

Historical evolution of Mitra- Sakthi (India and Sri Lanka Military Exercise)

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Abstract

Exercise Mitra Shakti, the annual bilateral army exercise between India and Sri Lanka first conducted in 2012 has evolved into an important mechanism of defence cooperation and military interoperability. The study examines how Mitra Shakti has developed historically between the two armies and analyses its tactical, operational, and strategic dimensions. It further examines how the exercise contributes to counter-insurgency (COIN) and counter-terrorism (CT) preparedness under Chapter VII of the United Nations mandate, enhances interoperability and bilateral defence diplomacy, and strengthens professional military cooperation. The study also assesses its strategic relevance as India and Sri Lanka respond to extra-regional influences within the changing geopolitics of the Indian Ocean Region. In addition, it identifies key challenges and future prospects affecting the continued development of bilateral defence cooperation through Mitra Shakti, including differences in military capabilities, resources, infrastructure, and Sri Lanka's strategic balancing. Using a qualitative descriptive-analytical approach based on secondary academic literature and official sources, the study argues that Mitra Shakti serves simultaneously as a tactical training mechanism, a platform for defence diplomacy and confidence building, and an important component of India-Sri Lanka bilateral and regional security cooperation."

Keywords: Mitra, Defence, Interoperability, Diplomacy, Geopolitics

1. Introduction

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has increasingly emerged as a theatre of strategic competition, connectivity, and cooperative security arrangements among South Asian and extra-regional powers (Brewster, 2014). Within this milieu, India and Sri Lanka, bound by geographic proximity, historical ties, and overlapping security concerns, have progressively institutionalized their defence relationship through a series of joint military engagements. Exercise Mitra Shakti, an annual bilateral army exercise which has been initiated in 2012 and is conducted alternately in India and Sri Lanka, has a special significance as another important bilateral land exercise between the Sri Lankan Army and Indian Army (Nandy & Naha, 2023). Unlike Symbolic/ceremonial military engagements, Mitra Shakti has been geared towards improving joint operational capability against counter-insurgency/counter-terrorist activities in sub-conventional and semi-urban scenarios, within the broader framework of United Nations (UN) Chapter VII (Pattanaik, 2021). Mitra Shakti's development must be seen in the context of the overall trajectory of India Sri Lanka defence cooperation that also includes the naval exercise SLINEX which was launched in 2005, and various capacity building and training arrangements. Scholars place this cooperative architecture in the context of the India's "Neighbourhood First" policy and its ambition to be a "net security provider" in the IOR, which aims to strengthen regional security and help resolve India's own security concerns about cross border terrorism and insurgent movements. The exercise should also be viewed in the context of growing rivalry

between China and India in the Indian Ocean region. The so called "String of Pearls" thesis, which suggests that China is attempting to build a string of ports and strategic positions around the IOR, including in Sri Lanka, has also prompted a lot of academic debate over the magnitude of the IOR security dilemma faced by India (Khurana, 2008; Brewster, 2014). In this conflicting discourse, bilateral military exercises like Mitra Shakti are often seen as tools India uses to assert its traditional sphere and react to extra-regional strategic changes without engaging in any 'securitization'. This paper is structured around five research questions concerning the historical evolution, tactical-operational-strategic dimensions, COIN/CT contribution under the UN mandate, interoperability and defence-diplomacy functions, and the geopolitical counterbalancing role of Mitra Shakti, alongside the challenges confronting its continued development.

Problem Statement

Though the conduct of Exercise Mitra Shakti has been going on since 2012 and its importance has increased in the context of India-Sri Lanka defence relations, yet comparatively less scholarly focus has been given to the exercise compared to naval exercises such as SLINEX and other regional groupings such as the Quad. The literature on Indian Ocean geopolitics largely tends to concentrate on maritime rivalries and the 'String of Pearls' concept, whereas bilateral land exercises between India and other countries that involve counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism operations have not received much attention. Therefore, the following questions arise: How has Mitra Shakti undergone institutional change in its various editions? What kind of interoperability and defence diplomacy has Mitra Shakti been able to foster, apart from symbolic cooperation? What is the real role of the exercise as a response to extra-regional presence in Sri Lanka?

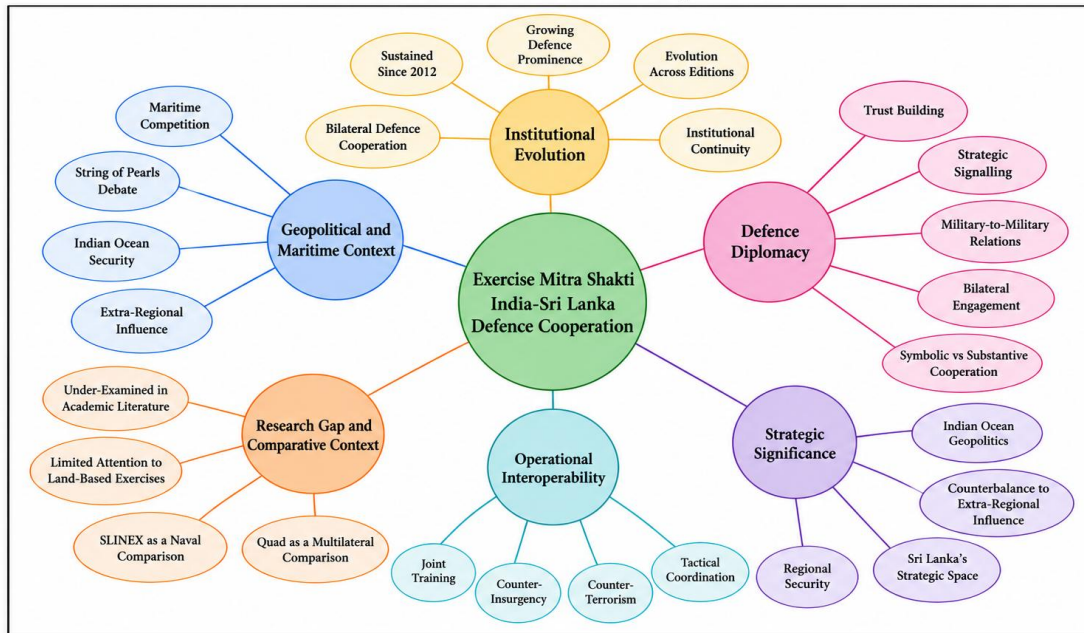
2. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive-analytical research design to trace the historical evolution of Exercise Mitra Shakti and examine its tactical, operational, strategic, and diplomatic dimensions within the broader India-Sri Lanka defence relationship. The study is based solely on secondary data sourced from peer-reviewed articles in academic journals, scholarly book chapters, and research papers on Indian Ocean geopolitics, defence diplomacy, and South Asia's security cooperation excluding any government press release and news reports, to remain strictly academic and grounded in the scholarly literature. The process of data gathering entailed an academic search of databases and repositories of literature that deals with India-Sri Lanka bilateral military exercises, cooperation on COIN/CT under UN mandate, and strategic rivalry of China and India in the Indian Ocean Region. The main themes search includes the history of Mitra Shakti, the tactics, operations, and strategies, COIN/CT contribution, military interoperability, defence diplomacy, India-Sri Lanka security cooperation, and geopolitical counterbalancing. They are grouped around research questions and then studied descriptively to trace continuities and changes in them through successive editions of the event since 2012. The methodological contribution of the paper includes the use of historical tracing and thematic analysis of Mitra Shakti as a tool of military, diplomatic, and geopolitical policy."

Conceptual-Thematic Network of Exercise Mitra Shakti and India-Sri Lanka Defence Cooperation

The Figure 1 below illustrates a conceptual-thematic network of Exercise Mitra Shakti, demonstrating six dimensions of interaction. The network reveals that Mitra Shakti has evolved as a result of institutional continuity and constant bilateral defence cooperation from 2012 onwards, whereas its strategic importance is a product of the geopolitical context of the Indian Ocean region characterized by maritime competition, String of Pearls discussion, and extra-regional intervention. As for the dimension of defence diplomacy, it is focused on trust-building, military-to-military relationship, signaling, and bilateral engagement, while operational interoperability finds its expression in joint training, counter-insurgency, counter-terrorism, and tactical cooperation. The network also reveals a research gap, namely the lack of academic interest to bilateral land-based exercises, especially in comparison with SLINEX and Quad exercises. The strategic importance of Mitra Shakti is also associated with regional security and the strategic space of Sri Lanka, as well as its counterbalancing potential. In conclusion, the network reveals Mitra Shakti as not only a military exercise but also a multidimensional tool of operational cooperation and defence diplomacy between India and Sri Lanka.

Figure 1. Conceptual-Thematic Network of Exercise Mitra Shakti and India-Sri Lanka Defence Cooperation



Source: Author

Historical Evolution of Exercise Mitra Shakti Since 2012

"The Exercise Mitra Shakti has gradually evolved into an institutionalized model of defence cooperation between India and Sri Lanka by 2024. Its evolution mirrors the growing frequency of bilateral military interactions, growth of interoperability and the rise of counter insurgency and counter terrorism training in the wider security landscape of the Indian Ocean Region. The exercise was started to increase mutual friendship between the Indian and Sri Lankan armies and boost the inter-operability by conducting joint training sessions, especially in counter insurgency and counter terrorism operations. The first edition was carried out in India in 2012 and the second edition in Colombo, Sri Lanka, in 2014. The third edition took place in Pune, India from 29th Sept to 12 October 2015. These early editions concentrated on conducting the exercise in India and Sri Lanka alternately and primarily on building the capabilities and strengthening the military ties for joint counter insurgency/counter terrorism operations. The fourth edition was held from 24 October to 6 November 2016 in Ambepussa, Sri Lanka and the fifth edition was held from 13 to 26 October 2017 in Pune, India. The emphasis on tactical training and on the cooperation between the two armies was continued in these editions. The sixth edition was executed in Sri Lanka from 26 March to 8 April 2019 and the seventh edition in Foreign Training Node, Pune from 1 to 14 December 2019. The seventh edition focused more on interoperability and added some of the modern needs of United Nations peacekeeping operations issues in the practical discussions and tactical exercises. Between the sixth and seventh editions, the exercise has become more regular and more institutionalized, and remains a focus on developing common approaches to joint military operations. The Combat Training School in Ampara, Sri Lanka hosted the eighth one from 4 to 15 October, 2021. A 120-strong Indian Army contingent, along with the Sri Lankan Army battalion, joined in the exercise. The exercise continued to emphasize CT/CI operations in semi urban and the need for interoperability and joint tactical training. It was then repeated at Pune from 16-29 November 2023 in the 9th Edition. This edition expanded on the build-up of combined operational capabilities and improved intermarries professional relations. The 10th Edition was held at the Army Training School, Maduru Oya, Sri Lanka from 12th to 25th August 2024. The Indian contingent had 106 members, with one battalion each from the Rajputana Rifles, other arms and services, while the Sri Lankan contingent had members from the Gajaba Regiment. The exercise was aimed at further developing joint military capability to conduct counter insurgency operations in a sub conventional scenario within the framework of the United Nations Chapter VII mandate. The training covered semi urban operations, response to terrorist actions, joint command post, intelligence and surveillance, helipad and landing site security, small team insertion and extraction, special heliborne operations, cordon and search operations and use of

drones and counter drone systems. The exercise also helped exchange best practices on tactics, techniques and procedures, and reinforced the interoperability and bilateral defence cooperation. The path of Mitra Shakti thus shows a few salient trends. First, the exercise started with the intention of being a bilateral military engagement and now became a regular and institutionalized exercise that is held on alternate yearly basis in India or Sri Lanka. First, the intention of the exercise was originally to be a bilateral military exercise and now became regular and institutionalized with an alternate annual exercise in India or Sri Lanka. Secondly, its geographical rotation between the two countries has enabled continuity in bilateral military engagement. Thirdly, it has progressively adopted more structured counter insurgency and counter terrorism exercises, joint command arrangements, intelligence and surveillance, heliborne operations and newer technologies like drones, counter drone etc. Fourth, the exercise has placed more importance on interoperability, sharing of best practices and the creation of common tactics, techniques and procedures. Lastly, the exercise has emerged as an integral element in the broader defence relationship between India and Sri Lanka, along with other areas of military and naval cooperation. The institutionalization of Mitra Shakti as a platform for military interoperability, professional cooperation and bilateral defence engagement in the Indian Ocean Region is evident in this evolution.

Table 1 Historical Evolution of Exercise Mitra Shakti

S.No	Edition	Year and Date	Location of Exercise	Participant Indian Side	Participant Sri Lankan Side
1	1st Edition	December 2012	Pune, India	Around 40 Indian Army Para-SF Commandos	Sri Lankan Army Special Forces
2	2nd Edition	August 2014, 2-week exercise	Colombo, Sri Lanka	Indian Army Contingent	Sri Lankan Army Contingent
3	3rd Edition	29 September–12 October 2015, 14 days	Pune, India (Aundh Military Camp)	Indian Army Contingent led by Brigadier Tapan Lal Sah	Sri Lankan Army Contingent led by Brigadier K. P. Aruna Jayasekara
4	4th Edition	July–August 2016, 14 days	Sinha Regimental Centre	One Platoon from the Rajputana Rifles Regiment, Indian Army	One Platoon from the Sinha Regiment, Sri Lankan Army
5	5th Edition	13–25 October 2017, 13 days	Pune, India	Indian Army Contingent	Sri Lankan Army Contingent
6	6th Edition	26 March–8 April 2018, 14 days	Gemunu Watch Regimental Training Centre, Sri Lanka	Indian Army Officers, JCOs and Soldiers	Sri Lankan Army Contingent
7	7th Edition	1–14 December 2019	Foreign Training Node (FTN), Pune	Indian Army Contingent	Sri Lankan Army Contingent
8	8th Edition	4–15 October 2021, 12 days	Combat Training School, Sri Lanka	120 Personnel from an Indian Army Infantry Battalion Group	120 Personnel from a Sri Lankan Army Battalion
9	9th Edition	16–29 November 2023, 14 days	Aundh Military Station, Pune	120 Personnel, mainly from the Maratha Light Infantry Regiment; 15 personnel from the Indian Air Force	Personnel from the 53 Infantry Division of the Sri Lankan Army; 5 personnel from the Sri Lankan Air Force
10	10th Edition	12–25 August 2024, 14 days	Army Training School, Sri Lanka	106 Personnel led by a Battalion of the Rajputana Rifles, along with personnel from other arms and services	Personnel from the Gajaba Regiment of the Sri Lankan Army
Source: Compiled by the researcher from official Ministry of Defence/Press Information Bureau releases and High Commission of India, Colombo sources on Exercise Mitra Shakti.					

3. TACTICAL, OPERATIONAL AND STRATEGIC DIMENSIONS OF EXERCISE MITRA SHAKTI

Mitra Shakti should be understood as a multi-layered construct that links the development of small unit counter terrorism practice with the broader objective of security in the Indian Ocean. In the tactical sense it reinforces sub unit skills for semi urban operations, the operational aspects enhance interoperable command, intelligence and sustainment routines and the strategic aspects indicate a growing norm based defence partnership in line with India's Neighbourhood First and SAGAR postures. Mitra Shakti focuses on company and platoon level drills common to counter insurgency and counter terrorism (CI/CT) operations in built up areas at the tactical level. These reported modules cover cordon and search, room intervention and clearing, raid and search and destroy small team insertion and extraction, helipad and landing site security, and casualty evacuation under fire. The repeated mention of semi urban terrain has been due to the requirement of having to move, share intelligence, respond quickly and manage civilian risks carefully (Waidyatilake, 2019). In 2024, it featured technological innovations such as drones and counter drone systems, combat reflex shooting and heliborne manoeuvres, thus moving tactical preparation into the domain of technology-assisted small unit operations. These exercises improve situational awareness, ground/air coordination, and response to new aerial threats. The exercise is designed to build up repeatable and interoperable procedures and not just tactical skills. The creation of a joint command post, a Joint Intelligence, Surveillance Centre and the rehearsal of special heliborne operations enhance common operating procedures, intelligence co-ordination and command arrangements. These functions are crucial in coordinating ground movement, air support and casualty evacuation in complex CI/CT operations. The regular conduct of these activities helps in nurturing communication, liaison and coordination between the two forces. The 2023 edition was also expanded with the participation of the air force, which also added a component of mobility and operational coordination between the air force and the army (Waidyatilake, 2019). Mitra Shakti, on a strategic scale, has three interrelated objectives. It strengthens the long term defence relationship between India and Sri Lanka through regular military interaction, professional cooperation and institutionalized training. Second, it puts a focus on sub conventional operations under Chapter VII of the UN mandate linking bilateral CI/CT cooperation with internationally recognized principles governing joint operations and peacekeeping. Third, the exercise was also a valuable contribution to India's Neighbourhood First and SAGAR initiatives to improve defence cooperation with a strategically important Indian Ocean nation. With the surrounding area having conflicting external interests, military involvement offers a means to a practical end to ensure security cooperation with Sri Lanka. The overall development of the India Sri Lanka security dynamics is increasingly intertwining the concept of counter terrorism and Indian Ocean Region maritime security and connectivity. In this context, Mitra Shakti operationalized tactical training as a part of operational interoperability and broader strategic goals of defence cooperation and regional stability (Waidyatilake, 2019)."

3.1. Mitra Shakti, Counter-Insurgency and Counter-Terrorism under the UN Mandate

Exercise Mitra Shakti is a component of counter insurgency (COIN) and counters terror (CT) preparedness and has trained the Indian and Sri Lankan armed forces in joint sub-conventional operations as per Chapter VII of the United Nations mandate. The exercise has developed into a structured platform for improving interoperability and tactical coordination. It concentrates on semi-urban areas, where CT operations need to be conducted in a coordinated fashion, and involve intelligence sharing, quick response and careful management of civilian risks. The UN-oriented approach links bilateral military preparations with the overall needs of international peace and security. Mitra Shakti, therefore, is more than a military cooperation initiative; it ensures both military forces are prepared to act in unison to address complex security challenges within the framework of internationally recognized mandates (Curran, 2013; Drab, 2018).

The tactical dimension emphasizes the tactical COIN/CT skills relevant to joint operations. Training consists of what to do when a terrorist incident occurs, raids, search and destroy, cordon and search, small team insertion and extraction, room intervention, close quarter battle, helipad and landing site security and casualty evacuation. The 10th edition, held in Sri Lanka from 12-25 August 2024, comprised a Joint Command Post, Intelligence and

Surveillance Centre and special heliborne operations. These exercises help reinforce the command structure, intelligence operations and tactical activity of both forces. Similarly, through repeated training, common tactics, techniques and procedures are also addressed, thus less operational friction during multinational deployments (Bashir & Gul, 2021). Modern technologies relevant to the CT operations of today have been incorporated into the exercise. The 2024 edition also featured drones and counter-drone systems, highlighting the significance of unmanned aerial surveillance and defense against aerial threats. Tactical action combined with mobility and force protection is joined with heliborne operations and landing-site security and casualty evacuation. These capabilities show that successful COIN/CT operations requires more than just ground engagement with armed groups, but also speedy information, coordinated movement, effective command arrangements, and secure evacuations. The exercise also allows for the exchange of best practices for both armies.

Mitra Shakti also boosts the normative and operational aspects of military cooperation with the United Nations. It places emphasis on sub-conventional operations under Chapter VII, fostering joint operations in an internationally authorized environment, and not just as a domestic security operation. Interoperability was also a primary focus of earlier editions, as was counter-terrorism operations conducted under a UN mandate. This continuity ensures that coordinated action and professional cooperation of the two armies continue. Mitra Shakti provides a practical training tool for complex peace and security environments, including tactical drills, command arrangements, intelligence coordination, technological integration and risk reduction (Curran, 2013; Cheyre, 2013; Drab, 2018). Mitra Shakti promotes COIN and CT preparedness by ensuring tactical capability, interoperability, technology, command coordination and UN principles. It is important for it to bridge the gap between the skills needed at the battle level and the interagency and peacekeeping level. It is an evolving model of bilateral defence cooperation, as repeated exercises, standard operating procedures, and up-to-the-date operational capability enhance the capacity of Indian and Sri Lankan forces to communicate, coordinate, and act together in the event of a terrorist or insurgent attack, while providing a reduction in risks to personnel, civilians and property (Wedagedara, 2013; Kinne, 2020; Bashir & Gul, 2021).

3.2. Interoperability and Bilateral Defence Diplomacy between India and Sri Lanka

By institutionalizing regular military contact with a high degree of trust and trust building, beyond just one-off drills, Mitra Shakti promotes interoperability and bilateral defence diplomacy. It builds common operational practices, professional connections and diplomatic momentum which can help support joint action in the future on issues related to peacekeeping, disaster response, and maritime security. The exercise is standardizing Indian and Sri Lankan units' planning, communication, and execution of missions. Regular practice of the joint command post develops joint reporting, liaison routines and decision making processes. Regular practice of the joint command post builds joint reporting, liaison routines and decision making processes. Gradually, it increases the coordination due to an understanding of the operation procedures of the staff officers and field commanders (Wenas Inkiriwang, 2021). The addition of bi service elements further adds interoperability. In the 2023 edition, 15 Indian Air Force and five Sri Lankan Air Force personnel joined the army contingents of 120 each, mainly comprising of Maratha Light Infantry and 53 Infantry Division. For more complex joint operations, joint heliborne insertion, close-air support coordination and integrated casualty evacuation exercises demand that the two militaries coordinate technical procedures and safety protocols.

Mitra Shakti is also an ongoing confidence building process. It is a periodical exercise in which the exercise takes place on Indian and Sri Lankan soil, which establishes professional relationships between military ranks. Earlier editions also had women soldiers and Special Forces soldiers, which show that there is joint training in a more professional way. Mitra Shakti is not only a military exercise; it is also a diplomatic tool to indicate the ongoing cooperation between the defense sectors. Alternate hosting of the exercise reflects the mutual interest in the bilateral relationship. The 2021 edition took place at the Combat Training School, Ampara, Sri Lanka, with the 120 personnel of all arms Indian contingent and a Sri Lankan infantry battalion. The 2023 edition took place at the Army Training School, Aundh, Pune, and the 2024 edition was held back in the Army Training School, Maduru Oya, Sri Lanka, with 106 Indian participants, mostly from the Rajputana Rifles and 100 Sri Lankan Army participants from the Gajaba Regiment. This continuity gives a degree of predictability to engagements and enhances institutional continuity for the defence relationship. The exercise also offers opportunities for

professional dialogue, joint debriefing and the exchange of good practices related to the broader problems of security, such as maritime security and coordinating the response to disaster . By this way, Mitra Shakti brings together the training of military staff and defence diplomacy and strengthens India's Neighbourhood First policy (Pattanaik, 2019).

Mitra Shakti's focus on interoperability is significant for regional security as well. During the period of their military cooperation, both sides have enhanced their capacity for assistance in the field of peacekeeping and regional security cooperation, which is beneficial for the mutual development of peacekeeping and regional security cooperation. Both sides have strengthened their cooperation in the field of peacekeeping and regional security cooperation, which benefits the development of peacekeeping and regional security cooperation. This capacity building can help in the overall security architecture of the Indian Ocean Region by enhancing coordination between two forces in complex situations (De Silva, 2020). The exercise also showcases the institutionalized defence engagements and the practical cooperation between India and Sri Lanka. Mitra Shakti is therefore a mechanism to bolster regular military engagement as a process for confidence building, interoperability and defence diplomacy, which also contributes to the wider bilateral and regional security goals (Amarasinghe, 2020).

3.3. Mitra Shakti and Strategic Counterbalancing of Extra-Regional Influences in the Indian Ocean Region

By integrating military cooperation between India and Sri Lanka into broader institutional, operational-level and maritime security frameworks in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), Mitra Shakti acts as a strategic tool to bolster the defence cooperation between the two nations. Instead of being a confrontational exercise, it is part of a more holistic security climate of frequent military engagement, interoperability and confidence building. Mitra Shakti is part of a broader network of security cooperation between India and Sri Lanka, which also involves maritime security, training, and intelligence sharing and joint military exercises (De Silva, 2020; Pattanaik, 2019). In June, 2024, the Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre was established in Colombo, with a US\$6 million grant from the Indian government, further bolstering maritime security cooperation. The centre has a sub centre at Hambantota and unmanned installations at various places such as Galle and Trincomalee, establishing an institutional framework for maritime search and rescue co-ordination. At the same time Mitra Shakti, which is a part of the maritime arrangements, also enhances army level interoperability and continuity in the bilateral defence cooperation. India and Sri Lanka also inked a pact to deepen bilateral ties in December 2024 under which they further strengthen their cooperation through joint exercises, maritime surveillance, defence dialogue, information exchange and capacity building, and also explore a framework agreement on defence cooperation. The developments reflect the growing institutionalization of the bilateral security cooperation (Madutharanaga, 2023; Pattanaik, 2019).

The Sri Lankan Hambantota port is a key component of the larger strategic context of India Sri Lanka defence cooperation in which China is involved. In 2017, Sri Lanka and China signed a 99 year concession deal for Hambantota Port, making it a key focal point in discussions around China's economic and strategic presence in the Indian Ocean. This has led to ongoing strategic discussions on the impact of Chinese infrastructure development under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) on India and regional security (Gangte, 2020; Robinson et al., 2020; De Silva, 2020). Mitra Shakti is not directly against Chinese military operations or construction projects. Rather its role is to bolster Sri Lanka's defence capabilities through the regular training of military personnel, interoperability and professional military cooperation with India. For instance, the 2024 edition was dedicated to counter insurgency operations in a sub conventional environment of Chapter VII of the United Nations mandate and comprised of joint CPs, co-ordination in intelligence and surveillance, heliborne operations, cordon search operations, drones and counter drone systems. The activities themselves build practical cooperation between the two forces, but don't involve Sri Lanka in an anti-China security stance.

In Sri Lanka, this cooperation is also possible in line with the country's quest for strategic autonomy, as it enables him/her to enhance the capabilities of the armed forces and to have multiple ties with the outside world (Amarasinghe, 2020; Madutharanaga, 2023). Defence cooperation is India's ongoing commitment to its near neighbourhood as a key security partner. Joint statement issued by the two countries between India and Sri Lanka on 30th December 2024 highlighted mutual security concerns, training, capacity building, intelligence and information sharing, joint exercises, maritime surveillance and defence dialogue. It also recognized the stability of the Indian Ocean Region as one of the key goals of further bilateral

cooperation. This process is further facilitated by Mitra Shakti, which offers an operational forum for the implementation of its broader diplomatic engagement in the form of repeated operational interaction (Pattanaik, 2019; De Silva, 2020). The exercise also provides continuity with the regular alternating deployment in India and Sri Lanka in this exercise. The 2021 edition took place in Ampara, the 2023 edition in Pune, and the 2024 edition in Maduru Oya, Sri Lanka. 106 soldiers, mostly from Rajputana Rifles, along with Sri Lankan Gajaba Regiment soldiers, took part in the 2024 exercise. The 2024 edition furthered the focus on interoperability, sharing of best practices and the establishment of shared tactics, techniques and procedures. This is beneficial for the development of both institutional familiarity and professional networks between the two arms of the service. These ties can help to ensure improved coordination in the future in bilateral or multilateral security activities. Mitra Shakti thus has less military implication than it has military security cooperation dribbling towards consolidation between India and Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka's positioning is also quite significant as it has a strong security agreement with more relevance in the wider region, since it sits close to vital sea lanes in the Indian Ocean. The military exercises, maritime cooperation, training and defence dialogue has created a more institutionalized engagement between India and Sri Lanka through annual military exercises and engagements. Mitra Shakti plays a significant role in this process, aligning tactical military training with interoperability, confidence building, and regional stability (De Silva, 2020; Madutharanaga, 2023). The exercise is a capability focused one which allows India to enhance defence cooperation and ensure strategic autonomy of Sri Lanka, rather than forcing her into a strategic binary choice (Amarasinghe, 2020; Robinson et al., 2020). Mitra Shakti, in this sense, is a step by step, institutionalized process of strategic interaction in which India reinforces its defence ties with Sri Lanka and helps build the overall security framework of the Indian Ocean Region..

4. CHALLENGES OF INDIA-SRI LANKA DEFENCE COOPERATION THROUGH MITRA SHAKTI

India Sri Lanka defence cooperation has potential for further development, but has to overcome structural, political and operational hurdles. The strategic interest of strengthening bilateral security cooperation between India and Sri Lanka is juxtaposed with the strategic autonomy of Sri Lanka and balancing domestic political sensitivities and relationships with external actors (Jain, 2022). A first problem is the fact that bilateral problems tend to persist, causing occasional difficulties in the broader relationship. Issue of livelihood for the fishermen in Tamil Nadu is a constant source of tension. Mechanized and bottom trawlers from India have been arrested, fishing boats seized and legal proceedings initiated against fishermen fishing in Sri Lankan waters, leading to some political and diplomatic tension (Manoharan & Deshpande, 2018; Vincent, 2020). In 2024, 530 Indian fishermen were arrested by the Sri Lankan Navy and 71 Indian fishing boats were confiscated. These events can create domestic political tension in both countries and can create indirect obstacles in the arena of bilateral security cooperation in the future.

The Katchatheevu issue also adds to the politically sensitive issue of fishing rights and maritime boundaries. Fishing issues, debates about the enforcement of fishing regulations and access to neighbouring waters occasionally lead to political demands in India and concerns in Sri Lanka (Vincent, 2020; Manoharan & Deshpande, 2018). If fishermen are arrested and boats seized, political actors can use the issue to consolidate in their own country, making bilateral relations more challenging. Additionally, Sri Lanka's internal political context is a crucial one. The economic challenges of 2022 and the subsequent political developments brought both challenges and opportunities for India Sri Lanka cooperation. The December 2024 India Sri Lanka joint statement showed the intent to further expand the scope of defence and maritime cooperation in the areas of training, capacity building, intelligence and information sharing, joint exercises, maritime surveillance and maritime defence dialogue. But the two governments only agreed to look into the possibility of concluding a framework agreement on defence cooperation. It is thus not a defence cooperation agreement that has already been signed in December 2024. (Tran, 2023)

Current focus on strategic autonomy also restricts the extent of defence integration between the two countries. Colombo is, however, expected to be keeping its security partnership with

India in check as it maintains the other relationships that it has with China and other external partners (Jain, 2022). This strategic environment is related to the economic and strategic presence of China in Sri Lanka, especially in terms of infrastructure investments, and the significance of the Hambantota Port (Gangte, 2020). In the case of Sri Lanka, it is a matter of balancing security and capacity development from India, without over-dependency on one country. The challenge for India is to strengthen bilateral defence cooperation, but not in a way that makes Sri Lanka feel constrained in its strategic choices. This means that Mitra Shakti cannot grow any quicker without causing political sensitivities in Colombo. Differences in equipment, organizational structure, and doctrine and training standards can be an issue when it comes to interoperability on the operational level. India has a far bigger defence machine, technological power and experience compared to Sri Lanka which has been under immense financial pressures in the past few years. Sri Lanka also pledged to scale down the size of its Army from the approved strength of 200,783 to 135,000 by 2024 and to 100,000 by 2030, as part of a wider restructuring programme. These were the numbers of forces planned for, not necessarily that these goals had been reached already. Restructuring can impact on staff and resource availability for large scale Bilateral Training. The advantages of Mitra Shakti can only be achieved at the unit level without the investment of continuous modernization of equipment, training and institutional capacity, limiting the success to certain units and not achieving broader interoperability between the two forces (Wenas Inkiriwang, 2021).

5. FUTURE PROSPECTS: INSTITUTIONAL DEEPENING AND WIDER SECURITY COOPERATION

However, if both sides make efforts for a gradual, mutually acceptable cooperation, the prospects of Mitra Shakti remain bright despite these difficulties. An important opportunity is to augment the coordination between Mitra Shakti and the overall coordination of the India Sri Lanka defence and maritime exercises. SLINEX already has a platform for bilateral naval cooperation, and Mitra Shakti is mainly based on land based military cooperation. Increased coordination amongst these mechanisms alone could help facilitate understanding between the services without the need for an immediate single tri service exercise. The December 2024 joint statement also highlighted the need for continued cooperation in the fields of maritime surveillance, joint exercises, defence dialogue, capacity building and disaster response. The priorities offer scope for further developing the practical links between maritime security and humanitarian assistance, and between maritime security and military preparedness. One potential avenue is to increase defence capacity development. Indian military has provided defence platforms and assets, defence training and maritime security assistance to Sri Lanka. The December 2024 joint statement mentioned the supply of defence platforms and assets, improvement of training and building capacity of the Sri Lankan defence forces and cooperation in the fields of disaster mitigation, relief and rehabilitation. These are areas that can be used in addition to Mitra Shakti, to integrate joint training with longer-term institutional capacity development. Future cooperation might focus on maintenance, logistics, and/or special training and information exchange, in addition to traditional field exercises. Another potential is the establishment of bilateral defence cooperation to be linked to broader regional security mechanisms. The Colombo Security Conclave offers an opportunity for collaboration regarding maritime security, counter terrorism, cyber security, combating smuggling and organized crime, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. There is a need for more coordination between bilateral exercises like Mitra Shakti and such regional mechanisms to enhance inter-operability and work around Sri Lanka's concern of maintaining strategic autonomy. Multilateral and minilateralism cooperation can then serve as a platform for India-Sri Lanka defence cooperation to serve the purpose of regional security but not merely as a bilateral strategic partnership. As for Mitra Shakti, managing expectations and building cooperation step by step is crucial. Relationship between India and Sri Lanka, in the broader political, economic and social context, should be complementary, and not a substitute for defence cooperation. To sustain confidence, sustained dialogue and clear communication and respect for sovereignty are therefore critical. India has to be careful not to be seen as forcing strategic alignment and Sri Lanka needs to tread the balance between strategic independence and the advantages of defence cooperation. Mitra Shakti can be expanded to become a more comprehensive platform for the Indian Ocean Region for interoperability, confidence building measures, capacity building and regional security cooperation, if these conditions are kept in place.

6. CONCLUSUION

Exercise Mitra Shakti, which started as a bilateral military exercise in 2012, is now an important mechanism to support greater defence cooperation between India and Sri Lanka in the framework of India's security architecture in the Indian Ocean Region. It has gradually evolved over the years with involvement in counter insurgency and counter terrorism exercises, semi urban operations, joint command post drills, intelligence and surveillance operations, heliborne operations, cordon and search operations and the inclusion of drones and counter drone systems? Its tactical aspect links field level training with operational level interoperability on common tactics, techniques and procedures, coordination mechanisms and professional military relationships. Mitra Shakti contributes to bilateral defence cooperation in a strategic way by focusing on counter insurgency operation in a sub conventional scenario as per Chapter VII of the United Nations mandate. It also contributes to the broader Indian Security and Indian Ocean Region security cooperation with Sri Lanka. The exercise enhance bilateral defence diplomacy through the strengthening of bilateral institutional and professional interaction between the two armed forces. It continues to conduct annually and alternating between Indian and Sri Lankan territory, with Ampara in 2021, Pune in 2023 and Madaru Oya in 2024. The 2024 edition included 106 Indian soldiers from the Rajputana Rifles and personnel from the Sri Lankan Gajaba Regiment, with a focus on interoperability and sharing of best practices and joint operational procedures. Such on-going engagement helps to foster confidence building and reinforces the institutional underpinnings of the bilateral defence relationship. But there are major hurdles to overcome. The fishermen issue brings politic and diplomatic sensitivity to the Indo-Sri Lanka relations with the number of 530 Indian fishermen arrested in Sri Lanka and 71 boats confiscated in 2024. Sri Lanka's high level of strategic autonomy and domestic political factors and Sri Lanka's relationship with other external powers also constrain defence integration to a certain degree. There is further difficulty in the interoperability due to operational differences regarding equipment, resources and institutional capacity. Sri Lanka has also been putting measures in place to reduce its Army size from its present 180,000 to 135,000 by 2024 and 100,000 by 2030, which could impact on the size of military cooperation in the future. It would, therefore, seem more appropriate to consider gradual institutional development for the future of Mitra Shakti, instead of its immediate metamorphosis into a complete military institution. Its wider strategic relevance could be enhanced through enhanced coordination with existing naval cooperation like SLINEX, greater capacity building and logistics/training cooperation, and better linkages with regional mechanisms like the Colombo Security Conclave. Any future expansion, including greater coordination among the three services should be consistent with Sri Lanka's strategic autonomy and domestic political sensitivities. With continued dialogue, mutual respect and incremental cooperation, Mitra Shakti can be developed from a bilateral tactical exercise into an important instrument for defence diplomacy, interoperability, defence capacity building and security cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region. The exercise showcases the ability to link up tactical readiness with operational interoperability and operational goals through sustained bilateral military engagement, and reinforces the Indo-Sri Lankan relations and regional security.

Ethics Approval

This is a qualitative, descriptive-analytical study based exclusively on secondary scholarly sources. It involves no human participants, primary data collection, interviews, surveys, experiments, or personal data. Therefore, ethical approval was not required. All sources were appropriately cited, and the analysis was developed by the authors. ChatGPT was used only for language editing, grammar correction, and assistance with tables and figures; all AI-assisted content was critically reviewed and approved by the authors.

Author Contributions

Kingston Narshmudi Kuttan C contributed to conceptualization, literature review, secondary data collection, analysis, and manuscript overall drafting; Madeswaran K. contributed through research supervision, conceptual and methodological guidance, critical evaluation, and manuscript revision; and Muralidharan V. contributed as research co-guide through academic guidance, critical review, interpretation, and revision of the manuscript. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare no competing financial or non-financial interests that could have influenced the research, analysis, interpretation, or presentation of the findings. The study was conducted independently and received no external funding or commercial sponsorship that could create a conflict of interest.

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