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**1**

**Geopolitics of the Indian Ocean and Indo-Sri Lanka Relationship**

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## **Geopolitics of Indian Ocean and Indo-Sri Lanka Relationship<sup>1</sup>**

### **Asanga Abeyagoonasekera**

#### **Abstract**

*The Indian Ocean will be where the big game will be played in the future. The existing global leader, the United States of America, rising China, and emerging India will be the key global players in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). To counter balance a rising power and its dominance of Indian Ocean we have seen how regional nations will tie with extra regional nations. It is significant that the Indian Ocean is the only ocean named after a State, hence the question posed by some if the Indian Ocean indeed belongs to India. Evidently, India has an important role to play in the Indian Ocean and needs to be aware of what is going on in its backyard. The Chinese submarine incident in Sri Lanka was a clear indication of this situation especially with regard to India's reaction. The main concern was whether the visit of Chinese submarines was a surprise or a carefully calibrated decision? In this backdrop, in order to clearly understand the changing geopolitical dynamics of Indian Ocean I will discuss two key areas which are: China's strategic presence in the Indian Ocean and, India's strategic aspiration in the Indian Ocean. Finally I will discuss certain important issues in the Indo-Sri Lanka relationship.*

#### **China's strategic presence in the Indian Ocean**

China's strategic presence in the Indian Ocean is clearly for the protection of its Sea Lines of communication (SLOCs) which is the most essential component needed to keep China's economy at its present level of growth as well as for future growth aspiration. China, as the global manufacturing hub requires tons of hydrocarbon that is transported across the two choke points, Strait of Hormuz and Malacca.

Sri Lanka's geo-strategic position in this geopolitical tapestry is viewed as extremely significant. According to Robert Kaplan in his book *The Monsoon*<sup>2</sup>, Sri Lanka is viewed as a geo-strategic hub. In one of the interviews he clearly states, "I consider Sri Lanka part of the new geography."<sup>3</sup> It is part of the new maritime geography, and that makes it very important. He also explains the main sea lines of communication between the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea and between the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. "It's part of China's plan to construct a string of pearls of ports that they don't own, but which they can use for their warships all across the Indian Ocean."<sup>4</sup>

In this regard, Hambantota Port is center-stage due to its geographical position; it being situated at the southern tip of Sri Lanka which is closer to the busiest shipping lanes of the world a few nautical miles just outside the port. This is seen by some experts as a Chinese strategy for

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<sup>1</sup> Public Lecture delivered at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, 25 February 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Kaplan, Robert D. (2011). *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power*. New York: Random House Inc.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/blog/michael-j-totten/conversation-robert-d-kaplan>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/blog/michael-j-totten/conversation-robert-d-kaplan>

military presence in the Indian Ocean which China and Sri Lanka deny clearly stating that this is purely for economic and trade benefits.

However at a (INSSSL Security Salon on 22nd February 2017 at the Ministry of Defence, Colombo, Professor Swaran Singh, Senior Fellow at INSSSL, the national security think tank, explained, 'Sri Lanka in China's eyes have moved from once being a saviour for isolated China to becoming a staging post for China's strategic game plan'. China today values this island's strategic location in the Indian Ocean. He further explained 'China's massive investment in the Hambantota Port is projected as an economic project but it makes no economic logic given its zero commercial viability for long time to come. But it makes strategic sense and brings political influence. India on the other hand enjoys 'social influence' and Sri Lanka civil society has often supported India and shows skepticism towards China.'

At the moment not many ships dock at Hambantota and it is not as busy a harbour as Colombo Port but we can assume that in years to come this position would change. It is a long term strategic project which Sri Lanka and the region could benefit from economically. Conversely, Sri Lanka will not allow an extra-regional power to build a military outpost in the island due to the strong relationship with its neighbour India.

It is also important to consider China's geo-strategic disadvantages in the Indian Ocean when examining this point. According to Dr. David Brewster<sup>5</sup>, 'China's strategic vulnerability is reinforced by the scarcity of overland transport connections between Chinese territory and the Indian Ocean.' He further states that China at present has no ability to exert control over the chokepoints nor has it any regular naval presence in any of the ports. Certain western analysts debate that if China is pursuing bases in the Indian Ocean under PLAN (People's Liberation Army Navy (PLA Navy) it would only have access to limited facilities for specific purpose or contingencies. The recent submarine encounters by the Chinese<sup>6</sup> have created a few ripples in geopolitics of the Indian Ocean. According to Professor Shen Dingli at Fudan University '...it is wrong for us to believe that we have no right to set up bases abroad'. He argues that China needs not only a bluewater navy but also overseas military bases to cut the supply cost ([china.org.cn](http://china.org.cn), 28 Jan 2010). This input has to be considered when deciding on long term strategic decisions by India and also Sri Lanka.

### **India's strategic aspiration in the Indian Ocean**

When examining Jawaharlal Nehru's Selected Works<sup>7</sup> one could think that India followed a model similar to the Monroe Doctrine which is to exclude extra-regional powers from the vicinity of India and the Indian Ocean. This is strategic thinking in modern India's determination to rid the subcontinent of residual colonial influence and exclude other powers from the entire South Asian region (David Brewster<sup>8</sup>). It is further explained by Bhabani Sengupta<sup>9</sup> that this is

<sup>5</sup> Brewster, David. (2014). *India's Ocean: The Story of India's Bid for Regional Leadership*. New York: Routledge.

<sup>6</sup> In 2014, a Chinese submarine docked at Colombo Port which was a first of its kind at an Indian ocean port in over a decade and the arrival of a Chinese submarine at Kota Kinabalu, Malaysia this year created apprehension in the US and India raising questions about China's naval activities.

<sup>7</sup> *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru: Series 2, Volume 3*. (1985). New Delhi: Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund.

<sup>8</sup> Brewster, David (2013), *India as an Asia Pacific Power*. New York: Routledge

<sup>9</sup> Prelim-Report-McArthur.pdf

an underlying theme in Indian strategic thinking where the presence of outside powers in India's neighbourhood is illegitimate and India's neighbours must solely rely upon India as a regional manager and security provider. Furthermore, the scholar K. Subramanyam has discussed that leadership in the Indian Ocean is part of India's "manifest destiny" (please see footnote 7) Sri Lankan scholar Dr. Vernon Mendis' book clearly points out India's role in South Asia<sup>10</sup> "...the short-sighted policy pursued by successive Indian governments to make India the sole dominant power in South Asia have created suspicions in the minds of smaller states like Sri Lanka", he says.

Every government has limitations and this was most evident for India when dealing with the almost thirty-year civil war in Sri Lanka. It was also evident from the Chinese submarine port calls. Upon inquiring from the Indian Defence Minister at the Shangri-la Dialogue as to the consequences if another Chinese submarine were to arrive in Sri Lanka, the Minister responded that India would react on a case by case basis. However, this is not the best strategy. India and Sri Lanka should maintain a proactive long-term defence stance on such important matters rather than a reactive position.

On the regional level India has resisted inviting Pakistan to join the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) or allowing China to become a full member of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS). On the other hand, India is building its massive naval fleet with 48 warships under construction including one aircraft carrier, one nuclear and six conventional submarines and a variety of destroyers, frigates, and corvettes. By 2027, the capacity will be expanded to hold 198 warships. While a silent yet aggressive naval build-up is taking place in Sri Lanka's neighbourhood, Colombo should be ready to proactively face any future challenge and cooperation as the Indian Ocean security environment is expected to remain complex.

### **Indo Sri Lanka relationship**

According to Ambassador Shivshankar Menon's latest book *Choices, Inside the Making of India's Foreign Policy*<sup>11</sup> India had to take Minimax foreign policy decisions at the last stage of the Sri Lankan protracted civil war in 2009. "Decisions aimed at minimizing the harm and maximizing the gain. Whether you succeed or not is never apparent at the moment, nor is necessarily clear subsequently". He further explains "no matter what one might think of its internal politics Sri Lanka today is a better place without the LTTE and the civil war. And India contributed to making that outcome possible".

Ambassador Menon clearly explains the limitations of foreign policy decisions made by India in the Sri Lankan context. The same limitations I heard at a Delhi conference organized by Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA) a few years ago, the same day India voted against Sri Lanka at the Human Rights Council in Geneva, (March 22, 2012). Salman Khurshid (Minister, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, eminent lawyer, member, Indian National Congress) explained to the conference participants how a regional government can dictate terms to the

<sup>10</sup> Guang, Lin Liang (1992), *India's Role in South Asia: A Chinese Perspective*, in Vernon L.B. Mendis (Ed.) *India's Role in South Asia*. Bandaranaike Center for International Studies: Colombo.

<sup>11</sup> Menon, Shivshankar. (2016). *Choices: Inside the Making of India's Foreign Policy*. Brookings Institution Press.

central government, further adding that he is like Muhammad Ali the boxer, allowing his opponent to punch him but waiting for the right moment to strike him down. This is a clear example of how strong the Tamil Nadu factor is in Indo-Sri Lanka relationship.

It is noteworthy that after thirty years an Indian Prime Minister made an official visit to Sri Lanka in March 2015 mainly due to the leadership of President Maithripala Sirisena. The Indian Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi is also expected (not definite) to visit the Island this year (2017). During his previous visit he spoke about devolution of power and the need to go beyond the 13th amendment to the Constitution. The Indo-Sri Lanka Peace Accord which was forcefully introduced according to the latest CIA declassified report is a clear example of the limitation of a weak policy advocated due to the pressure of certain political groups in India and Sri Lanka. In this regard the Sri Lankan Government also failed to inquire and discuss with the general public of the country prior to introducing this important political milestone. This ad hoc approach created further tensions between the two countries and within Sri Lanka's domestic political establishment.

A few days ago Dr. S. Jaishankar, India's Foreign Secretary, met with members of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) and the Tamil Progressive Alliance (TPA). In doing so, he was perhaps emphasizing on the unity of Tamil political leadership that needed to fulfill Tamil political aspirations. According to Dr. Jehan Perera, a Sri Lankan scholar, "India would be more likely to pressurize Sri Lanka on issues that concern its own national security, such as the proposed economic agreement with China involving Hambantota port, and Sri Lanka's backtracking on the Indian economic presence in the Trincomalee port."

This pressure is created by two factors. First, India clearly not understanding the Sri Lankan view towards regional and extra regional powers who are already playing an active role in the island. Second, certain speculative media articles that create much hype in both India and Sri Lanka and deteriorate the relationship. With an equidistant foreign policy followed by Colombo, India should not worry since Colombo will not pivot to one particular power. Apart from India's worry of Colombo's preference to Beijing there are bilateral issues to be resolved between India and Sri Lanka such as the long standing fisheries dispute which is yet to be resolved with a common solution that could benefit both countries.

Historic entries in the Ramayana to the religious and cultural ties Sri Lanka has shared with India have enabled the cultural diplomacy between the two countries to be strong. India and Sri Lanka shared a common colonial experience, post-colonial institutions, political culture, all which have ensured mutual confidence of two strong democratic governance systems. The two nations also have a rich historical and cultural relationship.

In the present day, Prime Minister Modi's "Act East Policy" has been extended from the "Look East Policy" to accommodate the regional cultural integration and "neighborhood first" policy. This has to be appreciated because India should give first priority to its neighbouring nations. I have clearly stated the importance of this in a recently published book *Modi Doctrine*.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ganguly, A; Chauthaiwale, V and Sinha, U K. (Eds.). (2016). *The Modi Doctrine: New Paradigms in India's Foreign Policy*. New Delhi: Wisdom Tree Publishers.

From an economic perspective, South Asia has an economic value of around \$2.5 trillion with untapped youth resource. There is much to be done to spur the growth of South Asia, however unfortunately political establishments have failed miserably since independence, which is a clear indicator of the high poverty levels in India, Sri Lanka and the region. However Indo-Sri Lanka political anxieties persist due to the volatile geopolitics of the Indian Ocean and understanding this is the key to resolving many issues.

It is also vital to understand that China and India are two players at a chessboard with different strengths and weaknesses. The relationship that Sri Lanka shares with India is historical and socio-cultural. Moreover, the location of Sri Lanka, as one of her closest neighbours, paves the way for India to share a bond that cannot be compared to any other relationship. This should be further strengthened at all levels including political, economic, social, cultural, and especially at the scholarly level between think tanks. Important inputs on policy making could be provided by think tanks to which political establishments in both nations should give the highest consideration. To strengthen any relationship we should understand limitations and past errors. By better understanding the Indian Ocean's volatile geopolitical environment, we can orchestrate a better future for the next generation.

### **Sri Lanka as a stabilizer.**

Sri Lankan politics will be affected from time to time by geopolitics of the Indian Ocean due to its location closer to India and the maritime route. Thus, balancing New Delhi, Washington, and Beijing will be a priority for Sri Lankan foreign policy as President Sirisena has rightly spelled out as 'balanced Asia centric'. Clearly an equidistant foreign policy is what Sri Lanka should have with global powers. President Sirisena has balanced his government's foreign policy with the east and the west. The recent article that appeared in Forbes Magazine (February 11, 2017) titled *China tells India to stay off its Indian Ocean 'Colony' Sri Lanka* is a poor analysis speculating that China is encircling India. Such speculative news items should be countered.

As Professor Indra de Soysa rightly points out 'Sri Lanka could potentially take a lead role in establishing a movement that de-militarizes and de-secritizes the Indian Ocean by building a regime for peaceful cooperation' (INSSSL Defence Review 2017). In this manner, we could construct a peaceful region which will benefit the Indo-Sri Lankan relationship as well.