

GEO-POLITICS AND CHINA AS A FACTOR IN INDO-SRI LANKAN RELATIONS AFTER 2005

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Abstract

China has emerged as a significant factor between India and Sri Lanka relations. Historically, the Indian Ocean has had significant geographical importance and has attracted the interest of major countries owing to its economic significance in facilitating East and West maritime commerce. In the 21st century, India and China have emerged as influential countries in Asia, and now whomever dominates the Indian Ocean would dominate Asia in the coming times. China is strategically surrounding India by establishing its presence in several regions, including the Indian Ocean, Pakistan, Tibet, Nepal, Burma, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. This is achieved via initiatives such as the 'new silk road', 'string of pearls', and the 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI). The Chinese government was actively involved in the construction of Hambantota in Sri Lanka as a strategic port to secure its energy supply from the Gulf area. The Chinese policy has a direct impact on the relationship between India and Sri Lanka. In response, India initiated the 'Security and Growth for All in the in the Region' (SAGAR) programme in 2015. The objective of this programme is to promote the development of the 'blue economy' among the countries located around the Indian Ocean Rim. This initiative aims to offset the growing influence of China in the area. This research paper focuses on the diplomatic ties between India and Sri Lanka after 2005, with particular emphasis on the tenure of Mahinda Rajapaksa due to his favourable posture towards China.

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Introduction

For any country, it is very important to maintain good relations with its neighbouring countries, and there are many factors that affect these relations. These factors are both domestic and international. One of the major determinants of Indo-Sri Lankan relations is the international factor. In Indo-Sri Lankan bilateral relations in the 21st century, China is playing a very important role. Geographically, since ancient times, the Indian Ocean has played a very important role, and it has attracted the attention of the great powers because of its geographical location and its economic value in the context of East and West maritime trade. (Refer to K M Pannikar, *India and the Indian Ocean*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1945, where he begins by citing Khairuddin Barbarosa “He who rules on the sea will shortly rule on the land also.”) In the 21st century, India and China have risen from Asia as regional powers of the world, and presently, there is a situation where whoever controls the Indian Ocean will control Asia in the future. For this, the convergence of India-China interest in the Sri Lankan context became critical, especially after 2005, because Mahinda Rajapaksa’s foreign policy was pro-China in comparison to India, and it provided the platform for these two powerful nations (India and China) to check and balance their interests. In the current endeavour, the researchers have attempted to answer prime questions as to why and how China is trying to evolve a ‘string of pearls’¹ around India and how Sri Lanka is trying to balance India and China in its foreign policy dealings. It also analyses China’s presence in Sri Lanka as well as in the Indian Ocean and its impact on Indo-Sri Lanka relations after 2005. Methodologically a blend of historical, descriptive, and analytical approaches has been followed using both the primary and the secondary data.

Geo-politics of India and China in the Indian Ocean and Sri Lanka: An Overview

China and India are the two most powerful nations in Asia, and both want to establish their supremacy in South Asia as well as in Asia. Presently, China’s policy towards South Asia is to have an ‘All-Weather Partnership’ with Pakistan, continue with the ‘String of Pearls’ policy for encircling India, and remain wary of the U.S. presence in the South Asian region. China’s security cooperation with Pakistan and

its support for Iran and Sri Lanka are the results of the encirclement strategy. China always tried to establish good relations with all neighbouring countries of India to counter India in South Asia. On the other hand, Indian relations with the countries of South Asia have been guided by two major apprehensions: first, a geo-strategic concern that is a desire to insulate the sub-continent from external forces. Second, geopolitical concern is a desire to ensure that 'the geographical proximity and ethno-religious affinities' do not lead to instability on or near its borders (Kumar 2014:113).

The strategic position and economic significance of the Indian Ocean Region have drawn the interest of major global powers, particularly in terms of facilitating East and West commerce. Currently, this region is also included by the "new silk route". Sri Lanka, situated along the 'silk road', has historically attracted the attention of imperialist nations due to its advantageous geographical position. Consequently, many attempts were made by these countries to colonise Sri Lanka and exploit its strategic significance. Their objective was to use Sri Lanka as a strategic base for their economic and military endeavours. Sri Lanka had significant importance for them in several aspects. Sri Lanka's strategic position along the Silk Route and its abundance of natural harbours contribute to its significance. During the Second World War, the British used Trincomalee, Hambanthota, and Colombo ports against Japan. (While the British left the Indian subcontinent in 1947, they retained hold on the Indian Ocean. The line of defence from Aden to Singapore via Trincomalee, Hambanthota and Colombo gave them effective control of the Indian Ocean.) Robert D. Kaplan (2011), in his book 'Monsoon', also identified Sri Lanka as one of the most useful countries in the Indian Ocean. Therefore, it is obvious that Sri Lanka has a geographical, economical, internal security compulsion, and strategic importance in the Indian Ocean (Madusanka 2015).

For India, South Asia has always been an area important from the point of view of its security. "India's foreign policy has recently suffered revisions following increased Chinese presence in the region" (Thakur, 2023, 428). South Asian countries such as Nepal have been playing 'China Card' in their relations with India; similarly, King Mahendra of Nepal did the same in the 1960s, especially after the Indo-China War of 1962. India also has a lot at stake in terms of security in its immediate maritime neighbour, Sri Lanka, which too has not been loath in using the 'China Card' to 'balance' India. The maritime rivalry between India and China in the Indian Ocean is well known (Bhattacharya 2018:5-7). China is also strengthening its

relations with Pakistan and Afghanistan by facilitating economic aid and building trade and energy corridors throughout the region that China can access, that is, increasing its presence in the Indian Ocean Region. The greatest challenge that India is facing at the moment in its immediate neighbourhood is therefore the long shadow of China, which considers itself a South Asian state and therefore feels it has legitimate interests in the region, especially the Indian Ocean, which it considers to be its lifeline. Therefore, China's presence in Sri Lanka is a matter of concern for India and for its national security.

India and China's Concern in Sri Lanka

After getting independence from India and Sri Lanka in 1947 and 1948, respectively, India was the main driver of Sri Lanka's foreign policy, as was reflected in the Sri Lankan government's demand that the British leave their naval base at Trincomalee and air base at Kathunayake in 1957. (There's a historical voyage connect between Sri Lanka and India, for example Ashoka's sister Sanghamitra sailed to Ceylon for the purpose of conversion but the several voyages also saw the development of navigation skills) After the Chinese victory in the 1962 war with India, Sri Lanka began to count China much more seriously. China, for its part, viewed India's role in Sri Lankan affairs not only as a means to attain regional supremacy in South Asia and to control Sri Lanka but also to expel the influence of other countries. Therefore, China started to strengthen its relations with Sri Lanka so that it could control the hegemony of India not only in Sri Lanka but also in South Asia. Sri Lanka welcomed China's support, and it also supported China on the question of China's sovereignty over Taiwan and Tibet. But given Beijing's inability to effectively project power in South Asia until the early 1990s, it could only be a marginal player in the Indo-Sri Lankan dynamic and was forced to accept India's central role in Sri Lanka, especially as India seemed willing to peruse coercive diplomacy until the late 1980s. It was Sri Lanka's war against the LTTE that made India's role contentious for both Tamils and Sri Lankans. This gave crucial manoeuvring space to China to enhance its profile in Sri Lanka (Pant 2016:113–114).

China's ambitious BRI project makes Indian Ocean states like Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh, and the Maldives strategically important for it. China has used its 'debt trap diplomacy' quite successfully in these states (Thakur, 2023: 425). India is increasingly concerned about China's growing presence and participation in Sri Lanka. China emerged as a significant

provider of arms and political backing to Sri Lanka at the United Nations during the Eelam War. Following the conflict, China has been a significant financial provider for the development of many infrastructure projects in Sri Lanka. China's engagement in the Tamil ethnic conflict demonstrates its growing involvement in Sri Lanka's political and domestic matters. China has the potential to become a significant competitor in countering Indian influence in Sri Lanka and the Indian Ocean Region (Hariharan 2013:42–43). From an Indian perspective, perceptions of China matter as much as reality. The Indian analysts see China as a real actor in checking the influence of other countries over Sri Lanka. The reasons that lead to this assumption are, for example, China's use of veto power in the UN Security Council, its vast resources, its avowed emphasis on non-interference, and its action over human rights issues in Sri Lanka (Malik 2011:788–789). These issues mattered more for India because, after 2005, the relationship between China and Sri Lanka reached a new height under the leadership of Mahinda Rajapaksa. Rajapaksa visited China in 2007 to celebrate the Golden Jubilee (50 years) of diplomatic relations and signed eight agreements and an MOU with China to strengthen their ties (Kelegama 2014). During this visit, both governments signed bilateral agreements on counter-terrorism assistance programs. China granted US \$455 million worth of technical assistance to Sri Lanka to defeat terrorism and develop the island (Senavirthne 2009:387).

In 2015, a decade long regime was changed in Sri Lanka and Mahinda Rajapaksa lost the election and Maithripala Sirisena became next president. It was a setback to pro-China politics in Sri Lanka when Maithripala Srisena announced, soon after assuming presidency, that India would be the first country to be visited by him, a promise that he fulfilled in mid February 2015. The visit of President Sirisena created history for India. Its major highlight was the signing of a nuclear energy co-operation agreement between India and Sri Lanka. It provided for the transfer and exchange of knowledge and expertise, the sharing resources, capacity building and training of personnel in the peaceful uses of nuclear energy (Mehrotra 2015:3). Upon assuming office in 2014, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi also embraced the ideals of the 'Neighbourhood First Policy'. He made his first visit to Sri Lanka on 13-14 March, 2015, and subsequently visited Sri Lanka again on 12 May, 2017. Modi is the first Prime Minister of India to undertake an independent bilateral visit to Sri Lanka subsequent to 1987. These travels were to address the persistent complaint of Sri Lankans that the Indian Prime Minister had not visited their nation (Kumar

2006: 106). The primary objective of the tour was to engage with the Chinese presence on the island and enhance the bilateral relations between Sri Lanka and China.

China's Presence in Sri Lanka and Issues of India's Maritime Security

In the Indian Ocean, the geo-strategic location of Sri Lanka, which is of great importance in terms of security and maritime trade with other states, has been a cause of concern to India. Sri Lanka's strategic location has encouraged China to develop economic and strategic relations with Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka provided an ideal base in the Indian Ocean for naval attack on India, and it can also be useful to India for defence in naval warfare. Geo-strategically, Sri Lanka is important to India and China both, especially as far as the Indian Ocean region is concerned (Bhattacharya 2018:9; Bapat, 2022:13-39.). This location gives the island a central position midway along the ancient maritime trade route between West and East Asia. Accordingly, Sri Lanka became a special landmark in the new Maritime Silk Route, which was created through China's One Belt, One Road (OBOR) concept. In the future, Sri Lanka will become the centre of the maritime trade route that connects China with the Middle East and Europe. While energy sources and goods are being transported through this zone, it also brings profits and benefits to Sri Lanka. For this, China invests over billions of dollars, and it enhances the development of infrastructure facilities in Sri Lanka. In these investments, there are two main factors on the side of China: geopolitics and profit maximisation, which can be identified as major reasons for Chinese investment in Sri Lanka (Dar 2005:3).

Indian Ocean Region: China is driven by a strong desire to achieve global dominance, and to accomplish this goal, it has adopted a regional policy of cultivating amicable relationships with its neighbouring countries in India. This strategy aims to bolster China's influence in both the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. The Indian Ocean Region has significant strategic importance for major global powers such as the United States, Russia, Western countries, China, and India. China's approach to Sri Lanka is a component of its goal to enhance its position in the Indian Ocean Region. The substantial investment of millions of dollars in Sri Lanka for infrastructure development, such as the Hambantota port and Colombo port construction projects, represents China's strategic threat to India from a maritime perspective.

Indian Ocean is bounded by the Asian land mass in its northern reaches while the African continent serves to separate it from the Atlantic in the west. In the east, the Indonesian archipelago and Australia restrict its access to the Pacific while the cold continent of Antarctica provide the southern base, the sea borne shipping passages of the Indian Ocean are connected to the Pacific through narrow water ways in its southern and eastern reaches while the rather difficult passage around the southern tip of Africa connects it with the Atlantic. The Mediterranean and continental hinterland of Europe are similarly connected to the Indian Ocean through the narrow passage of the Red Sea (Suri 2016:239).

In the future, the Indian Ocean Region will serve as the key zone for major global countries to exert their influence. The current dominant powers, including the United States, China, and the rising India, will have significant influence in the Indian Ocean region. The Indian Ocean Region has significant potential in terms of natural resources. India has a crucial position in the Indian Ocean and must be cognizant of the events occurring in its immediate vicinity. The Chinese submarine incident in Sri Lanka unequivocally demonstrated this position, particularly in terms of India's response. The primary consideration was on determining whether the arrival of Chinese submarines was an unexpected occurrence or a well planned and deliberate choice. The strategic presence of China in the Indian Ocean is directly linked to the issue of its maritime lines of communications (SLOCs), which are crucial for China's economy. (Ahmed 2018:86).

China's swearing strategic imperative in the Indian Ocean Region to protect, its SLOCs, especially the energy transport to China through the Strait of Malacca. The proposal by China to build Maritime Silk Road was welcomed by Sri Lanka which has been located on the ancient maritime route between the East and the West, as recognized in the 'Mahinda *Chintana* (vision) for the future'.³China is also assured that Sri Lanka will be benefitted by it and can have a lot of opportunities in developmental aspects and will play a very important role in building process of Maritime Silk Road (Bansal 2015:19-20).

String of Pearls: The term 'String of Pearls' was coined in 2005 by the team of consultants in the Pentagon (US Army H.Q.), to describe China's efforts to attain the strategic foothold in the Indian Ocean. Soon 'String of Pearls' comes to mean the encirclement of India by China. The former Indian Navy Chief, Admiral Arun Prakash remarked, "India is in the middle of the Indian Ocean and that is

where China has implemented its 'String of Pearls' strategy by creating right around us what are best described as weapon client states: Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Iran, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia. It is important to note that to effectively design a string of pearls, three things become essential: access to airfields and ports, increase in diplomatic relations and finally modernization of military force. China is gradually accomplishing all the three" (Gupta 2013:42). While India, US, Japan and Australia have deepened their strategic ties in the Indian Ocean China's landlocked provinces of Xinjiang and Yunnan see 'sea vents' through CPEC and CMEC at Gwadar and Kyaukpyu. They surround India and become more important for China in view of its continuous stifling in the South China sea by US and company (Thakur, 2021). Pakistan and Myanmar are thought to be significantly impacted economically by the CPEC and CMEC (Saklani and Ram, 2023: 3).

The greatest challenge that India faces at the moment in its neighbourhood is therefore the long shadow of China, which has conceded itself a South Asian state and therefore feels it has legitimate interest in the region, especially in the Indian Ocean, which is considered to be its lifeline. According to many strategic analysts, China has effectively encircled India with its 'String of Pearls' strategy by establishing footholds in the Coco Island of Myanmar, the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka, and Gwadar port in Pakistan. Of late, it has been reported that China plans to build an ocean station in the Maldives with the concurrence of the Maldivian government. China has developed a strong partnership with Nepal and Bangladesh by developing its trade and investment relationship. It is in connection with the Chinese encirclement of India in South Asia in strategic terms (Battacharya 2018: 9). India has built the Chabahar port in Iran to counter China's concept of 'String of Pearls'. China is also building container ports in Bangladesh at Chittagong as a part of its string of pearls (Gupta 2013:42).

Chinese diplomacy has effectively attracted South Asian governments, including Sri Lanka. The Chinese participation in the Hambantota port and Colombo port developments is a component of the 'String of Pearls' strategy. China considers Sri Lanka significant due of the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean. Scholars debate that 'the great game 'of the 21st century will mostly take place in the Indian Ocean. Despite India's advantageous geographical position in the Indian Ocean, it is uncertain if New Delhi can maintain its strategic benefits, even with a more amicable administration in Colombo (Pant 2016:116).

China has helped Sri Lanka overcome the Civil War and initiated many infrastructure development projects after the war, also keeping in view Sri Lanka's strategic location for the 'String of Pearls' strategy. China has supported Sri Lanka unconditionally, financially, militarily, and in the international arena. Even during and after the Elam War IV, Sri Lanka faced many allegations about human rights' violations. For that, the United Nations put resolutions related to human rights violations against Sri Lanka in the General Assembly in 2009 and 2012, 2013, 2014, and 2015. India voted twice in 2012 and 2013 for the resolution against Sri Lanka, mainly under internal political pressure from Tamil Nadu. While China again voted against the resolution in 2012 and 2013, which helped Sri Lanka see China as a good friend and keep healthy relations with it, Under President Mahinda Rajapaksa, Sri Lanka rejected all resolutions of 2012, 2013, and 2014. However, Srirsenawickremasinghe (2015–19) has earned the support of the West by accepting the fourth resolution (2015), which has protected Sri Lanka's interests by allowing an internal investigation. The fifth consensus resolution of 2019 has given Sri Lanka time in 2021 to implement the commitments on human rights issues (Sahadevan 2019:15).

China wanted to be a 'resident power' in the Indian Ocean, just like the US, the UK, and France. Chinese naval ships and submarines are now making frequent forays into India's near seas. Many on the Indian maritime periphery have embraced China's Belt and Road initiative. With the increasing presence of China in the Indian Ocean Region in India's front yard, there is an intensifying China-India geo-political rivalry in this region (Peiris 2015). New Delhi has feared being encircled by China's 'String of Pearls' network of installations in the Indian Ocean, and many of its fears may now be coming true. China has opened its first overseas naval base in Djibouti and is planning to open a new naval base at Jiwani, next to Pakistan's China-controlled Gwador port. In Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and elsewhere, China is using the Belt Road initiative to create client states. Beijing is using its infrastructure projects to create debt crisis in these countries, particularly in Sri Lanka. China has recently augmented its financial commitment to the Maldives, allocated a substantial sum of US\$830 million to enhance the Sri Lankan airport and construct a 1.3-mile bridge connecting the airport island to the city. This bridge project has a price tag of US\$400 million. China and the Maldives have entered into a free trade deal with the aim of expanding China's presence in the Indian Ocean. These advancements in surrounding countries pose direct threats to India's

position in the Indian Ocean. India is taking steps to strengthen its position in response to an increasingly aggressive Chinese presence by creating its own strategic network of military and economic alliances, sometimes referred to as the 'String of Pearls'.

Hambantota Port Project: The Hambantota Port Project has significant strategic importance for China owing to its advantageous geographical position. The Hambantota Port, situated on the southern coast of Sri Lanka, has facilitated entry to the maritime routes of the Indian Ocean. The construction of a contemporary port at Hambantota, located in the southern region of Sri Lanka, with the help of China, was officially started in October 2007. The construction started in January 2008. The project is expected to take fifteen years to complete, with progress being made in phases. The total cost of the project is projected to be around US\$1 billion. The Chinese government was actively involved in the construction of Hambantota in Sri Lanka as a strategic port to secure its energy supply from the Gulf area (Singh 2010:416).

However, the strategic location of the port is not only important for the Chinese merchant vessels and cargo carriers sailing but also for Africa and the Middle East to make a stopover. Any military fleet can also use it. Sri Lanka had proposed building the Hambantota port as a joint venture with India, but while the talks were on, China grabbed the opportunity. The Sri Lankan government made it clear that China offered the best deal, and we don't have favourites (Bajaj 2010).

Hambantota Port has been a hot topic of discussion for strategic analysts. Any Sri Lankan port has strategic importance given the island's location in the Indian Ocean. However, it is worth mentioning that Hambantota port has not been an issue in the bilateral relationship. The Indian external minister S.M. Krishna's statement during his visit to Sri Lanka in November 2010 that "the relationship between India and Sri Lanka need not be at the cost of other countries; our ultimate objective is to see a prosperous, stable Sri Lanka" is a testament to this (Roy and Kumar 2011:750). Although Indian establishments will long regret not taking up Mahinda Rajapaksa's offer to develop Hambantota port, The first phase of the port was opened on November 18, 2010, with the first ceremonial berthing of the naval ship "Jetliner" to use the port facility. It is named after former President Mahinda Rajapaksa. Sri Lanka handed over the Hambantota port in December 2017, which will take control of the facility for a 99-year lease. This action was an alarm to India, which is concerned about China's growing strategic

and economic footprint in the Indian Ocean through a Sri Lankan development project.

Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe has stated that “China, as part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is interested in expanding its footprint in the Indian Ocean. China’s acquisition of Hambantota port is purely intended for civilian purposes” (Panda 2017). On the other hand, despite the assurances of Sri Lanka, India has doubts over its misuse against India in the future. In order to allay India’s security concerns over the Chinese navy’s presence in Sri Lanka, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe ruled out the possibility of the strategic port being used as a military base by the foreign country.

China and Sri Lanka have also signed an agreement for Hambantota port phase 2 in October 2016, under which Sri Lanka would sell an 80 percent stake in Hambantota port in the country’s south. For China, Sri Lanka stands as an important node in the maritime silk road, the maritime component of Beijing’s border ‘One Belt, One Road’ initiative to improve infrastructure and connectivity across Asia. Additionally, Sri Lanka’s proximity to India and strategic location in the Indian Ocean. Chinese investment in the island has taken on geopolitical relevance, particularly as China’s naval assets, including warships and submarines, were seen docking in Colombo during Mahinda Rajapaksa’s final months in office (The Diplomat 2016). After the departure of Mahinda Rajapaksa in the 2015 presidential election, Sirisena came to power vowing to rebalance Sri Lanka’s foreign policy between India and China, but Colombo has gone back to realising the necessity of Chinese capital.

RimCountries and ‘Security and Growth for All in the Region’ (**SAGAR**): India launched SAGAR in 2015 to develop the ‘blue economy’¹⁵ of ‘Indian Ocean Rim countries’¹⁶ under the guidelines of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to counter the Chinese presence in the region. The main objective of ‘SAGAR’ is to build trust and increase maritime cooperation with Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, the Maldives, etc. Though SAGAR has had moderate success, its importance is increasing more than ever before. The growing strategic power play between China, the USA, and its allies in the Indo-Pacific region is affecting the strategic interests of India and BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical Economic Co-operation) countries. To strengthen relations with neighbouring nations, Prime Minister Narendra Modi invited the heads of BIMSTEC countries Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Nepal, and Bhutan for his swearing-in ceremony

on May 30, 2019, for his second term ceremony of oath (Hariharan 2019:3–4).

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI):the relations between India and Sri Lanka are moving away because of the many strategic changes in the Indian Ocean Region. Sri Lanka has emerged as an important partner of China's ambitious BRI, its strategic economic infrastructure project. The BRI includes the 21st century Maritime Silk Road (MSR), which aims to strengthen maritime infrastructure between China and Asia, Africa, and Europe. China is making huge investments in economically unviable projects in Sri Lanka to complete its maritime silk road, using Sri Lanka as a starting point. China is now gaining not only military advantages but also a commercial edge in South Asia. When the China-Sri-Lanka free trade agreement comes through, Chinese businesses are capable of using India's free trade agreement with Sri Lanka to gain backdoor entry into Indian markets (Hariharan 2019:4). Thus, China has created maritime assets in the Indian Ocean Region, including Hambantota, which extend now from Djibouti in the west to South China in the east. This poses a serious challenge to the security of India in the region.

Balancing geography with politics

The Indo-Sri Lanka relationship is not defined by a simple framework. A writer, D. Suba Chandran, has argued that there are four multiple actors in Indo-Sri Lanka relations: Colombo-Beijing, Colombo-Jaffna, New Delhi-Chennai, and UNP-SLFP. The Colombo-Beijing vertical is balancing geography with politics. The biggest challenge for India has been Sri Lanka's strategy emerging from Colombo-Beijing relations, which have grown in the 21st century. While, historically, geographically, culturally, and economically, Sri Lanka is closer to India, Mahinda Rajapaksa has made a bold attempt to change all the above by aligning Sri Lanka closer with China since 2005, when Mahinda Rajapaksa became the President. During his first tenure (2005–2010), China invested in many projects and provided military support during Eelam War IV. For Beijing, Rajapaksa was an opportunity and willing partner, which was ready to invite China into Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka under Rajapaksa became a crucial hub for China in the Indian Ocean in two critical ways: first, Sri Lanka became an important Indian Ocean pillar for China's side of the Maritime Silk Route (MSR); and secondly, Colombo also became an investment and infrastructure hub for China in the Indian Ocean,

overlooking the international shipping lanes and even the Malacca Strait.

The Colombo-Jaffna-Jaffnaon has also affected India-Sri Lanka relations because if there is any dispute between the two, it will most probably affect Chennai. Further, if Chennai is affected, it will affect New Delhi. Finally, the stand of UNP and SLFP, the main political parties of Sri Lanka, on ethnic issues also affects bilateral relations (Chandran 2019:37–39). The Indian Ocean has always been witness to the military presence of outside powers, right from the advent of the Portuguese in the 15th century until the present day. The colonial invasions were primarily driven by economic motives, but the contemporary extra-regional military presence aims to further the strategic objectives of states such as China, the US, and others. The growing Chinese navy, together with its establishment of a port in Djibouti, access facilities in Malaysia, and the strategic base at Gwadar, intensify this scenario due to valid logistical reasons. The Maritime Silk Road, introduced by the Chinese President in 2013, is widely seen by strategic experts as a veiled manifestation of China's military aspirations. (Suri 2016:239).

Sri Lanka sees a balancing role for itself in the great power politics in the Indian Ocean. The authorities of the island are now cognizant that competing nations with an interest in the Indian Ocean acknowledge the island's significance, not only in safeguarding crucial maritime routes but also in balancing and counteracting each other's strength and influence in the area. India and China have had significant influence on Sri Lanka's maritime policy and have also impacted the country via economic and political incentives on their separate fronts. Consequently, the growing global relevance of the Indian Ocean has heightened the strategic importance of Sri Lanka as a marine nation. So, China is deepening its strategic foothold in the region, which incidentally threatens to marginalise India in its strategic backyard (Sahadevon 2019:10–11).

Conclusion

In short, at the present time, the relationship between India and Sri Lanka has centred not only around security concerns but also on economic cooperation and political matters because of the closeness of Sino-Sri Lankan relations and China's growing dominance in the South Asian region. The China factor is now more important than the ethnic issue in Sri Lanka. Since the end of the civil war in 2009, China has invested tremendously in the development of Sri

Lanka. Moreover, the 'String of Pearls' is an important strategy used by China to enhance its influence in the South Asian zone. China's primary strategic initiatives in Sri Lanka consist of the Hambantota Port and Colombo Port. These initiatives facilitate China's efforts to integrate Sri Lanka into the 21st century Maritime Silk Road initiatives, which are part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In light of these advancements, India is also prioritising the mitigation of China's expanding influence in Sri Lanka via augmenting its economic aid to the country.

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Notes

1. The 'string of pearls' is a geopolitical theory on potential Chinese intentions in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). This network extended from the Chinese mainland to Port Sudan in the Horn of Africa, and it facilitated Chinese military

and commerce. The phrase 'String of Pearls' was first used in a 2005 report by Booz-Allen-Hamilton, 'Energy Futures in Asia' prepared for US Defense Secretary. 'String of Pearls Military Plan to Protect China's Oil: US Report', Space War, January 18, 2005, at <http://www.spacewar.com/2005/050118111727.edxbwxn8.html>

2. The Silk Route, also called 'the silk road' or 'ancient trade route', linking China with the West, carried goods and ideas between the two great civilizations of Rome and China. The main silk route went through countries like Syria, Turkey, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Pakistan, but other routes of silk route also covered the Indian Ocean.
3. This vision refers to the period from 2010 to 2016, which envisages a Sri Lanka that has an economy with a green environment and rapid development; aspires to be a stable society with a high quality of life for all of its people, having access to decent living, electricity, water, schooling, and health facilities; maintains the best of Sri Lankan culture, traditions, and long-standing global identity; aims to consolidate as an emerging market economy, integrated into the global economy, and is competitive internationally. For details, see <http://www.fao.org/faolex/results/details/en/c/LEX-FAOC170008/>.
4. The great game denotes the rivalry of the superpower to establish control over the Indian Ocean region for many reasons, such as strategic, trade, and natural resources.
5. The blue economy is the sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods, and jobs while preserving the health of the ocean ecosystem.
6. To foster regional economic cooperation, in 1997, the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) was formed. At present, it includes 22 member countries: Australia, Bangladesh, the Comoros, India, Indonesia, Iran, Kenya, Madagascar, Malaysia, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Mauritius, Oman, Mozambique, the Seychelles, Somalia, Singapore, Thailand, South Africa, the United Arab Emirates, Tanzania, and Yemen. IORA has evolved into the peak regional group spanning the Indian Ocean.