

INDIA'S STRATEGIC RESPONSES TO CHINESE INFLUENCES IN SRI LANKA

ABHISHEK SRIVASTAVA¹

¹Assistant Professor, Centre for International Politics, Organisation and Disarmament (CIPOD), Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, INDIA

ABSTRACT

The geographical location of Sri Lanka assumes a crucial role in upholding India's security interests. Positioned at the nexus of maritime trade routes connecting West and East Asia, as well as linking Africa, the Arab region, and the Eastern world, Sri Lanka is integral to the maritime journeys of merchant ships travelling from the ports of Kolkata and Yangon to the Suez Canal. Sri Lanka is strategically located in the Indo-Pacific region. Its southern tip is a vital chokepoint for global trade and energy, as it is the gateway to the Straits of Malacca, which is one of the most important shipping lanes in the world. China is heavily dependent on oil from the Arabian Gulf, and 80% of its oil imports pass through the Straits of Malacca. This makes Sri Lanka a strategically important asset for China, as it could be used to control the flow of oil through the Straits of Malacca. This paper tries to focus on India's role and explores various roles for India, where India can significantly enhance its influence in Sri Lanka by strategically focusing on economic cooperation. Until the 2021 economic crisis, China was still seen to be ahead of India in this aspect. Increasing grants, developmental aids, and expanding the items imported under a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) can strengthen economic ties between the two countries.

KEYWORDS: International Politics, International Politics, South Asia, China, India, Sri Lanka

INTRODUCTION

Owing to Sri Lanka's strategic geopolitical position within the Indian Ocean, the nation is presently subject to substantial financial investments from various foreign entities. Sri Lanka holds a crucial and advantageous strategic location in the Indian Ocean, particularly concerning other South Asian countries. The country is situated advantageously, with the primary east-west shipping route passing within a proximity of 6 to 10 nautical miles from the Sri Lankan island. Annually, this route accommodates more than 60,000 ships, transporting two-thirds of the world's oil and 50% of global container traffic. Sri Lanka serves as a significant base for military installations and maritime security operations in the Indian Ocean. The nation plays a pivotal role in establishing a naval base to monitor the Indian Ocean and the progressively congested shipping lanes. Sri Lanka's geographical location surpasses that of other South Asian countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, and the Maldives in terms of naval strategic significance. Sri Lanka is uniquely positioned to derive numerous advantages, encompassing the safeguarding of its strategic attributes, coastline, and maritime traffic. The geographical location of Sri Lanka assumes a crucial role in upholding India's security interests. Positioned at the nexus of maritime trade routes connecting West and East Asia, as well as linking Africa, the Arab region, and the Eastern

world, Sri Lanka is integral to the maritime journeys of merchant ships travelling from the ports of Kolkata and Yangon to the Suez Canal. Colombo and Trincomalee, two key ports in Sri Lanka, serve as vital hubs for communication, trade, and naval activities in the Indian Ocean region. Trincomalee, in particular, functions as a primary naval base. However, it is imperative to recognize that external powers gaining entry into Sri Lanka could potentially enable them to dominate crucial sea routes, posing a threat to India's waterway shipping interests.

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Pacific region. Its southern tip is a vital chokepoint for global trade and energy, as it is the gateway to the Straits of Malacca, which is one of the most important shipping lanes in the world. China is heavily dependent on oil from the Arabian Gulf, and 80% of its oil imports pass through the Straits of Malacca. This makes Sri Lanka a strategically important asset for China, as it could be used to control the flow of oil through the Straits of Malacca. This paper tries to focus on India's role and explores various roles for India, where India can significantly enhance its influence in Sri Lanka by strategically focusing on economic cooperation. Until the 2021 economic crisis, China was still seen to be ahead of India in this aspect. Increasing grants, developmental aids, and expanding the items imported under a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) can strengthen economic ties between the two countries.

China's "Malacca Dilemma" is its fear that India could block the western approaches to the Straits of Malacca, while the United States and its allies could block the eastern approaches. This would cripple China's merchant and naval shipping. A strong presence of the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) in the region would not only secure China's trade, but would also enable it to disrupt, delay, or destroy the trade and energy flows of its adversaries.

The Malacca Straits are less than two miles wide at their narrowest point, making them an effective chokepoint. This means that a small number of ships could block the entire strait, which would have a significant impact on global trade.

The Indo-Pacific region is becoming a major battleground for geopolitical influence between China and India. These two countries have a long history of adversarial relations and distrust, and they are both vying for control of the region. Sri Lanka, a strategically located island in the Indian Ocean, is seen as a key asset by both countries because of its potential to affect the maritime security of the region (Kumar, 2023).

K.M. Panikkar has pointed out the geopolitical significance of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) in his treatise *India and the Indian Ocean: An Essay on the Influence of Sea Power on Indian History* in the following words:

While to other countries, the Indian Ocean is only one of the important oceanic areas, to India it is the vital sea. Her life lines are concentrated in that area. Her future is dependent on the freedom of that vast water surface. No industrial development, no commercial growth, and no stable political structure is possible for her unless the Indian Ocean is free and her shores are fully protected. (Panikkar, 1945).

Additionally, two-thirds of the world's oil passes through the trade routes that surround Sri Lanka. Additionally, its proximity to regional markets and the security of its Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs) make it an important strategic asset to the United States, Russia, and China. Sri Lanka's strategic location in the Indian Ocean gives it the potential to significantly influence the politics of the Indo-Pacific region. If Sri Lanka were to align with either India or China, it could have a major impact on the balance of power in the region. China is particularly interested in gaining influence over Sri Lanka, as it would help to counter India's growing power in the region. China is pursuing a multi-pronged strategy to gain influence over Sri Lanka, including economic investment, military cooperation, and cultural exchanges.

HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF CHINA-SRI LANKA RELATIONS

Sri Lanka's two main political parties, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the United National Party (UNP), have both maintained cordial relations with China. Sri Lanka achieved independence in February 1948 and the UNP-led government declared its recognition of China in January 1950—merely three months after the People's Republic of China was founded—even as it ended relations with the Chinese Nationalist Government. The UNP government also signed a Rubber-Rice Barter Agreement with China in 1952, which automatically led to the suspension of United States aid to the island under the so-called Battle Act. The SLFP under S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike invited Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai for the island's ninth independence day celebrations in February 1957 and began diplomatic relations with China that same month; while Mrs Sirimavo Bandaranaike, who succeeded her husband, especially cultivated close relations with China beginning in the early 1960s despite China's relative isolation in the international arena at the time.

Notwithstanding pressure within the SLFP to brand China the aggressor during the 1962 Indo-China border war, Mrs. Bandaranaike avoided taking sides and instead took the lead in organizing the Six Nation Colombo Conference that sought to bring the two combatants to the negotiating. Throughout this period, Sri Lanka not only staunchly supported China joining the United Nations but strongly opposed Taiwan's membership. Ties between the two countries developed so well irrespective of the political party in power in Sri Lanka that a UNP government declined the opportunity to join the Association of South East Asian States in 1967 because it was felt that body was designed to contain China.¹⁸ Mrs. Bandaranaike's governments (1960–65 and 1970– 77) especially supported the non-aligned movement, which China

too fully supported. Both the UNP and SLFP have also disallowed the Dalai Lama from visiting Sri Lanka, despite the island taking pride in being a bastion for Buddhism. In international forums Sri Lanka votes in line with developing countries' preferences and typically ends up supporting the Chinese and Indian positions. Thus, there have hitherto been hardly any major issues that caused tension between the island and China. This is in contrast to Sri Lanka's relations with India, which have been complicated and vexed at times.

The discriminatory and anti-Tamil policies that successive Sri Lankan governments pursued caused India's Tamils in the southern state of Tamil Nadu to pressure New Delhi to aid their ethnic cousins. When the UNP government under J. R. Jayewardene (1977–88) pursued close ties with the United States and the West at a time when India was experiencing tense relations with the United States, India supported clandestinely Sri Lankan Tamil separatists and eventually stationed the Indian Peace Keeping Force in the island's northeast. While India proscribed the LTTE (after the group assassinated former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in May 1991) and provided Sri Lanka with intelligence to defeat the group in May 2009, the ethnic reconciliation that the Mahinda Rajapaksa government promised to institute so as to accommodate legitimate Tamil grievances never materialized and was one major factor that strained Indo-Lanka relations during recent years. New Delhi thus felt duped, and the Rajapaksa government's continued persecution of Tamils in the island's north especially angered Tamils in Tamil Nadu. Indeed, political parties and student groups in Tamil Nadu mounted major protests against Sri Lanka, demanding accountability for the alleged war crimes the island's military perpetrated against surrendering LTTE cadres and innocent civilians.

The protests pressured the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance government in New Delhi and contributed to India voting against Sri Lanka at the 2012 and 2013 United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) meetings in Geneva. While India surprised everyone by abstaining during the 2014 UNHRC vote, China stood steadfastly by Sri Lanka and even lobbied various developing countries to support Sri Lanka. China's position of not interfering in states' internal affairs is self-serving, given its own widespread human rights violations especially in Tibet and Xinjiang Province. At the same time, non-interference in other states' internal affairs is a long-standing Chinese policy, and China's opposition to an international investigation on war crimes in Sri Lanka allows it to project a principled stance and claim it is consistent in this aspect of its foreign policy. As Jia Qinglin, a member of the Beijing politburo, recently reiterated, 'We maintain that all countries, big or small, are equal, and we are opposed to the

big, strong and rich bullying the small, weak and poor.(Goh,2016)

INDIA-SRI LANKA CO-OPERATION IN RECENT YEARS

The links between India and Sri Lanka are more than 2,500 years old. From Ramayana in India to Mahavamsa and Dipavamsa in Sri Lanka there are frequent mentions of both countries and the exchanges between them. Buddhism and Hinduism, the two most dominant religions in Sri Lanka have their origins in India.

India's immediate humanitarian assistance to IDPs included supply of 250,000 family relief packs, establishment of an emergency medical unit which treated over 50,000 IDPs and carried out over 3000 surgeries from March to September 2009, supply of over one million roofing sheets between August 2009 and May 2011 as well as 400,000 bags of cement for constructing temporary housing and provision of 95,000 starter packs of agricultural implements. Since the requirement of de-mining was a major constraint on the speed of resettlement, the Government of India fully financed seven Indian de-mining teams, engaged in various sectors in northern Sri Lanka to help expedite resettlement.(*Consulate General of India*)

Between 2010-12 India extended a development credit for repair and upgradation of the tsunami-damaged railway links in Sri Lanka worth \$1.35 bn.(India-Sri Lanka Bilateral Relations. (2012, January). Wreck removal project for rehabilitation of Kankesanthurai Harbor, worth 2.05 Sri Lankan Rupees (approx. 16 million USD). (Bilateral Brief. 2016, December)) Setting up of a coal power plant in Sampur as a joint venture between National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC) and Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) Till 2012, India was largest source of FDI for Sri Lanka. After that China took the lead but India has regained its position since 2021.(Narayan, 2022)

India and Sri Lanka have a defence relationship in terms of service linkages, training and joint exercises (since Colombo Security Conclave).(*The state of defence cooperation in the Indian Ocean region*) The Indian Housing Project, with an initial commitment to build 50,000 houses in war affected areas and estate workers in the plantation areas, is Government of India (GoI)'s flagship grant project in Sri Lanka. Overall commitment of INR 1372 crores makes it also one of the largest projects undertaken by GoI abroad.

Under "1990 Emergency Ambulance Service" at a total cost of more than USD 22.5 million, close to 300 ambulances were provided by GOI in 2016. More than 11 Lines

of credit (LOC) have been extended to Sri Lanka by the Export Import Bank of India in the last 17 years.

In 2020, India was Sri Lanka's 2nd largest trading partner with the bilateral merchandise trade amounting to about USD \$ 3.6 billion. India played a crucial 'Neighbourhood First' role with foreign aid of US \$4 billion to Sri Lanka after the island economy defaulted on its foreign debt in April 2022 and slipped into an economic crisis. India's proposal of \$4 billion in humanitarian and financial aid outshone Beijing's backing of \$2.9 billion through the International Monetary Fund. This support not only faced delays but also occurred in the uncomfortable backdrop of China still holding up to 20 percent of Sri Lanka's foreign debt. (Grossman, 2023) In the 2023, India extended aid worth \$3.9bn to Sri Lanka to help the country to recover from the economic crisis it has been facing since 2021. Restoration of Thiruketheeswaram temple; installation of Replica of Sarnath Buddha; Indian Gallery at Sacred Tooth Relic Temple, Kandy (Sri Lanka). (*Cultural and Heritage Cooperation in Development projects*) There is trade deficit between the two countries in India's favour. However, Sri Lanka has been continuously benefitting from the FTA signed between the two countries. (Kelegama, 2017)

CHINA-SRI LANKA CO-OPERATION AND RELATIONS IN RECENT YEARS

China has a long history of relations with Sri Lanka that date back to the 4th century AD, when the Chinese monk Faxian visited Sri Lanka. In the 20th century. In the era of Ming Emperor Yongle, Admiral Zheng He's expedition reached Sri Lanka, actively participating in the Ming-Kotte War. The Galle Trilingual Inscription, dated 1409 and situated in Galle, Sri Lanka, was erected to honor Zheng He's second voyage to the region and acknowledge the Ming emperor's legitimacy among international leaders. (*Zheng He: A Peaceful Mariner and Diplomat*)

China has committed financial assistance by way of grants and loans for priority development projects in Sri Lanka. There are currently several projects that have been or are being built with Chinese assistance, of which the major ones are the Hambantota Port, the Mattala International Airport, the Colombo-Katunayake Expressway, the Narocholai Coal Power Plant, the Moragahakanda Multipurpose Development Project (which deals with irrigation, drinking water, and electricity), the Matara-Kataragama Railway Line, and the Colombo International Financial City. China is also assisting in building a specialised hospital for kidney disease, as well as an outpatients' building at the National Hospital in Colombo. (*Overview of Sri Lanka-China Relations - The Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute*)

Beijing supported Sri Lanka's position in refuting accusations of human rights violations by members of the international community during its counterterror war. In 2002 China began to provide military equipment and munitions for Sri Lanka's counterterror operations (Wang and F, 2019). China is the biggest arm supplier to Sri Lanka since the 1950s and it intensified the supply during the last phase of the war against LTTE in 2006 providing the crucial military assistance Sri Lanka needed. In 2007, Sri Lanka signed a major arms-deal with China's Poly Technologies for a variety of weapons, including Jian-7 fighters, JY 11-3D air surveillance radars, armored personnel carriers, T-56 assault rifles, machine guns, anti-aircraft guns, rocket-propelled grenade launchers, and missiles. The deal was worth \$37.6 million. (Kumar, 2017)

China is investing in the Colombo City Project since 2013 and is expected to pour in US\$ 14.4 billion in two phases. In the case of Hambantota Project, China is predicted to create 100,000 jobs and US \$5 billion dollars in terms of investments. There is a huge trade deficit between the two countries in China's favour.

CONCLUSION

Based on above considerations and data we can see that there are certain areas where India lags behind China and there are certain areas which pose as a challenge to China-Sri Lanka relations which provide India an opportunity to exploit. For this, India can take a fourfold approach to counter Chinese Influence in Sri Lanka and secure its own interests.

First, India can significantly enhance its influence in Sri Lanka by strategically focusing on economic cooperation. Until the 2021 economic crisis, China was still seen to be ahead of India in this aspect. Increasing grants, developmental aids, and expanding the items imported under a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) can strengthen economic ties between the two countries. It becomes pre-eminent as Sri Lanka holds immense importance for India's maritime interests in both South Asia and the Indo-Pacific Region. In such a situation, India must prefer Sri Lanka under its 'Neighborhood First Policy'.

Second, Recognizing Sri Lanka's heavy dependence on China in defence procurements, India should seize the opportunity to diversify its role beyond training and joint exercises. Actively engaging in arms trade with Sri Lanka can help reduce its heavy dependence on China for defense-related matters. This approach not only enhances India's defense ties with Sri Lanka but also contributes to regional stability by offering an alternative to Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean.

Third, India can play a crucial role in improving Sri Lanka's international standing by providing diplomatic aid.

Given Sri Lanka's historical ties with China and concerns over human rights violations, India can act as a mediator. Drawing from its own experiences in addressing ethnic discontent and fostering political solutions, India can assist Sri Lanka in navigating international scrutiny and working towards resolving human rights issues. By doing so, India not only contributes to regional stability but also strengthens its position as a diplomatic ally in South Asia.

Fourth, India should strategically strengthen its position in the Indo-Pacific Region, with a particular focus on South-East Asia. Collaborative efforts like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) provide a platform for regional cooperation that can counterbalance China's influence. However, India's efforts should not be limited to multilateral initiatives alone. To assert its influence in the region and garner a persuasive diplomatic impact on Sri Lanka, India must bolster its own capabilities, especially in maritime strength. By enhancing its maritime capabilities, India sends a clear message that its presence and influence in the Indo-Pacific cannot be easily challenged by China. This involves investing in modern naval assets, expanding maritime infrastructure, and fostering regional partnerships. A robust maritime strategy not only safeguards India's interests but also contributes to the overall stability and security of the Indo-Pacific region. The demonstration of India's maritime prowess not only strengthens its position vis-à-vis China but also serves as a strategic lever in influencing Sri Lanka. A maritime powerhouse, India can offer security assurances to Sri Lanka, showcasing the benefits of aligning with a strong regional partner.

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SRIVASTAVA : INDIA'S STRATEGIC RESPONSES TO CHINESE INFLUENCES IN SRI LANKA

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