India of its reliability.<sup>58</sup> Due to the proximity, there is considerable influence from India into Sri Lankan domestic politics and foreign policy formulation, as the former wants to preserve its regional hegemon status.<sup>59</sup> This illustrates the threat perception from the large neighbour towards Sri Lanka, especially because of their mutual interests that lie south, in the Indian Ocean.

Australia is New Zealand's nearest large neighbour and second largest trading partner after China. Their common British colonial heritage has created close cultural connections, such that the two countries are often referred to as family and the Tasman Sea as 'the ditch'.<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, politically Australia positions itself as a medium power aligning with larger and stronger powers, particularly the US, while New Zealand aims to maintain an independent position, reflecting an asymmetry in the interests of the two countries.<sup>61</sup> This asymmetry is also geographic. While both countries have some of the world's largest maritime domains, New Zealand is distant from main trade routes and SLOC; Australia is its only substantive close neighbour, whereas Australia is close to SLOC and to South-East Asian states, Indonesia in particular. This difference flows into the magnitude and likelihood of maritime threats and risks experienced by each state, with Australia having many more maritime assets, both military and non-military, than New Zealand.<sup>62</sup> Nevertheless, New Zealand is important to Australia, particularly as a cooperative partner in defence and security matters. As a result, the security forces and border agencies work well together in the region, including interoperability of their maritime assets.<sup>63</sup>

Another large state in the region of relevance to both Sri Lanka and New Zealand is China, with which both states have significant trade ties.<sup>64</sup> That both India and Australia are members of the Indo-Pacific Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), along with the United States and Japan, creates a potential tension for Sri Lanka and New Zealand. The strong focus of the QUAD on maritime security in the South and East China Seas supports the maintenance of trade flows that are important to both Sri Lanka and New Zealand, while at the same time creating a sense of military threat that is not compatible with their own maritime security positions.<sup>65</sup> Sri Lanka, for instance, is squarely in the centre of the power rivalry between China and India. Hence, Sri Lanka will find itself in a peculiar situation as it maintains its relations with the QUAD states, whilst also maintaining friendly relations with China.<sup>66</sup>

New Zealand faces the prospect of similar dynamics in the South Pacific, where China's military presence is in the form of training and support for Pacific Island countries. New Zealand has to tread a careful diplomatic path between China and Australia, given the trade tensions between these two countries and New Zealand's close relationship

with both.<sup>67</sup> In the maritime domain, however, China's presence is 'softer', taking the form of marine research vessels and fishing fleets that are also known to undertake surveillance. Pacific QUAD members, including Australia and New Zealand, are nervous about China's Military Strategy that they interpret as signalling a more overt military presence in the South Pacific maritime domain in future.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, an unannounced visit of the navy training vessel *Qi Jiguang* in October 2019, in which the New Zealand Defence Force was not involved, was a curious event, inviting speculation as to its purpose.<sup>69</sup>

As outlined earlier, Sri Lanka and New Zealand are dealing with non-military threats in their respective maritime areas of interest. Their territorial borders are not under threat and their navies provide surveillance and patrol cover for non-traditional threats such as sea lines of communication and fishery protection. The trade of both countries is affected by threats to the dense maritime flows that pass by the horn of Sri Lanka and move up through the South China Sea to China, Korea, and Japan. This route is subject to piracy. As such, New Zealand naval vessels contribute to the policing of the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asian maritime routes by escorting vessels when required.<sup>70</sup>

In addition, trans-national crime is a common concern, although it plays out differently for both, as discussed in the next section. Both countries' approaches involve interagency coordination, and responsibilities over large search and rescue areas. Neither country has a large military, but both countries' navies have a growing call on the non-traditional maritime interests in their large EEZs and search and rescue zones. There are implications for both the military and the protection of their maritime interests from these dual functions – research into and comparison of our two countries' experiences would be worth pursuing.

The similarities discussed above highlight that although both countries' maritime interests might be in non-traditional areas, their maritime neighbourhoods are subject to geopolitical influences that drive them to pursue regional connections for political reasons as much as protecting their immediate maritime zones. As countries with small populations and therefore limited resources, regional engagement is one way they can make a meaningful contribution. An area worth of further research is the role Sri Lanka and New Zealand play in their respective regional arrangements.

## **Differences**

Differences in maritime security occur in the challenges presented by each country's primary trade routes and by maritime threats. These differences affect maritime security priorities in both countries.

*Trade routes compared*

One of the biggest differences between Sri Lanka and New Zealand is the flows and volumes of sea traffic. Much of the world's maritime traffic passes around Sri Lanka either through the Malacca Strait or to Indian ports, rather than directly to Colombo. New Zealand's main sea traffic flows between New Zealand and Australia from multiple ports, and from Auckland and Tauranga to the north past Indonesia to Northeast Asia. The stark difference in trade flows helps explain the lack of maritime connections. Figure 4 illustrates the distance New Zealand is from main trade routes.



*Figure 4: Primary trade flows – Sri Lanka and New Zealand.*

*Source: [vox.com/2016/4/25/11503152/shipping-routes-map](http://vox.com/2016/4/25/11503152/shipping-routes-map).*

Trade is a great connector, as has been evidenced by both countries' relationships with China.<sup>71</sup> Not only are trade flows between New Zealand and Sri Lanka relatively modest, but the lack of direct supply lanes also creates a distance that is greater than the physical kilometres separating the two countries.<sup>72</sup> It is, therefore, not surprising that Sri Lankan and New Zealand maritime interests have only marginally intersected, and that research comparing these interests has not occurred.

A second difference between the two countries comes from the way their specific geographies determine their maritime threats. Thus, even though both countries experience threats from transnational criminal groups smuggling drugs and firearms, IUU fishing and shipwrecks, the way they manifest in each country's maritime areas of interest is different.

### *New Zealand*

New Zealand's primary maritime security concerns are from trans-national organised crime (TOC), particularly drug smuggling and IUU fishing.<sup>73</sup> Much drug smuggling is via commercial shipping and the threat is similar as for Sri Lanka. For example, in March 2022, New Zealand Customs seized 70 kg of cocaine in a shipping container, the second seizure in two weeks.<sup>74</sup> However, TOC has a particular manifestation for New Zealand. The South Pacific is particularly vulnerable to transnational criminals' sophisticated networks and resources that enable them to establish themselves there.<sup>75</sup> New Zealand has a dual interest in combatting trans-national criminal activity in the region – to build Pacific Island nations' capability to protect themselves, and to disrupt the smuggling of drugs and small firearms via small craft from the Pacific Islands to New Zealand. Further, a new TOC trend is smuggling of cocaine from South America by sea.<sup>76</sup> New Zealand's IUU fishing focus is on the Pacific and Southern Ocean. New Zealand's interest in this area is demonstrated not only by its membership of regional fisheries organisations and CCAMLR, but also by a 2021 government inquiry (ongoing at the time of writing) that seeks to better understand the dynamics of IUU fishing in these areas and thus how to better regulate it.<sup>77</sup>

A second unique threat relates to New Zealand's natural resources. Maritime security in this sense does not necessarily equate to criminal activity, although illegal harvesting, smuggling, and trading of New Zealand's endangered species is a particular aspect. Mostly, the threats are to marine biodiversity and marine incursions from marine farming and resource competition.<sup>78</sup> Climate change and high volumes of maritime traffic from commercial trade exacerbate the situation, particularly from ballast water and biofouling.<sup>79</sup> Further stress comes from international fishing fleets following the fish south as stocks in the North Pacific are depleted.

New Zealand's rugged coastline and treacherous Cook Strait has resulted in a long history of shipwrecks, with the most recent being the container ship MV *Rena* on the Astrolabe Reef off Tauranga Harbour, causing pollution and damage to the wildlife from the spilled oil and lost containers.<sup>80</sup>

### *Sri Lanka*

Threats to Sri Lanka's maritime environment are associated with being in proximity to main sea lanes. In contemporary history, at least two maritime disasters have occurred in the Sri Lankan waters over a 12-month period. Two ships, namely MT New

Diamond and MV X-Press Pearl caught fire off the coast of Sri Lanka in October 2020 and May 2021, respectively. The latter is considered one of the worst marine ecological disasters in Sri Lanka, due to the cargo it was carrying, which included plastic pellets, nitric acid, petroleum.<sup>81</sup> The plastic pellets washed ashore killing hundreds of sea turtles and other maritime life.<sup>82</sup> Therefore, the primary threat to Sri Lanka is its proximity to the sea land that increases the island's exposure to maritime disasters and its resultant marine pollution.<sup>83</sup> The island is currently in the process of improving its laws and their implementation to obtain compensation and to prevent such disasters from recurring in Sri Lankan waters.<sup>84</sup>

The second threat is associated with TOCs such as the smuggling of drugs and arms. In 2021 alone, Sri Lanka Navy conducted special operations to apprehend narcotics such as cannabis, Crystal Methamphetamine (ICE) and heroin from being smuggled into the country using small crafts such as fishing boats and trawlers.<sup>85</sup> Smuggling of narcotics is a significant threat to Sri Lanka as even though the island was previously being used as a transshipment hub, drugs are now finding its way into the island's citizens' bloodstream.

Non-traditional security threats emanating from South India is the third threat for Sri Lanka. South Indian fishermen cross the International Maritime Boundary Line (IMBL) to fish in Sri Lankan waters.<sup>86</sup> Moreover, these Indian fishermen engage in Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing, bottom trawling etc. and extract large numbers of fisheries resources from the Sri Lankan waters. This has resulted in source depletion and loss of livelihood for Sri Lankan fishermen, thereby leading to a significant diplomatic concern.

Despite these apparent differences, there are signs of convergence. For example, Anthea McCarthy Jones (2018) tracks how global networks of transnational organised criminals use brokers to connect and expand their markets, with maritime SLOCs an important aspect of getting the goods from suppliers to buyers.<sup>87</sup> These connections reach across the Pacific and into the Indian Ocean, with Sri Lanka being an important transit point. Research into potential transnational criminal connections between Sri Lanka and New Zealand could be an important addition to scholarship on maritime transnational crime.

## Conclusion

By comparing Sri Lankan and New Zealand maritime security approaches, this article set out to shed light on the dynamics experienced by smaller states, particularly in relation to non-traditional maritime security. It has drawn a picture of two British Commonwealth countries with numerous reasons to connect more than they currently do. The similarities outweigh the differences, suggesting the two countries could be a useful focus for further research on non-traditional maritime security, particularly as it relates to island states.

Apart from the similarities in non-traditional security both countries have a main trading partner in China. New Zealand's and Sri Lanka's immediate neighbours, Australia, and India respectively, are members of the QUAD, which counter China's interests in the Indo-Pacific region. China already has significant economic engagement with Sri Lanka and is foraying in the Indian Ocean region through investments made via the Belt and Road Initiative as well as through its naval assets. Sri Lanka has had naval warships visiting the country previously. However, recent visits have caused concern, especially because of misinterpretations around the BRI and concerns from the Indian front. In turn, New Zealand treads a careful diplomatic path between its two biggest trading partners, China, and Australia, both of which are active in the South Pacific and Antarctica. In the maritime domain, New Zealand is taking a watchful approach to China's activities. The storm might be coming in the trade arena, as stated by Foreign Minister Mahuta in 2021, and this will affect trade routes via the South China Sea. In the South Pacific, New Zealand's membership of the Pacific QUAD is a predictor for its likely position in the event of any maritime security situation involving China.

Even though New Zealand and Sri Lanka have a common colonial heritage, in the future, the two islands will have to make their own tough decisions pertaining to their engagement with China and the international pressures that would arise through the QUAD as well as their immediate neighbors. Comparing the effects of these geopolitics on Sri Lanka and New Zealand in the maritime domain is therefore a fruitful area for further research.

This article has pointed to several other areas for further research. First, tracing Sri Lanka and New Zealand's shifts in the military/non-military mix of navy functions and priorities could point to whether the roles of navies are changing, and what the implications of any changes might be for smaller states. Second, exploring the value Sri Lanka and New Zealand provides in regional cooperation could bring greater understanding of the roles of smaller states in regional fora. Third, this article could be the starting point for exploring the broader influence of the British Commonwealth in the Indo-Pacific. Fourth, comparing in more detail the challenges Sri Lanka and New Zealand face from managing large maritime zones could be useful case studies for other island states.

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