



India's Maritime Relations with Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean

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Abstract

The Indian Ocean is home to major sea routes connecting the Middle East, Africa and East Asia with Europe and the Americas. The commercial route and rich natural resources provide a lifeline to the countries surrounding the Ocean rim. For the past several years the balance of power has fluctuated around the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) between India and China. Pursuing the 'Belt and Road' initiatives Beijing intends to capture the maritime trade hub of the Indian Ocean by framing a string of commercial connectivity with regional states. China's commercial expansions have upset India's regional commercial ties which in turn reduces the geo-economic influence of New Delhi over the Indian Ocean region. India always considers the Indian Ocean region as an important strategic domain. The geographical proximity, historical ties and strategic location indicate that Sri Lanka to be a perfect partner for India. Indian and Sri Lanka are among the first two countries that proposed to make the Indian Ocean as a peace zone. This paper tries to highlight the important role India and Sri Lanka could play in sheltering peace and security in the Indian Ocean region to check Chinese continuous military and territorial expansion.

Keywords: *Connectivity, Competition, Expansion, Maritime Security, Commercial Trade, Partnership.*

Introduction

Indian Ocean trade route today feeds some of the largest economies in the world. More than 70% of international commercial ships have passed through the Ocean region. Since independence, India has always been the dominant power that maintains peace and normalcy in the Indian Ocean. However, during the past several years the Ocean has become an arena of competition between India and China (Hassan, 2019). In pursuing the Belt and Road initiative Beijing takes economic success as an opportunity for expansion over smaller nation-states. India sees that the Chinese aggressive approach could hamper the norms of free

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navigation and unimpeded commerce among the Indian Ocean states. Though China offers growth and progress in the name of financial aids and infrastructural development projects, they always accompany some forms of territorial expansion. Most of the countries surrounding the Indian Ocean rim including Sri Lanka today have fallen into China's debt trap (Naren Chetty, 2008).

To counter the Belt and Road initiative India has launched the 'Neighborhood First Policy' and 'SAGAR' to focus foreign policy more closely towards the Indian Ocean rim (Taurangbam, 2019). The increasing Indo-China competition in the Indian Ocean adds Sri Lanka's crucial position within the maritime great game; under this circumstance, the geographical location of Sri Lanka is likely to play a central role in deciding the balance of power in the Indian Ocean region. The Island country becomes a transit point for trans-continental sea trade connecting Europe, East Africa, Middle East, South East Asia and India. Knowing their geographical importance Colombo tries to upgrade itself to be the 'Hub of the Indian Ocean'. However, this objective is unrealistic so long as the Island country allows deeper penetration of China within her territory.

Importance of the Indian Ocean

The Indian Ocean is the third largest water body, covering an area of 70.5 million square kilometers and holds approximately 20% of the water on the earth's surface. It is located at the geopolitical crossroad of international trade connecting the Middle East, Africa and East Asia with Europe and America (www.cia.gov, 2020). Moreover, the world's most important checkpoints such as the Straits of Hormuz and Malacca are located in this region. About 18% of the United State's oil supply from the Middle East passes through the Straits of Hormuz. Apart from being a hub for international trades, the region provides valuable economic sources for fishing and natural resources. It gives opportunities for economic development within the rim of the Ocean region, particularly to the smaller Island who are economically insecure. The geopolitical location becomes a deciding factor for China's bigger interest in commercial expansion connection with Europe and Africa.

The Indian Ocean countries divide themselves into several sub-regions such as Australasia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, West Asia and Eastern and Southern Africa having their regional groups like SAARC, ASIAN, GCC, IORA and SADC (mea.gov.in, 2020). However, all the regional countries come together under the umbrella of the Indian Ocean Region (IORA) comprising forty-eight countries including India and Sri Lanka.

Indo-Sri Lanka Position in the Indian Ocean

India and Sri Lanka are divided by a landmass called the Palk Bay, a narrow strip of water separating the State of Tamil Nadu in India and the Northern Province of Sri Lanka. Since ancient times the area provided fertile fishing ground for fishermen from both sides. People of this area mostly comprised of Tamil communities with similar ancestry where frequent inter-visit had taken place between them. The two countries also still share a very similar culture; India is the birthplace of Buddhism, the dominant religion of Sri Lanka and

India is also the ancestral home of the Sri Lankan Tamils who are mostly Hindus (www.mea.gov.in, 2020)

Due to its geopolitical locations, Sri Lanka has played a significant role in the Indian Ocean maritime calendar. Since ancient times Ceylon provides one of the busiest trading ports connecting the Middle East and Europe. The Island country became a centre of rivalry among colonial powers at one point of history. After independence Sri Lanka immediately attracted western countries' strategic military interest in the Indian Ocean. Soon this was followed by reaching the British Defense and External Affairs Agreement, between Sri Lanka and the British Government in 1948 (Kandaudahewa, 2016). The British considered Trincomalee port as an essential base for maritime activity operation due to its significant location.

Sirimao Bandaranaike then concluded another Maritime Agreement with the USSR in 1962. It did not stop here; an agreement to construct a powerful new Voice of America was reached with the U.S Government by J.R Jayawardene during his reign. The agreement received huge opposition from neighbouring countries, especially India who was playing a mediatory role between Colombo and Tamil Militants. Western countries were also showing great resistance to the agreement since it was meant for intelligence gathering purposes and electronic surveillance of the Indian Ocean (Mehrotra, 2012). Due to its strategic location, Sri Lanka's ports provided a decent position to control the Indian Ocean.

Power Struggle in the Indian Ocean

Following the policy of non-Alignment movement, India always declares the Indian Ocean a peace zone. The deployment of Chinese naval forces to the Gulf of Aden in 2008 as anti-piracy forces marked the beginning of an inflection point in the Sino-Indian maritime dynamics (Henry, 2016). Initially, India believed that China's interest was driven primarily by the protection of Beijing's maritime trade and energy concerns. The continuous presence of Chinese Navy vessels in the Indian Ocean region soon became the centre of India's attention. China extended its footprint in the IOR by claiming lonely Island in the Indian Ocean by setting up military bases.

During the final year of the Sri Lankan Civil war, China became Sri Lanka's biggest military ally. The then President Rajapaksa reached a secret agreement with Beijing for military support in exchange for a port development project. President Rajapaksa's visit to Beijing in 2007 led to the signing of an agreement for the purchase of Chinese Jian-7 Fighter Jet, anti-aircraft guns, JY-11 3D air surveillance radar, and armoured personnel carrier and others (Yuanzhe, 2020).

Beijing considered the agreement as a significant achievement in the pursuance of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In 2012, China even further extended funding for building military camps (Abi-Habib, 2018). Even though Chinese funding contributed essential parts in managing the economy, on the other-hand, Colombo faced difficulty in generating income to repay her debt. In this manner, the Island country soon fell into the debt trap of China.

Located at the centre of the Ocean rim with major muscle power, India has always occupied a central position in the Indian Ocean geopolitical setting. India's leadership has always upheld the necessity of maintaining peace and security in the region. It has been estimated that about 95 percent of India's trade by volume and about 70 percent of India's trade by value pass through the Indian Ocean. About 70% of global trade in oil passes through the Indian Ocean (Powell, 2011). Besides, 80% of India's crude oil is supplied through the sea route. The above factors highlight the significant reasons for New Delhi to stretch its muscles to secure peace and normalcy in the Indian Ocean. The Indian Ocean provides a major route of commercial transaction not only with neighbouring Island countries but also to international communities.

For the past several years India has become an active member of regional groups like ASIAN, IOR, IORA and others. It maintains cordial trade relations with SAARC and ASIAN countries by making them significant commercial partner countries. In the meantime, China seems to be making much progress in capturing the economy of these nations by successfully luring them into a debt trap. Many of the infrastructure projects taken up by China do not show successful results. The Hambantota port in Sri Lanka which was believed to be one of the world's busiest ports now receives only 2-3 ships per day (Hillman, 2018). The Rajapaksa airport which was constructed under the \$210 million funding now has become the world's emptiest airport. After observing such failures, the trust level put on China by Sri Lanka and other countries in the Indian Ocean had degraded tremendously. The debt trap obliges them to carry on with the Chinese but inside they are searching for an alternative player like India who has the muscles and resources to challenge Beijing to usurp its expansionism (Baruah, 2020).

Over the last decades, India has improved relationships with the Indian Ocean states. India extends cooperation with mutual respect and understanding while China materializes fatty loans and infrastructural projects with the objective of territorial expansion. The redundant objective imposed by Beijing has compelled India to mend an appropriate maritime policy towards the Indian Ocean.

India-Sri Lanka Maritime Cooperation

Under Mrs Bandaranaike, Sri Lanka became among the first nations to propose the Indian Ocean as peace zone in 1971 (Misra, 1977). Since independence, the status of Kachchativu, a small barren island in the Park Bay area has been a major point of irritation between India and Sri Lanka. To define international maritime boundaries the Indo-Sri Lanka Maritime Agreement was signed in 1974 and 1976. Under this agreement, India agreed to confer sovereignty of the disputed Kachchativu Island to Sri Lanka. The agreement enabled both countries to draw a demarcation line in the Palk Strait, Gulf of Manner and the Bay of Bengal (Suryanarayan, 2020). However, despite the agreement fishermen issues still remains an unsettled subject between the two neighbours.

China has taken advantage of her economic prosperity as an opportunity for territorial expansion over smaller states. In 2014 and 2015, Chinese military submarines docked at Colombo port and Karachi port in Sri Lanka and Pakistan respectively. The Gwadar port management right has also been handed over to Chinese authority which was financed under China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) (Chatterji, 2020). Besides this, China also has a military base in Djibouti. The Payra port in Bangladesh and Kyaukpyu deep-sea port of Myanmar constructed by Chinese companies could soon be heading towards the same fate as that of Hambantota.

India and Sri Lanka have revived maritime cooperation mainly to counter Chinese expansion. Since Modi took over the Prime Minister's Office in 2014, India began to take major focus towards Chinese expansion in the Indian Ocean region. From the first day that Prime Minister Modi attained office, the Indian Government expressed interest in developing closer relationships with neighbouring countries. To accomplish this task New Delhi has introduced the 'Neighborhood First Policy' focusing on reviving closer ties with immediate neighboring countries. India has been extending further cooperation in the form of financial support and infrastructural development projects. Besides the reestablishment work it carried out for internally displaced persons, New Delhi and Colombo carried out negotiations for the construction of Trincomalee port in 2017 (Prasar, 2017). Ranil Wickremasinghe and Sirisena were known for their pro-Indian policy that had refused the Chinese to dock submarines at Colombo harbour.

India launched the SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) policy in 2016 to revise maritime strategy particularly with neighbouring countries including Sri Lanka. India's initiative is to give priority among the Indian Ocean region to ensure peace, stability and prosperity among nations. To Modi, the Indian Ocean is a lifeline of prosperity for all the regional states that provide great economic opportunities for nation-building. The geographical proximity, historical ties and strategic location indicate that Sri Lanka would make a perfect partner for India.

Since the signing of Indo-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement (IFSTA) in 2000, commercial relations between the two countries have grown rapidly (www.doc.gov.lk, 2020). To widen the ambit of ISFTA beyond trade in goods by incorporating service sectors, a Joint Study Group (JSG) was set up in 2003. Based on the recommendation of the JSG, both governments began negotiation on CEPA in February 2005. For the past several years, China's commercial expansions have upset India's regional commercial ties which in turn have reduced the geo-economic influence of New Delhi over the Indian Ocean region. President Sirisena and Prime Minister Modi resumed trade talks under the framework of 'Economic and Technological Cooperation Agreement' (ECTA). This agreement sought to boost cooperation in the technical areas, scientific experts and research amongst institutions boost the standard of goods and services to be able to compete in the global market. It also aimed at improving opportunities for manpower training and human resource development.

As a countermeasure to China's increasing expansion, New Delhi has decided to enlarge a number of financial aids and investment in smaller neighbouring countries. Maldives, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Bhutan become the largest recipient of Indian aid among other countries. Sri Lanka becomes one of the largest recipients of India's financial aids and infrastructural development projects in the area of education, health, transport connectivity and small and medium enterprise development. In addition to this, investment in different sectors such as petroleum, health care, tourism, telecommunication, banking and financial services have been carried out between the two countries. In 2019, bilateral trade between India and Sri Lanka amounted to \$ 4.59 billion (www.mea.gov.in, Brief of India-Sri Lanka Relations, 2019). The signing and enforcement of ECTA will provide crucial development in renovating better trade partnership between the two countries.

A remarkable feature of the Indo-Sri Lanka relations is the close military and security links that have been maintained for the past several decades. New Delhi and Colombo consider the immense importance of security in the Indian Ocean for their economic and commercial prosperity. New Delhi always provides security support to Colombo maritime efforts. In 2006 and 2008, Indian Coast Guard handed over two offshore patrol vessels (OPV) to Sri Lankan Coast Guard after providing training on ship handling, bridge navigation, and engine room controls. Another two advanced offshore patrol vessels (POV) amounting to \$ 74 million were handed over to the Sri Lankan Navy in 2017 and 2018 made by Goa Shipyard Limited. They were the largest vessels of its kind acquired by the Island country which were ordered back in 2014 (Shantanu, 2019). For this, they agreed on strengthening strategic cooperation to make the Indian Ocean a peace zone.

Apart from providing a course on military training across the three branches of Lankan security personnel by India, both countries organized joint military exercises such as 'Mitra Shakti' for the army and 'SLINEX' for the navy. The last military exercise conducted between the two countries in December 2019 was on counter-terrorism (pib.gov.in, 2019). China may represent itself as a competitor to India by providing and selling military equipment and weapons to the Island nation. However, comparing the amount of cooperation maintained, India achieves a much more prominent role with regards to Sri Lanka's defense and security. This provides an umbrella to Sri Lanka from the bottomless meddling of external forces within the Island. India takes great concern over Sri Lanka's security because what is happening inside the Island country has an immediate impact in India one way or the other.

In 2018, the combined nominal GDP of the Indian Ocean-connected nations amounted to \$ 54 trillion making them among the fastest-growing economies in the world. This gives greater concern over the security of Indian Ocean sea lines of communication (SLOCs) for regional states. Their future economy largely depends upon the security level of the Indian Ocean SLOCs. Therefore a level of mutual cooperation with understanding must be reached among Indian Ocean states to develop a comprehensive strategy to tackle the emerging security challenges in the region.

India and other regional powers such as Australia, France, Japan and the United State of America have agreed to join forces over security reasons in the Indo-Pacific region. These regional powers considered New Delhi's roles in the Indian Ocean to be crucially important. India, Japan and Sri Lanka are also looking for the possibility of engaging in a trilateral project to increase Colombo's port containers. India and Japan are also hoping to have a fair share in the development of the Trincomalee port in Eastern Sri Lanka. This joint effort is undertaken to counterbalance China's increasing presence in the Island country.

Refreshing Indo-Sri Lanka Maritime Cooperation

Under Sirisena's regime, India and Sri Lanka enjoys the highest level of cooperation by reaching a bilateral civil nuclear agreement, cooperation on counter-terrorism and a tripartite maritime cooperation pact involving the Maldives. Today the Indo-Pacific region becomes a centre of transoceanic trade centre attracting attention from foreign powers. Both countries must maintain their maritime foreign policy to cope with the increasing challenges. The return of Rajapaksa's brother put a major concern for India because China's shadow has been present all over the Island. However, the close link maintained by Colombo with Beijing only escorts the Island country into a debt trap. Sri Lanka has now been forced to sacrifice the country's busiest port Hambantotae to the Chinese authorities since 2017. When this event took place under the Sirisena regime, Mahinda Rajapaksa was among the leaders who vehemently condemned the decision of the Government.

Today Sri Lanka is on the verge of breaking itself from being a sub-regional player at the backdrop of the Indian Ocean to becoming a global entertainer in maritime trade. However, with the continuous presence of China inside the Island country it looks an impossible task to achieve such objective. Therefore, Sri Lanka needs to give New Delhi a much bigger strategic balance so that there is no hegemonic power in the Indian Ocean region.

China has the nature of putting pressure against Sri Lanka to drop all other commercial allies including India. This becomes clear over the emergence of confusion regarding India and Japan's Eastern Container Terminal (ECT) Project, suspension of the Japan-funded Light Rail Project, and the possibility of abandoning the US-backed Millennium Challenge Corporation Project (MCC) (Fernando, 2020). Due to this Sri Lanka continues to lose good and long-standing friends. In other words, when Colombo loses more and more friends it submerges itself more and more into China's orbit. Rajapaksha brothers could observe that such an incident will sooner or later put questions over the Island sovereignty.

This compels the Island states to look for an equally powerful state with the capability of confronting China's strategic and commercial course. India becomes the perfect choice for being the biggest and the most dominant power in the region with the world fastest economic growth rate. The equally important key position shared by India and Sri Lanka compels them to support each other to maintain peace and security in the Ocean rim. Most importantly,

India's location at the centre of the Indian Ocean directly inherits the task of maintaining security in the Ocean region.

Gotabaya saw the significant role India played in securing peace and normalcy in the Indian Ocean region. During his visit to New Delhi, Gotabaya highlighted that Colombo would never do anything to harm India. In the meantime, the Sri Lankan Government is not in a position to refute neither India nor China but rather always seeks an opportunity to gain benefits from both countries. However, the Island's President was not blind to see how China's 'Belt and Road' initiative had started to depreciate the Island's sovereignty. Today, an external debt to the country's GDP ratio is as high as 86 percent. This experience obligates Rajapaksa to maintain closer cooperation with India to keep the Chinese from usurping the Island's security. The Sri Lankan Government has also set a new policy under which at least 51 percent of any new project or assessment venture within the country will be owned by the Government.

Recent Development

The Galwan Valley face-off between Indian and the Chinese security forces in Eastern Ladakh claimed a number of lives from both sides on June 15th, 2020. India's success in building connectivity particularly with neighbouring countries and America becomes among the important factors that have motivated Beijing to take such an infuriating decision. In recent years India and the U.S have posed real challenges to PLA Navy expansion in the Indian Ocean (Malhotra, 2020). The incident also highlights the level of ambition China has displayed in and around the countries surrounding India.

Soon after the incident happened the Indian Navy deployed one of its frontline warships in the South China Sea where the PLA Navy objected to the presence of any other force by claiming authority within the entire region. However, the Indian Navy is not alone; the American Navy immediately supported them by deploying destroyers and frigates. In addition to this, New Delhi has increased its naval operation along the Malacca Strait near the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, the route used by the Chinese Navy to enter the Indian Ocean. To send a clearer message India has deployed underwater ships in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) that the misadventure Beijing initiated at Eastern Ladakh was unacceptable. Once again India has proven to the world that it has the required muscle and mental courage to hold its position. This achievement could generate the trust level rested upon India by neighbouring smaller countries to the next level which China never wanted to witness.

In August 2020, Sri Lankan Foreign Secretary Jayanath Colombage declared Sri Lanka would adopt an 'Indian first approach' as its new foreign policy though Colombo would always be open to dealing with other major countries for economic development (Hindu, 2020). This means Sri Lanka would never engage in anything that could harm India's strategic security interest. The Foreign Secretary also confirmed President Rajapaksa's decision to go ahead with a memorandum of cooperation signed with India on the Colombo Port's Eastern terminal. The announcement made by the Sri Lankan Government highlights the Island Government's willingness to free itself from reliance on any external power

including China. This could become a turning point in realizing deeper connectivity between the two countries.

India has also taken the initiative of rewriting Look East and Act East policy under the umbrella of Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral and Technological Cooperation (BIMSTEC) as a part of reviving maritime policy. The BIMSTEC was formed in 1997 which today comprises seven states Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand. Since August 2018, Sri Lanka has assumed its duties as the Chairperson of BIMSTEC (www.un.int, 2020). Past experience has shown SAARC as a regional organization that was in effect that has degraded immensely. Therefore strengthening BIMSTEC as a regional organization becomes immensely important to revive commercial ties among member countries. India must allocate more budget and resources to BIMSTEC the organization could provide meaningful momentum in recapturing commercial attachment with Indian Ocean states.

The rapid reaching out to neighbouring countries at the time of pandemic signifies India's concern for tranquillity and solidarity with neighbouring countries. Apart from deploying medical personnel to Nepal and Maldives, India has sent Hydroxychloroquine (HCQ) tablets to Afghanistan, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Maldives, Mauritius and Myanmar to support COVID management. With the initiative of Prime Minister Modi, a SAARC Leaders Video Conference was held on how to combat Covid-19 pandemic. An amount of \$ 10 million has also been pledged by India to the SAARC Covid-19 Emergency Fund. Other 10-tonne consignments of essential life-saving medicines have been sent to Sri Lanka by the Indian Government.

When the global health and economy is deeply exaggerated by the COVID pandemic, China does not stop its coercive behaviour in the Eastern Ladakh and the Indian Ocean. Under the present condition, China's permanent presence in the Indian Ocean region seems less favourable since it has incorporated postcolonialism character. Even after several peaceful high military-level talks, PLA has once again attempted an escalation at the LAC on the 29th and 30th August 2020. Beijing's fresh activities in the Indo-China border is a clear sign that tension between the two big powers will continue for some time. Therefore enhancing security must be the top priority for India and neighbouring countries to counter the aggressive intention of a single nation's intention to execute supreme control within the region. Especially in the Indian Ocean where Beijing's centre of interest resolves around, New Delhi and Colombo must develop a steadfast partnership to ensure peace and security in the region.

Sri Lanka is on the verge of finalizing a 20 point foreign policy directive draft. The first most important point among them is neutrality where the Island country wants to maintain a friendly relation with every other nation. This could have been one of the important reasons why it has rejected a \$480 million Millennium Challenge Cooperation with America in February 2020. Colombo's intention was not about ignoring Washington but to put more concern on preserving the country's peace and security. The Sri Lankan

Government did not want to intensify the level of competition among powerful nations such as America, China, India and Japan that could escalate into a military contest. To secure their position Colombo highlights the country's willingness to carry out friendly relations with any country including America, China and India.

Though the Indian Navy dictates the Eastern Indian Ocean it nonetheless has always proclaimed it as a zone of peace. India is capable of forming cordial maritime cooperation with the U.S, Japan, France and Australia. New Delhi must continue to value partnerships with these regional countries. Washington remains an important partner of Delhi with whom China currently fights a full-fledged trade war. This level of cooperation will further secure India's dominant position in the region to challenge China who recently bypassed America to become the world's largest naval power in the world.

Conclusion

It might not be possible for India and Sri Lanka to suddenly avoid China who enjoys the world's second-largest economy. However, China is also currently facing intense scrutiny from the trade war, pandemic crisis, geopolitical competition and its own internal political mishap. The continuous provocative act of the PLA in the Indo-China border and the Indian Ocean region shows Beijing's desperation over her internal political instability. Beijing wants to present itself as a powerful nation to the world but secretly its internal administration slowly decays. This puts many nations that have largely depended upon the Chinese aid and funding in a vulnerable position. Since economy is the deciding factor of a country's progress New Delhi and Colombo must conclude negotiation on ECTA as soon as possible. Particularly to Sri Lanka, escalating resources is the top priority to generate more GDP for debt payment.

For security purposes, India's initiative to set up a maritime research coordination centre should be given full support. It would provide great assistance with regard to security matters because it is meant to be an information centre of maritime activities for the Indian Ocean regional states. Lastly but not least, the two countries must continue to cherish the importance of people to people correlation. During times of adversity, it has always been the inner attachment shared by the two countries that bring them together which China will never understand. The common historical, cultural and traditional values cherished for the past several decades bind the two nations closer than any other countries. Most importantly the neutrality policy esteemed by the two nations must be upheld more conveniently and sensibly.

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