

Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to thank for the opportunity to deliver a speech on the EU's increasing engagement with and in the Indo-Pacific, and our cooperation with the region and Sri Lanka at the prestigious General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University.

EU strategy for cooperation with the Indo-Pacific

For the European Union, the Indo-Pacific region, and more specifically the **Indian Ocean**, is not a distant horizon but a vital space where our economic, environmental, and security interests **converge**.

Sri Lanka at the heart of the Indo-Pacific Region is an important partner to the European Union. Sri Lanka and the EU have deep and constructive partnership that we have built together over the years.

The 2021 **EU strategy for cooperation with the Indo-Pacific** is the realisation by the EU of **the region's strategic importance**. A few statistics illustrate that: the Indo-Pacific region is the second largest destination for EU goods; the EU is the top foreign direct investment partner of the region; one-third of global trade goes through the South China Sea and so does 40% of EU trade.

This is **why our strategy is wide-ranging** covering the areas of sustainable and inclusive prosperity, green transition, ocean governance, digital governance and partnerships, connectivity, security and defence and human security. And it is inclusive of all partners who wish to cooperate with us.

This strategic engagement is driven by an explicit **commitment to a rules-based international order**, sustainable development, and inclusive **multilateralism**, with the UN Charter at its core.

Let me emphasise **the EU Member States' full involvement in the implementation** of the Strategy. It is a joint effort, fully in line with the Team Europe spirit behind initiatives!

Strengthening international ocean governance is also one of the priority areas of this Strategy, as well as the forthcoming **European Ocean Pact** – the EU's strategy for a coordinated response to all aspects concerning the ocean.

The **interdependence** between the EU and the Indo-Pacific is evident with the ships that navigate daily between our ports, the data flowing through undersea cables, and the digital transactions that interlink our economies.

This growing interdependence is unfolding alongside increasing strategic competition, and it also exposes shared **vulnerabilities**. Disruptions to supply chains can trigger ripple effects across the globe and the surge of hybrid threats have highlighted the need for cooperation and collective response.

The EU is committed to an **open and safe Indian Ocean**.

The EU has a **naval presence in the Northwest Indian Ocean**, thanks to EU Naval Force **Atalanta**, which fights piracy and blue crime along the sea lines of communication.

A **Coordinated Maritime Presence in the North West Indian Ocean** was established in 2022 (building on the successful example in the Gulf of Guinea). This will ensure we make the best use of the naval assets, which EU member states are deploying to the region.

The EU supports regional **Djibouti Code of Conduct –Jeddah Amendment (DCOC-JA)** signatory countries to reach their objective of establishing an integrated national and regional maritime security architecture and to fight besides piracy, also all maritime crime and illicit trafficking and unreported/ unregulated (IUU) fishing.

We are **committed to diplomacy**. Since the adoption of the EU Indo-Pacific Strategy in 2021, three **EU-Indo-Pacific Ministerial Forums** have been held and enjoyed the participation of Sri Lanka. The High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission Kaja Kallas is planning to organise a Fourth EU Indo-Pacific Ministerial Forum in Brussels in autumn this year. Bringing together Foreign Ministers from over 70 partners from Europe and the Indo-Pacific, these annual Ministerial Meetings have emerged as a unique platform for cooperation between the EU and Indo-Pacific partners.

IORA

We would like to congratulate Sri Lanka for its leadership the last two years as Chair of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and welcome that it was here in Colombo in October 2023 at the 23rd IORA Council of Ministers' Meeting when Sri Lanka conferred the status of IORA's Dialogue Partner to the European Union. On 21 May, the EU participated for the first time in its new capacity of IORA Dialogue Partner in the IORA Council of Ministers meeting.

As the only regional organisation devoted exclusively to the Indian Ocean, IORA emerges as a natural partner for the EU, in particular in the context of the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy

The **convergence** between the EU and IORA is grounded in **shared interests** and complementary capabilities. This relationship can also serve as a model of inter-regional cooperation.

High Seas Treaty

The **EU and its Member States have been leading the High Ambition Coalition on Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ)** which played a key role in reaching in 2023 the agreement on the landmark High Seas Treaty **to protect the ocean, tackle environmental degradation, and prevent biodiversity loss.**

The agreement provides for the common governance of **about half of the Earth's surface** and **95% of the ocean's volume**, the largest habitat on our blue planet.

We warmly welcome that **this year** (February 2025) **Sri Lanka became a signatory** to the “High Seas Treaty” and we encourage Sri Lanka to ratify the agreement, as it is our hope that the 60 ratifications needed for the BBNJ agreement to enter into force could be reached during the UN Ocean Conference in Nice in June.

Maritime security

The Revised **EU Maritime Security Strategy** of October 2023 highlights the importance of maritime domain awareness (MDA) as a precondition for maritime security.

In light of recent growing challenges to the maritime domain, the EU will seek to contribute more visibly to open, secure sea-lanes of communication, support freedom of navigation and overflight and its partners through capacity building, port calls, and exercises.

We share Sri Lanka’s concern for the protection of **submarine cables**. On 21 February, the European Commission and the High Representative presented an action plan on this issue. The action plan includes measures to prevent and deter attacks on cables, and to increase the repair capacity. It also includes the idea of ‘**cable diplomacy**’ to work with partners – such as Sri Lanka - to create favourable conditions internationally for the protection of submarine cables against so-called ‘hybrid attacks’, including making full use of the international law of the sea framework to pursue perpetrators.

Enhancing Security Cooperation In and With Asia (ESIWA) project has been developed as part of a broader strategic approach under the EU Indo-Pacific Strategy. Sri Lanka is associated to ESIWA and participates in activities on an ad hoc basis.

The EU is active on **maritime security** through our **CRIMARIO** (Critical Maritime Routes in the Indo Pacific) **project** supporting regional partners in better governing their respective maritime spaces. CRIMARIO developed **IORIS, a maritime domain awareness system**, that has successfully reached operational status with so far more than 50 countries and 100 agencies in the Indo-Pacific using IORIS.

Cooperation with Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka faces maritime challenges widely shared with fellow IORA (Indian Ocean Rim Association) nations - whether in terms of illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, illegal trafficking, illegal immigration, safety of life at sea, climate disasters or maritime pollution. Maritime security and safety issues need a structured, multilateral and efficient tackling and our constructive partnership with Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean relates to many initiatives already underway.

Sri Lanka is an important partner to us as demonstrated when Sri Lanka co-hosted last year the 2nd IORIS Steering Committee bringing together more than 100 senior officials from across the Indo-Pacific region.

Let me reiterate how much we appreciate the **remarkable cooperation the EU and Sri Lanka have in the framework** of CRIMARIO. The Sri Lanka Navy and Coast Guards are demonstrating best practice in using IORIS platform effectively.

We have also worked with Sri Lanka in the area of **maritime safety and environmental protection**. This was initiated after the X-Press Pearl vessel caught fire near the coast of Colombo and caused serious environmental pollution in 2021. The Sri Lanka Marine Environment Protection Authority (MEPA) requested short term support right after the disaster, and also an EU advisory mission with experts from EU Member States. This resulted in recommendations for how to strengthen Sri Lanka's capacities and to improve marine pollution preparedness, response, and recovery. Several EU Member States have also supported concrete actions.

And today, I am pleased to be here at KDU and visit the first activity in Sri Lanka under the EU funded **Global Port Safety Project** implemented by Expertise France. This new project is overall aiming to support major ports of Asia (among which Colombo) in the management of risks and the incident response for port and maritime disasters.

The first training in Sri Lanka under the Global Port Safety project is on Dangerous Goods Law Enforcement. It is **taking place at the** Regional Centre for Maritime Studies. This important regional centre was recently established here at KDU with support from France to advance maritime safety and security in the Indian Ocean.

The training will be conducted by Polish and Czech experts, and it will have participants from four beneficiaries countries of the Global Port Safety Project, namely Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Malaysia and Indonesia.

This illustrates how the EU and its Member States partner with Sri Lanka in maritime security and safety and bring together expertise and best practice to the benefit of shared objectives.

Thank you.