

The Geopolitical Rivalry of India and China in the Indian Ocean as a Crucial Determinant of the Future of Littoral States: Case Study of Sri Lanka.

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Abstract

Behind the rhetoric of Indian Ocean geopolitics, great power rivalries are trapping tensions over the region's sustainable future. Sri Lanka, located in the heart of the Indian Ocean, with close ties with both India and China, is now obliged to adopt more cautious strategies due to the two great powers devising their new experiments of expanding maritime trade and security connectivity in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), especially as Sri Lanka has become a 'playground' of their competing interests. The theoretical examinations based on Alfred T. Mahan's Sea Power Theory and Robert D. Kaplan's Geopolitics in the Indian Ocean offer a comprehending perspective on geopolitical rivalries of great powers which supports the main focus of this paper namely, how such geopolitical rivalries challenge over littoral states. This paper analyses this concept taking Sri Lanka for the case study. The paper examines two interrelated case narratives i.e., dealing with foreign direct investments to port development and bilateral maritime security ties with India and China. Considering the case study approach, this paper utilises qualitative data collection methods, including several key secondary sources in examination i.e., seminal publications, diplomatic and journalistic reports. The conclusion of the paper inquires into whether or not Sri Lanka upholds its external sovereignty given the increasing geopolitical tension between India and China in the IOR and their increasing interest over Sri Lanka's port development and maritime security. Further, Sri Lanka is positioning an explanatory case study to comprehend the geopolitical challenges of littoral states in the Indian Ocean Region.

Keywords: Geopolitics, Indian Ocean, littoral States, India, China, and Sri Lanka

1. Introduction

The Indian Newspaper, *Hindustan Times* reports that Chinese research vessel Shi-Yan 6 enters the Indian Ocean expecting to dock in Colombo Port in October 2023 (Gupta, 2023, September 25). India has stated its deep concern regarding Sri Lanka's diplomatic standpoint on Chinese research vessel entering into the Indian Ocean and harboring in the Colombo Port. Amidst India's diplomatic repercussions, Sri Lanka's Foreign Minister Ali Sabry has made a media statement assuring that the Shi-Yan 6 will not be permitted to the Colombo Port while emphasizing that 'India's security

concerns are as paramount to Sri Lanka' (NDTV, 2023, September 26). However, depicting the 'walking in the tightrope' scenario in Sri Lanka's diplomatic engagements, three weeks later, after President Ranil Wickremesinghe's visit to Beijing to grace the 10th Anniversary of the Belt Road Initiative, the Chinese ship Shi-Yan 6 entered Sri Lanka's territorial waters and then on the 25th October, it harbored at Colombo Port (*Dailymirror*, 2023, October 25).

The Indian Ocean Region (*hereinafter used as IOR*) has become one of the busiest maritime routes in global trade and commerce. As stated in some examinations, the IOR will perform with the projected growth in trade share from 13.1% to 15.7% between 2017 and 2025 (Wignaraja et al., 2018). Berlin (2006) examining into the significance of India located in the Indian Ocean (*hereinafter used as IO*) has stated that India's geographical, historical and political relevance is salient as the 'continental power' of the IO. Whereas, over the last decades, China in particular has gained a trade momentum in global level and that it influences the overall trading ownership at the global level as well as the Indian Ocean (My Hai Loc, 2023). China's Belt and Road Initiative¹ (*hereinafter used as BRI*) has successfully gained control over the Indian Ocean, where it has persuaded both trade and strategic ties through policies such as 'String of Pearls'² and China's industrial and security establishment 'New Maritime Silk Road'³ (Aftab et al., 2019). India has deemed it necessary to hold a security concern over any intervention of China in the IO (Mohan, 2022) whereas, India perceives with the Chinese maritime enhancements made them declaring, the Indian Ocean security to be an 'unobstructed fulcrum' (Ghosh, 2011; Singh, 2019). With such developments,

¹ The One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative is a Chinese development strategy looks at the economic integration of Eurasia— and the growth of China's infrastructural and transportation projects connecting its western hemisphere. The OBOR seeks to revive ancient land-trade routes and establish regional and even a global platforms of cooperation through land and sea. China embarked on the OBOR in year 2013 by networking with cross-continental states and organisations. See for more details: <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/>

² China's 'String of Pearls' strategy refers to its efforts to increase China's influence and access to ports and airfields along the sea lines of communication in the Indian Ocean. As per criticisms China's 'String of Pearls' influenced over India in numerous ways particularly in India's naval advancements (Khaurana, 2008).

³ The 'New Maritime Silk Road' is a key component of the China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and aims to enhance global development 'governance'. The (old) 'Maritime Silk Road' has historical significance to trade, with evidence of early global maritime trade and cultural exchanges between China in the Asian region and its ties with other continents. The 'New Maritime Silk Road' combines China's strategic and trade & commerce in global outreach (Aftab et al., 2019).

the tension that arises from daily engagements of India and China unwraps a critical scholarly reassessment on the great power competition in this region and its impact to other states. On the other hand, located at the intersection of the third largest ocean in the world, Sri Lanka becomes the land of strategic importance to both India and China (Nye, 2023; Attanayake & Wakkumbura, 2023). China has swiftly trapped South Asian states including Sri Lanka being one of the top locations of Chinese BRI investments (Grare & Samaan, 2022). However, despite China's rapid trade presence in Sri Lanka, India, the powerful resident hegemony remains equally close to Sri Lanka in revitalising its trade and security ties.

In the scope of this paper, littoral states like Sri Lanka are affected by the competing trade and maritime developments of India and China in the IOR. Being a small state with limited military capabilities, Sri Lanka also serves as a littoral state in the Indian Ocean. Consequently, this dual role brings both pros and cons in light of changing geopolitical setting in the IO. In certain instances, it can prove to be challenging for a small state like Sri Lanka, which possesses limited diplomatic negotiating capabilities, to navigate the dynamics of engaging with both India and China on an equal footing. For example, during the recent economic crisis, grappling with the worst financial breakdown, Sri Lanka has gone through a turbulent in negotiating with its bilateral trade partners, and in particular negotiating with China had become tough. In the bilateral financial assistance for recovery purpose India stepped in firstly with India's Credit Line support of USD 4 billion (Business Standard, 2022 September 5), despite China, its largest bilateral investor, stepping back. Besides, negotiation process with China on restructuring foreign loans repayment has proven to be a protracted and arduous task for Sri Lanka. It was dubious as to why China delayed assisting Sri Lanka financially and its loan restructuring process, especially considering China's status as Sri Lanka's most influential trading partner. In the face of Chinese silent role, Foreign Minister of India, S. Jaishankar claimed at the Munich Security Conference held in March 2022, that Sri Lanka's economic collapse is a result of China's 'strategic trap diplomacy' (Buddhavarupu, 2022, March 31).

The present diplomatic stance of Sri Lanka, in its engagement with both India and China, necessitates careful scrutiny. Thus, the primary objective of this paper is to examine how littoral states like Sri Lanka become volatile amidst the presence of two great powers in the geopolitical rivals, while these two states have also been strong bilateral partners to Sri Lanka, exerting a considerable influence on its trade and security affairs. The research objective of this paper inquires within the larger context of Indian Ocean Region's

geopolitics. China's inclination towards employing a 'soft power approach'⁴, extending trade ties with extra regional states, whether or not China's 'debt trap diplomacy' hinders states' in partnership and India's 'Neighborhood First'⁵ policy, intervening to its South Asian neighbors for considering 'India-First', where such complex great power influences hinders external sovereignty of states, given the emphasis to a littoral state like Sri Lanka located in the center of the Indian Ocean.

In order to do so, this paper employs a qualitative case study analysis, focusing on the geopolitical rivalry of India and China, its causes and challenges to Sri Lanka. While discussing the scholarship of geopolitics in the IOR, this paper presents the rationale that trade and maritime dominance of the two states i.e., India and China play a crucial determinant in shaping geopolitics in the region. The paper is divided into three sections. In the first section, it examines geopolitics, triangulating theoretical ideas of Alfred Thayer Mahan's Sea Power Theory and Robert Kaplan's Geopolitics in the Indian Ocean. Also, the paper considers the concept of 'security dilemma' developed by Herbert Butterfield, John Hertz and Robert Jervis for a closer examination of security apparatus of the Indian Ocean. Moving on to the third section, it analyzes the case of Sri Lanka. Finally, the conclusion presents several key recommendations for apprehending recent geopolitical viewpoints which are seen as key considerations for maneuvering Sri Lanka's diplomatic leverage for safeguarding external sovereignty.

2. Geopolitics in the Indian Ocean, Sea Power, Security Dilemma and External Sovereignty

This first section delves into the four thematic concepts that are integral to forming the theoretical and conceptual foundation for the central examination of this paper.

⁴ China favors its 'soft power approach' which perusing international cooperation through non-military affairs. As examined by Chen (2014) the 'soft power approach' is China's foremost political strategy at the global level. China emphasizes Chinese 'culture' in maneuvering its 'soft power approach' (see more details in Glazer & Merphy, 2009).

⁵ Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's foreign policy direction on 'Neighborhood First Policy' aims to strengthen ties with India's immediate neighbors in the South Asian region (Das, 2016). The policy that introduced in year 2008, aimed at various regional cooperation i.e., economic, security, combating non-traditional security threats, development and fostering peace in the region etc. The 'Neighborhood First Policy' has undergone shifts over the period—focusing largely on development partnerships among neighboring South Asia.

2.1 Defining Geopolitics

The scholarship of geopolitics across various disciplines is a subject of much debate, with differing definitions. In International Relations, *geopolitics* is seen as a strategic element of foreign policy (Zreik, 2022). Additionally, some discussions have suggested that geopolitics sheds light on the political geography, shaping power and geographic location of a state (Smith & Dawson, 2022; Ashley, 1987). Scholars often employ multiple concepts to discuss geopolitics, and in common platform concepts like geography and politics are utilised (Luttwak, 1990). Scholars in the field of International Relations also frequently draw upon interdisciplinary discussions, with geopolitics serving as the focal factor for examining how geopolitics and power capabilities of a states (Agnew, 2000). It can be noted that security interests of states influence the fate of geopolitics. Bouchard and Crumplin (2010) argue that the “Indian Ocean is no longer neglected and has become a prominent player in geopolitics” (p.27). The two geographers elevated traditional elements of geopolitics, such as location, population, economy, natural resources and political ideology, are no longer the sole determining factors of geopolitics by adding regional and extra-regional elements (Bouchard & Crumplin, 2010, pp.28-29).

In the debate of the origin of the concept ‘*geopolitics*’, Sprout and Sprout (1957) argued that geopolitics is a branch of Geography that aims to explain the geographical realities and international affairs (cited in Spencer, 1988, p.42; Kristof, 1960). Identifying several other theoretical analyses are also important. Alfred Thayer Mahan in his seminal writing *The Influence of Sea Power on History* (1890) focused on the significance of geopolitics and the access and control of the sea by global players has been discussed in the ‘Sea Power Theory’. The two dominant theses thereafter known as the Heartland Theory, and Rimland Theory focused on the land and sea based domination in geopolitics. Halford Makinder in his work titled *Geographic Pivot of History* (1904), has identified the geographical mass called the ‘*Heartland*’ (also known as the World-island) that occupies a large portion of Eurasia claiming ‘whoever controls the Heartland dominates the world’ (Sloan, 1999). Nicholas J. Spykman, introduced the Rimland Theory (1942) that declared the geographical periphery of the Heartland (the lesser satellite states and the Eurasian coastal borders) which was refereed as the ‘*Rimland*’ as the most strategic space for world dominance (cited in Hepple, 1986). According to Spykman ‘whoever controls the Rimland controls the world (Hepple, 1986)’.

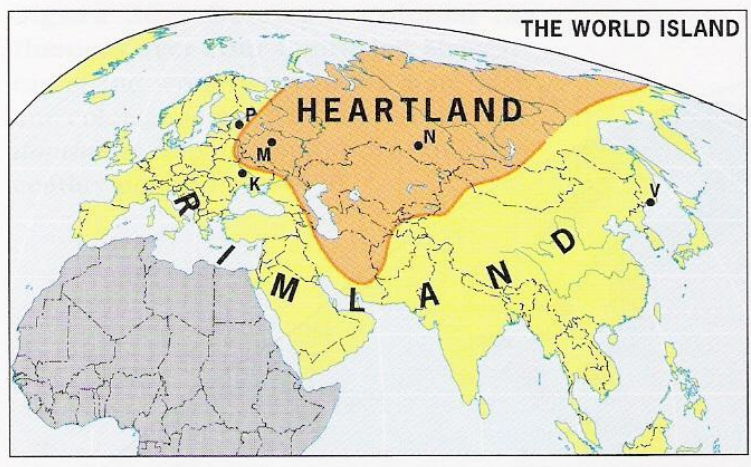


Figure 1: The Heartland and the Rimland

Note: This figure provides the geographical spread of Makinder's Heartland and Spykman's Rimland.

The theoretical evolvments in geopolitics encompass intricate factors and thus, placed beyond the geography and politics highlighted by Mackinder and Spykman. Therefore, the current geopolitical complexities explicate elements such as power, strategy, trade, commerce and technology, making more critical and behavioral outlook to geopolitics (Kuus, 2010). Scholars have taken notice on the Indian Ocean Region, in particular considering its pivotal space in the geopolitics of the twenty-first century (Kaplan, 2009). Given the importance of such developments, this paper benefits from the insights of ‘Sea Power Theory’ of Alfred T. Mahan and Robert Kaplan’s ‘Geopolitics of the Indian Ocean’ as more appropriate for forming its theoretical foundation to the further examination of the key objective of this paper.

2.2 Sea Power Theory and the Geopolitics of the Indian Ocean

The ‘Sea Power Theory’ encompassed six fundamental principles, including geographical position, physical conformation, extent of the territory, number of population, character of the people and the character of the government (Mahan cited in Dittmer & Sharp 2014, p.24). According to Alfred T. Mahan, among these fundamental principles, the geographic position is important for a state to maintain military power and engage in trading. Additionally, the physical conformation of the territory is crucial in particularly to view the connectivity to the sea, thus making those littoral states strategically significant. Maritime domain also serves as a platform for people to interact with the rest of the world. Mahan’s arguments on ‘sea power’ highlight nature of the territorial extent, pointing out the extent of the territory should not be measured solely by its size in square miles, but rather by the

extent of its coastal line and the natural character of it (Mahan cited in Albrecht et al., 2020, p.3). In his thesis, Alfred Mahan places a great importance on state's population and he considers the human resource as the core element that engages in the development of sea power of a state (Mahan cited in Dittmer & Sharp 2014, p.25). His examination on the national character is about the government's role in fostering 'peaceful relations in the sea'.

It can be noted that the 'Sea Power' theory has long been a significant theoretical impute in the study of ocean politics (Sumida, 2001; Mohan, 2022), whereas, studies of the Indian Ocean do place a significant emphasis on the modus operandi of 'sea power', making use of the interactions of great powers such as India and China (Kaplan, 2009, p.27). Kaplan who examines the Indian Ocean's strategic and geopolitical parameters stated that the Indian Ocean has become China's 'zone of influence' (ibid). The two theoretical assessments show the significance of the sea as a source of power for great powers, currently being embraced as a national strategy by both India and China. Consequently, their association with Sri Lanka, the country being a small state situated in the heart of the Indian Ocean can be perceived as a window of opportunity for making their preferred maritime connectivity. For a better understanding of the geographical positioning of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), the following map (see *figure 02*) is presented.



Figure 2: Map of the Indian Ocean Region – IOR

Source: <https://pakistanhouse.net/indias-increasing-influence-in-the-indian-ocean-region/>

Note: Adopted from *Center stage for the twenty-first century: power play in the Indian Ocean*, by Robert D. Kaplan, 2019.

Further to its assessment of the geographical location, economic and security trends have been characterised to value IOR's current strategic relevance (Aswani, 2022). As United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) has reported, China has become the top exporter in Indian Ocean economy and the region of Asia becoming the top maritime trader (Review of Maritime Transport 2022, UNCTAD). Along these developments, IOR fosters a critical global shipping routes. There is a high amount of oil shipments carried from the Strait of Homuz, the Persian Gulf to cross the Indian Ocean to the western Pacific (Habib & Fatima, 2020). The chokepoints facing the Indian Ocean, i.e., the Mozambique Canal, the Strait of Bab Al Mandeb, the Strait of Hormuz and the Strait of Malacca, allow narrow waterways for international maritime trade that makes some of the connecting territorial borders strategically important.

2.3 Indian Ocean and the Security Dilemma

Recognizing the third concept in clarification, the concept of '*security dilemma*⁶' occupies a major position when evaluating a state's military capability in comparison to the military power of another state (Glaser, 1997). As introduced by John Herz (1951), the concept of '*security dilemma*' emerges as a situation in which states find themselves engaging in military build-ups due to the accumulation of security by decreasing security of another state (ibid). The power rivalry between India and China encompasses not only making sea and trade connectivity but also military and strategic advancements in the IOR. According to numerous analyses, the Sino-Indian affairs instigated a security dilemma which increased defensive military capabilities (Brewster, 2015), thereby influencing the security balance in return. Also, literature on this field debates of security dilemma of India and China over deciding geopolitical landscape in South Asia and the Pacific.

One can argue that the consistent naval autonomy of India, its status as the preeminent military power in the IO and particularly being the fourth largest military power in the world, are the key factors of India's security dominance in the region. Added to this, making an extra regional dimension, India's historical friendship between the United States (USA), India became a member to the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), that enables India to strengthen security stance in the Indo-Pacific strategy (Rajagopalan, 2020). On one hand, China's strategic engagements with India have transcended from their historical territorial disputes and from recent times China has shifted their

⁶ The concept of '*security dilemma*' has been developed by three prominent scholars in realist traditions of security namely Herbert Butterfield, John Hetz and Robert Jervis. Some scholars find that '*security dilemma*' is the most important source of inter-state and international (military) conflicts. (See for more details Glaser, 1997).

focus more towards India due to its military progress in the Pacific Ocean. China being the third largest military power in the world and China's rapid trade networking through the 'New Maritime Silk Road' have shaped China's military developments for safeguarding its trade routes in the IO (Mohan, 2022; Samaranayake, 2019; Wakkumbura, 2018). In return, India has steadily been observant of China's military advancements in the Indian Ocean.

2.4 Littoral States and External Sovereignty

Giving the emphasis to the fourth conceptual clarification, this article employs the term 'littoral states' in its primary analysis to observe the asymmetrical power dynamics between Sri Lanka vs. India and Sri Lanka vs. China. This section unpacks geopolitics of great powers vs. littoral states (also in the capacity of a small state), which Sri Lanka stands a case study in literature of geopolitics. In general, littoral states possess distinctive qualities that make them contribute to global affairs (Singh, 2019). Such qualities are not solely the terrestrial domain, but the maritime territory, which make them vital for themselves and others. The littoral states also referred to as 'large sea states' are given recognition to its jurisdiction over waters (Are, 1996). In terms of the law of the sea, it defines the 'sea territory' under several layers of waters in recognition, such as the coastal baseline, internal waters, and territorial waters. Furthermore, the littoral state bears legal responsibility for the contiguous zone, which regulates and enable preservation of historical and archaeological objects within the sea. The coastal state grants sovereign rights to exploring, conserving and managing natural resources and conduct maritime research in the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) (Treves, 2015). Hence, the author presents the geographical positioning of Sri Lanka in the following figure, showcasing its land space and maritime borders for benefiting the argument of how a small state in the nature of a littoral state get influenced by great powers around it.

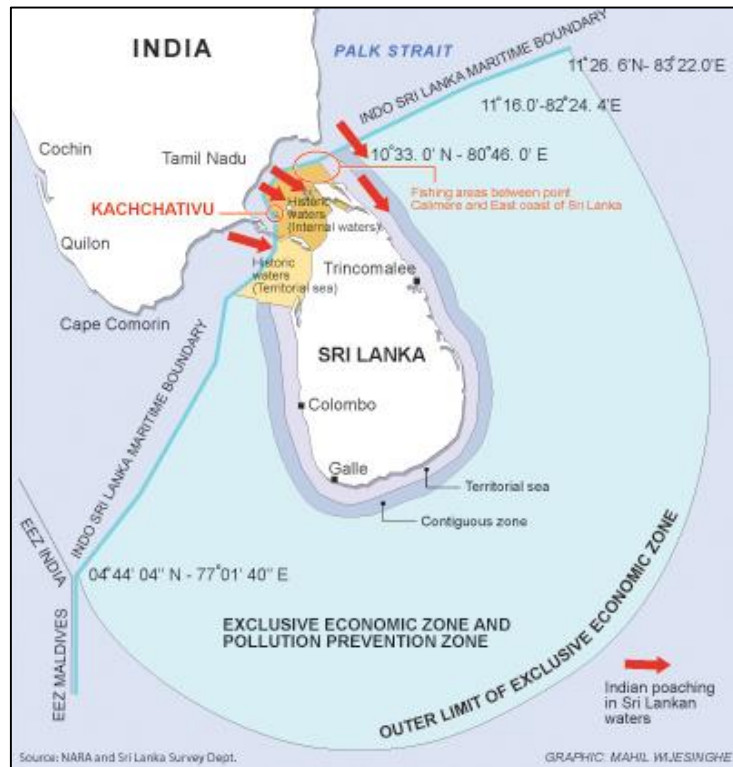


Figure 3: Maritime Borders of Sri Lanka

Note: Adopted by NARA & Sri Lanka Survey Department

In the geopolitical context, Sri Lanka is a rich resourceful island of nine times larger EEZ that carries a vital significance to its marine resources. With reference to the United Nations guiding principles of ‘sovereignty’, and the International Law provisions, Sri Lanka occupies a larger maritime zones (see the *figure 03*), seizing 200 nautical miles to its EEZ that demarcates from the Indo-Sri Lankan maritime boundary line and the historic waters of the Palk Bay. Roy-Chaudhury (1996) stated that the littoral states possess a substantial expanse of maritime sovereignty extending up to 200 nautical miles from the coastal baseline that includes their EEZ (p.3). This maritime advantage of the littoral states holds strategic significance and trade importance by rendering them highly desirable for major global powers (pp.25-26). In light of the main discussion of this paper, it becomes apparent that the location, maritime space and its closer connectivity to the Indian Ocean’s sea routes as foremost factors of its attraction that Sri Lanka become a strategic location for great powers in the IO. The following sections argue more on this.

3. India and China: current trends in their geopolitical rivalry

In the third section of this paper, the author presents a validation for the competing positions of India and China in the IOR. The rapid trade and maritime developments of the two states have become increasingly influential for littoral states in particular. In his examination, Raja Mohan (2020) stated that in the geopolitical dynamics between India and China it is noteworthy that China is enhancing maritime security to secure its BRI in the India Ocean (p.3). China has largely invested in port infrastructure in India's neighborhood making its security impetus i.e., 'String of Pearls' more stable through trade and military connectivity. Some of those vital port projects are located in Gwadar in Pakistan, Hambantota and Colombo in Sri Lanka, and Chittagong in Bangladesh. China port investments to reveal its strategic internal motives, as explained by Joshua White (2020) China enters to the Indian Ocean for its primary reason to dominate the maritime trade that reaches to global scale (pp.10-14).

3.1 India's strategic entry to the Indian Ocean

India has asserted multiple state level positions, effectively defending China's trade and maritime advancements. Confirming India's preemptive stand in the Indian Ocean security, Indian Foreign Minister, S. Jaishankar, stated during the proceedings of the Council of Foreign Relations in New York, that China's 'steady increase in naval presence' has made India to prepare for a 'far greater presence of Beijing than ever before' (*Economic Times*, 2023 September 27). India has taken number of measures, India's *de facto* engagements between the Strait of Malacca and Strait of Homuz, has been strengthened (ibid). India has implemented several strategic naval policies, such as Maritime Vision 2023, including the vision of strategising of 'blue ocean' (*Sagarmala*, Ministry of Shipping, Government of India). India being a powerful naval power, from the *Freedom of use the seas* (2007), *Sagar Policy* (2015), and current maritime strategy, *Ensuring Secure Seas* (2015) made India's military and strategic outreach in the IO and beyond. As in some of the key criticisms, a way forward to a global naval power, India's current maritime strategy is being more strategic by shifting its focus from the 'Euro-Atlantic' to the 'Indo-Pacific region' (Upadhyaya, 2019). India has reinforced its initial regional dominance through 'Neighborhood-First Policy' as well as India's maritime engagement through a very high scale regional and international maritime policy i.e., 'India Maritime Plus' policy initiative.

India's maritime security scope is vast and complex. Among some of those profoundly debated analyses, India's military calculation is seen in two key perspectives i.e., threats influencing from Pakistan on its western borders

and the developments of China on its eastern borders (Anwar, 2020). However, in the examination of India's naval presence, Raja Mohan says protection to the IO is paramount to India since China invaded Tibet in 1951 (Kaplan, 2009, p.27), that makes China's development a single striking factor for India's maritime security development. Indian leadership had always made sure that its regional political view includes strategic interest. The recent observations of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 'Look East' policy has reached to security alliances in the Pacific region. India made sure that they openly support the United States' Indo-Pacific Strategy, and being a member of the QUAD, shows its steady influence to China's presence in Indo-Pacific and also a reaction to China's presence in the IO. India also enhanced its multilateral strategic engagements with countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Myanmar. All those states are in close proximity to China, and all of them are members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). These developments have to a great extent viewed to counterbalancing China's presence in the Indian Ocean. Another major development is India's direct military engagement in its neighborhood, India's military presence in Madagascar and close ties with small islands like Seychelles, Mauritius, Sri Lanka and Maldives. Such developments reveal India's military vigilance in the IOR.

3.2 China's steadiness in the IOR

While debating India's maritime developments, one can argue about China's competing strategic entry to 'near borders' envisaging through its 'Belt Road Initiative' and 'New Maritime Silk Road', the so called 'soft power' approach in China's foreign affairs. Examining a seminal work, Robert D. Kaplan (2009) on the Indian Ocean geopolitics presented under the title of *Center Stage for Twenty-First Century: Power plays in the Indian Ocean* mentioned the following:

More than a geographic feature, the Indian Ocean is also an idea. It combines the centrality of Islam with global energy politics and the rise of India and China to reveal a multilayered, multipolar world. The dramatic economic growth of India and China has been duly noted, but the equally dramatic military ramifications of this development have not. India's and China's great-power aspirations, as well as their quests for energy security, have compelled the two countries to redirect their gazes from land to the seas (Kaplan, 2009, p.17)

Competition between India and China has extended beyond events to the major geopolitical discussions in the IO. Kaplan's views highlighted the compelling reasons behind India and China maritime dominance. Kaplan (2009) articulated these rationales as being ensnared primarily within the realm of trade and commerce, and secondarily within the sphere of maritime security. China engages in balancing its focus on maritime engagements in order to protect its sea routes used for trade. Shinn (2023), in his recent examination spoke about China's steadiness to protect sea trade corridors running through the Indian Ocean. It is numerically correct when considering what China imports. China imports the largest amount of oil from the Persian Gulf region, whereas, China-Africa trade has reached to USD 282 billion in 2022 and continued to grow. White (2020) examining China's 'grand strategy' made his claim that China is considering Indian Ocean as its secondary theater of performance (pp.3-4). Such events, processes and facts already formed a definitive evaluation of China's interest in the Indian Ocean.

4. Sri Lanka: littoral state and its external sovereignty

The present case study on Sri Lanka delves into significant advancements within India and China's geopolitical realm. The paper unpacks the question of to what extent and to which character do India and China exert influence over Sri Lanka and whether or not India and China limit Sri Lanka exercising of its external sovereignty. This paper outlines two recent developments for close examination i.e., the investments made by India and China in Sri Lanka's ports in particular, and their influence on Sri Lanka's maritime security space.

Starting off with the political speech, at the very recent high level diplomatic meeting, Sri Lanka affirmed for its commitment to 'peaceful relations' in the Indian Ocean. President Wickremesinghe expressed these views at the heads of the state meeting with Premier of China, Xi Jinping attending the 10th Anniversary of the Belt Road Forum. Premier Xi Jinping stated China's support to Sri Lanka as a 'willingness without political condition' (*The Island*, 2023, October 17). Despite the two states' cordial ties and expression, scholarly criticisms raise over Sri Lanka's actual diplomatic standpoint thrives its independent decision-making and whether or not Sri Lanka gains a win-win situation in China-Sri Lanka trade and diplomatic stances. This paper delves into questioning this situation by citing recent diplomatic setbacks. This scenario views on Sri Lanka's limited space about independent decision making over its waters. The explanation begins with Chinese research vessel Shi-Yan 6 entering to Colombo Port. India insisted that Sri Lanka should deny its permission to dock the ship in Colombo port, while Sri Lanka promised to remain on India's side and later changed its position by permitting the Chinese Shi-Yan 6 to dock in its waters.

Setting the background of historical bilateral ties, India and Sri Lanka have a longstanding relationship that dates back over 2500 years (Ministry of External Affairs, India). Given the close geographical proximity of the two countries, India has always regarded Sri Lanka as an integral part of its security framework (Destradi & Plagemman, 2012). On the other hand, China and Sri Lanka have had trade connections since the first century AD and their diplomatic ties have firmed with the 1952 Rubber-Rice Pact and the two countries continued their close bilateral affairs. China has surpassed India in year 2011 to become Sri Lanka's largest bilateral trading partner (Wignaraja et.al, 2020). China has already invested USD 12.1 billion during the period of 2006-2019, making it the highest bilateral investor in Sri Lanka (ibid). Infrastructural investments at Sri Lanka's strategic locations, that is, Colombo and Hambantota ports and the Port City investment have enabled China's BRI to be possible through the Indian Ocean (Brewster, 2015; Hassan, 2019), so that China's mega investment plan becomes an active execution in Sri Lanka.

With China's trade and maritime ties with Sri Lanka, India's watchdog policy became apparent, and Sri Lanka frequently became a target for India's vigilance in the southern ocean space. It can be often noted that India's views on Sri Lanka-China relations under its strategic calculation, India appeared to be vigilant in almost all of Sri Lanka's activities with China. With Sri Lanka's recent economic collapse, a deliberate discourse has opened up on whether Sri Lanka should choose India or China. India taking the first step in Sri Lanka's debt recovery process offering USD 4 billion credit, opened the room for Sri Lanka to receiving a credibility towards claiming the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) bailout of USD 3.2 billion (Gupta, 2023). Certain criticisms made a point that India and Sri Lanka entered a new phase of firm diplomatic ties. This was also viewed as a diplomatic turning point of Sri Lanka strengthening its bilateral ties with India. India was fast to highlight five key domains of bilateral cooperation including infrastructure, air connectivity, energy and power connectivity, trade and economic and people to people connectivity (East Asia Forum, 2023 August 2) at the meeting of President Ranil Wickremesinghe with Prime Minister Narendra Modi held in July 2023. In this occasion, India has endorsed its policies in favor of global South-South cooperation initiative, and viewed bilateral support to Sri Lanka in strengthening of 'Neighborhood-First Policy'. This paper delves into the two case scenarios:

4.1 Sri Lanka is meeting a competing interests on foreign investments to port development

Under the present literature on India and China geopolitical developments in the Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka has gained a significant traction. There are diverse local and international scholarly views on Sri Lanka's future in the hands of geopolitical rivalry of great powers. Attanayake and Ranjan (2022) say that Sri Lanka has effectively navigated its relationship with both India and China over the last decade, however, requires 'increased caution' in the country's foreign policy measures for future interactions (p.112). Wignaraja et al. (2020) acclaim the trade connections between Sri Lanka and China, revealing the potential risks of falling into China's 'debt trap' (p.2). Whereas, examining the intersection of foreign policy and governance, Colombage (2019) former Secretary to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sri Lanka stated that the presidential election in 2015 was a turning point that concluded former President Mahinda Rajapaksa's pro-China mega investment projects, and Sri Lanka gradually turning to India. Whereas, there are examinations highlighting Sri Lanka's 'strategic concerns' in the Indian Ocean that leaves Sri Lanka an foreign policy option of 'balancing' and or 'heading' ties with their allies (Ranjan & Senevirathna 2022; Vidanage, 2023). The examinations of this nature elicit significant apprehension on Sri Lanka's diplomatic efficacy in dealing with the great powers in the region and in particular with India and China.

There exist two key perspectives among many local and international scholars in their analyses of the ties between Sri Lanka and China. One perspective supports the notion that China's bilateral ties and investments are strengthening the cooperation. In fact, such ties also strategically position China's soft power approach, which holds China's 'non-interference' over another state's sovereignty. Conversely, the other perspective highlights the adverse consequences of China's trade involvement, particularly in relation to overloading with Chinese loans and in some cases it is referred as China's 'debt trap diplomacy' (Jones & Hameiri, 2020). The paper has been prompted by several significant recent events to explore the case further, whether Sri Lanka can exert its external sovereignty amidst the heightened influence of China.

There is no doubt about China's steady attraction to Sri Lanka and China has continued ties with Sri Lanka during United Peoples Freedom Government (UNFPA) since 2005, *Yahapalana* (Good Governance) government in 2015, government under Gotabaya Rajapaksa in 2019, and the interim government under President Ranil Wickremesinghe since 2022. However, making the choices much more cautious, in the face of geopolitical tension between India

and China, Sri Lanka entered to a phase of ‘diplomatic-dilemma’ making a situation amidst of fear and risk leading for ties between not only with China but also India, or one can argue dealings that both states in a ‘balance’ is prudent. However, can Sri Lanka envisage a ‘balanced’ diplomatic ties to manage the two great powers? In the current situation, the trade investments declared over Sri Lanka’s port infrastructural development explicate Sri Lanka’s exposure to difficult diplomatic negotiations. It can be realised that these great powers have now achieved a considerable stake on Sri Lanka’s ports. China’s BRI has led the initial investment in the Hambantota port in 2007 followed by the Colombo port in 2011. China also facilitated the creation of the Colombo International Container Terminal (CICT) and no later made itself the biggest investor of the Port City project in 2014. China-Sri Lanka ties gained a momentum, in their port infrastructural projects which also naturally holds the claim for Sri Lanka’s maritime space. For China, these developments are paying a way towards ‘China Dream’ on being the global superpower in maritime trade and conquering of China’s trade routes in the Indian Ocean. During his visit to Sri Lanka in September 2014, Chinese Premier Xi Jinping articulated the notion of a ‘strategic partnership’ and ‘in-depth development’ which signified China’s security impetus over trade affairs (Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in Sri Lanka).

Compared to China, India had been waiting for a long time until 2015 to be a realistic competitor to China’s large scale port investments in Sri Lanka. President Maithripala Sirisena made his first official visit to India in February 2015 and in return Prime Minister Narendra Modi became the first head of state to visit Sri Lanka during *Yahapalana* government in March 2015. The two visits made another turning point in Sri Lanka’s foreign policy strategy, questioning Sri Lanka’s pro-China foreign affairs executed under President Mahinda Rajapaksa since 2005. However, welcoming India was not that all quick and it aroused plenty of domestic political debates. One of the other crucial criticisms raised in the public concerns was Sri Lanka’s position over ‘Colombo Port dilemma’ (Moorthy, 2022) which led the government of Sri Lanka to lend one part to China and another to India. The setting has created a political unrest and Rajapaksas in the government as the President the Prime Minister in 2019 has to unilaterally cancel the India’s East Container Terminal (ECT) agreement due to such political unrest. As per some claims, unlike China, India’s port deal was characterised by a rigorous negotiation process. India being the single country generating two thirds of the cargo transshipments to Colombo Port, has to impose its interest to invest not only in the Colombo Port but also in Trincomalee port and had to go through tough political negotiations for arriving at a deal. Following numerous efforts under several months, Sri Lanka entered into a joint venture with India and Japan

through a build-operate-transfer (BOT) agreement for the construction of the East Container Terminal (ECT) at the Colombo Port in May 2019. The construction was started in November 2022 (Sri Lanka Export Development Board).

The current context is crucial. Sri Lanka allocating the ports' investments to China and India posed a severe question about Sri Lanka's sovereign decision-making and choice between two competing great powers. Some criticisms have offered views regarding Sri Lanka's port agreement between India and China, characterising it as a perilous endeavor (Woods, 2022). There are several reasoning such as the Colombo Port serves as the main source of income to Sri Lanka now under the deal of offering its revenue to China and India. This scenario is more conscious in terms of strategic foresight when both India and China have entered to a naval competition in the Indian Ocean. Sri Lanka had already transferred responsibility for the port construction to China Merchant Port Holding and thus they received an 85% share in the Colombo International Container Terminal (CICT) and the 99-year lease of the Hambantota Port in 2019. India gained a hold of 49% of the East Container Terminal (ECT) and India has signed the New Framework Agreement on the Trincomalee oil tank farms in January 2022 and the great power neighbor claims to have 'big plans in Trincomalee' (Mehta, 2023, August 12). Examining this further, Mehta points out the strategic importance of the Trincomalee harbor⁷ to India, as it can be developed to an integral part of India's Indo-Pacific strategy (ibid). These projects thus tend to open a space for far serious security and strategic implications that trade benefits may be far more difficult to handle than what Sri Lanka gain out of development. The scholars and think-tank bodies already made their views on Sri Lanka entering to a strategic calculation of regional and extra-regional states and the island nation being vulnerable in geopolitical tension (Attanayake & Ranjan, 2022; Esteban, 2018).

4.2 Sri Lanka: waving through the maritime security competition

The second case narrative directs on India and China involvement is maritime security advancements in the Indian Ocean. This paper possess several more scholarly examinations to refer. There are vast amount of literature on IOR and the regional stability against India and China maritime competition. Such changes gradually evading the notion of Indian Ocean

⁷ Trincomalee harbor being the largest natural harbors in the world and geographic positioning to the east of the Indian Ocean, embraces a high value for India that this investment project directly can be seized within India's strategic perspective, thus affording significant leverage in future security and defense purposes. (See more details <https://www.voanews.com/a/india-investment-sri-lanka-trincomalee-port/3826456.html>).

being recognised as the ‘zone of peace’ (Sheliya & Joshi, 2019). In his examination Frankel (2011) stated that the ‘mutual suspicion’ over India and China has led them in the next stage of maritime rivalry. Thus, they would aim arms build ups. How have these causes been stiffened over a further escalation of India and China maritime rivalry? India has already embarked its position in the region as a powerful naval power. In particular, India has gone an extra mile towards ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy’ by showing its military interest in favor of the USA, and the western led anti-China security endeavor. Due to some of other critical security reasons that are emerging in the current context, such as piracy, sea-terrorism, illegal trade and drugs smuggling, India’s naval force has taken precautionary measures independently and jointly to maintain its naval readiness in the Indian Ocean. The same vulnerabilities and threats have become serious ramifications to China, in which its sea trading is at a very high increase. It appears that China operates independently when it comes to naval advancements in the Indian Ocean, even with regards to non-military and non-traditional security concerns. China’s Military Strategy White Paper published in 2015 stated that China ‘notably access to Africa and Persian Gulf’ for trading and hold ‘blue water’ strategic and economic safeguarding initiatives enables Chinese naval presence through the ‘New Maritime Silk Road’ (Eastasiaforum.org). In China’s strategic presence in the South Asian region, it has gone through number of strategic policy establishments such as ‘India Encirclement Policy’⁸, whereby China initiated a series of infrastructural projects with India’s neighbors. Such developments of China strike directly over the security of India on the one hand and the Indian Ocean which has a large ocean space on the other hand. India has consistently perceived China’s engagements in the IO as ‘debatable’.

Regarding Sri Lanka in particular, a number of incidents over the past few years show that it has reached a point where Sri Lanka is compelled to appease great powers in the region. Taking into account some of the previously explained incidents in the ports development and hardline criticisms in politics, there is a discussion whether Hambantota Port will become China’s next foreign naval base. In the context of the naval developments of great powers in the IO, Sri Lanka would then naturally enter to a difficult phase by dealing with India and China. Making note of some of other crucial incidents, Sri Lanka had to grant permission for a Chinese submarine and a warship to

⁸ China’s ‘India Encirclement Policy’ directly deals with the IOR and Indian Sub-continent in particular, a firm policy of China countering India in the Indo-Pacific strategy. The ‘India Encirclement Policy’ has captured some of the strongest allies of India for trade their dependency with China i.e., China-Bangladesh, China-Nepal, China-Sri Lanka, China-Maldives and China-Pakistan. See for more details: <https://dras.in/chinas-encirclement-policy-implications-for-india/>

dock at Colombo Port in 2014 and as viewed by India ‘this triggers a security risk’ in the region (Rupasinghe, 2014) and India invariably intervene to such engagements. In later years, China has gifted a military ship P 625 to Sri Lanka. China-Sri Lanka trade ties naturally opened up naval cooperation and there were number of times on which Chinese research vessels carrying intelligence equipment and spy technology arrived in Sri Lanka’s coast. Some reports show that there were more than 19 Chinese research vessels that have reached Sri Lanka since 2017 (Farzan, August 17, 2023).

Turning the insight into India, who is also considered as Sri Lanka’s historic naval ally, it is currently in the stand to foster stronger naval ties with Sri Lanka. India showed its interest on a durable strategic maritime developments with Sri Lanka in the recent time. In the case of India’s investment plans to Trincomalee, India expressed its intentions of making substantial investments in Sri Lanka’s eastern port (Mehta, 2023, August 12) which is already under careful scholarly scrutiny. India has commenced a ferry service in October 2023 connecting Nagapattim in Tamil Nadu and Kankesanthurai in Jaffna and for the first time the two closest neighbors ignoring Tamil Nadu political intervention to Sri Lankan Tamils in the Northern Province. The Sri Lankan government has thus far given priority to the opportunistic aspect of this interstate ferry service. The ferry service shows India’s intention for larger scale sea connectivity and the approval of political willingness. Taking an advantageous step over Sri Lanka from recent political and economic changes, it seems that India is proactive in trade and naval cooperation with its southern neighbor.

5. Conclusion

This paper presented a qualitative case study examining Sri Lanka in the geopolitical rivalry between India and China, and it has a potential to be more concerning in future. The paper examines the geopolitical reality of Mahan’s ‘Sea Power Theory’ in which great powers are in accumulation of maritime dominance and Kaplan’s geopolitics of the IOR, where India and China have engaged in a fierce rivalry for trade and military developments. The aforementioned discussion provides an important proof of increased influence of India and China on littoral states like Sri Lanka which face trade, maritime and diplomatic dilemma situation when deciding on its own position (Sri Lanka is also in the small state nature with low amount of military capabilities, no military interest outside the territory) Further, their decision-making power is challenged, where they are either driven by fear or risking their authority over resources in the demanding interests of great powers. It is also noted that there is a tough situation on Sri Lanka’s external sovereignty due to India’s

influence over 'India-First' choice and China's BRI in trade development. Sri Lanka gradually moves itself in a situation of 'diplomatic deadlock': already limiting its bargaining power to the ownership to ports and port investments revenue. Sri Lanka, mindful of its strategic significance and willingly offering its strategic locations for crucial foreign investments, made the island nation arriving at a more careful phase of relinquishing its external ties, in particular the two competing states, India and China in closeness. According to the two case scenarios i.e., foreign investments on port development and advancing maritime security, Sri Lanka depicts a clear diplomatic failures that push the island nation towards regional geopolitical tension. Since the prospects and the issues around the geopolitical rivalry of India and China are still being evolving, and there is still a growing space for many other critical developments, Sri Lanka in particular should be prudent for more outstanding policy initiatives and action and this paper intentionally leaves room for further conclusions.

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