

Sri Lanka calls for new maritime security arrangements of Indian Ocean

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Colombo: Sri Lanka yesterday called for a multilateral agreement and new maritime security arrangements to ensure free and safe passage through the Indian Ocean even as it asserted that there would be no naval bases allocated to other nations within the country.

Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, speaking at the maritime security conference "Galle Dialogue" attended by representatives of 35 countries including China, India and the US, said no country is capable of handling maritime security threats and challenges in isolation, no matter how advanced and developed it might be.

"The Indian ocean is in need of a mutually benefiting security architecture established on a multi lateral basis," Wickremesinghe said at the two-day conference. "He said the need is to think globally and engage in structural co-operation mechanisms in order to effectively address the maritime security threats and challenges.

He said Sri Lanka is willing to take the lead in forming a multilateral forum with UN support to ensure the maritime security of the Indian Ocean.

He asserted that there would be no naval bases allocated to other countries within Sri Lanka.

"This Government will continue with the reaffirmed policy of ensuring that all ports in Sri Lanka are open for commercial shipping. We would like to reiterate that there would be no naval bases allocated to other countries within Sri Lanka," he said.

He said there is a need for the establishment of a small Naval force to undertake Sri Lanka's responsibilities jointly with other nations towards ensuring the freedom of navigation from Channel to the Malacca and Indonesian straits. The Prime Minister made direct reference to China's interest in building ports in Sri Lanka and elsewhere in south Asia, which has raised concerns of a possible Chinese long-term plan to extend its sea power to the Indian Ocean.

"Likewise, it is believed that there are concerns raised by the Chinese about a US-Indian strategic vision for Asia Pacific and the Indian Ocean region," the premier said. "The chief of the Indian Navy chief Admiral R K Dhowan is participating in the conference.

- PTI