

The Security Dilemma of Sri Lanka in Sino-Indian Rivalry

Nujhat Amina Jarin¹



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Introduction

The South Asian region has strategic importance due to its geopolitical location. There has been a rivalry between India and China to establish a strategic foothold in this region. Despite Sri Lanka being a small island state, it has immense geopolitical importance as it is situated near the critical maritime sea lanes that connect Asia with Europe and Africa.² Sri Lanka could become crucial to

¹ Nujhat Amina Jarin is a Research Intern at the Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS). She completed her BSS (honors) from the Department of International Relations, BUP, and is continuing her MSS in the same department and university.

² Bruce Vaughn, "Every CRS Report - Everycrsreport.Com," https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20170104_R44731_f8d707ba3753b82504c4d464feb989797ee4d81d.pdf.

competition and geopolitical rivalry between China and India. As India is the regional hegemon of South Asia, China's increasing influence is a security threat to India.

China sees this region as a trump card for its strategy to gain global influence and rise as a hegemon.³ To achieve this goal, creating influence over Sri Lanka is crucial, as Sri Lanka is one of the precious pearls of China's string of pearls. Though India is the closest neighbor of Sri Lanka, and they share an ancient history and a friendly relationship, Sri Lanka has recently developed closer ties with China. Sri Lanka's history with India and this attention towards Sri Lanka because of competition between regional hegemon creates a security dilemma, and the current political situation might fuel the problem.

This paper is an initiative to explore and analyze the security of Sri Lanka in the Great Game between India and China. It will mainly focus on the security challenges Sri Lanka will face to maintain a balanced relationship with these two economic giants. It will also discuss the challenges China and India face in increasing influence on Sri Lanka to check and balance the power distribution among themselves.

Sri Lanka: A “Precious Jewel”

Sri Lanka is strategically important because of its geopolitical location. It is situated near one of the most important sea routes in the world. This sea route connects the Persian Gulf of the Middle East and Europe with an Asian resourceful economy.⁴ Because of its geopolitical location, it is very important to the regional powers. Hence, Sri Lanka finds itself in a power struggle with the hegemon. Its complicated historical background with India and recent development of relations with China has put Sri Lanka in a security dilemma. China and India are rising economies and are determined to establish their influence over the South Asian region. Though Sri Lanka had historical ties of thousands of years with India, relations with China are improving due to economic support and investments. Sri Lanka struggles to balance between two regional hegemon, and the

³ David J. Karl, “Sri Lanka, the Maritime Silk Road, and Sino-Indian Relations,” *China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative and South Asia*, 2017, 137–72, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-5239-2_6.

⁴ Bruce Vaughn, “Every CRS Report - Everycrsreport.Com,” https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20170104_R44731_f8d707ba3753b82504c4d464feb989797ee4d81d.pdf, accessed September 7, 2023.

Difficult historical background with India and the recent development of relations with China creates a grave security dilemma for Sri Lanka.



Source: Jagran Josh

Sri Lanka's Relation with India

Sri Lanka and India have shared a relatively close historical, cultural, and religious link for a long time. Mahatma Gandhi used the metaphor of Sri Lanka as India's "daughter state" to describe the relationship between the two countries.⁵ The ethnic composition of Sri Lanka and India is very similar, creating a complicated situation regarding the Tamil people. Tamil people of both have similar religions, languages, and cultures. There is also the issue of the border crisis in Sri Lanka. Following the signing of the India-Lanka Treaty in 1987, India became involved in the counterinsurgency against the LTTE. Between 1987 and 1990, India lost approximately 1,200 soldiers in this fight.⁶ An LTTE suicide bomber assassinated Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991. President Sirisena's first international trip as President to New Delhi in February 2015, as well as

⁵ Manoharan, N. "Brothers, Not Friends." *South Asian Survey* 18, no. 2 (September 1, 2011): 225–36. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0971523113513370>.

⁶ Manoharan, N. "Brothers, Not Friends."

the visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, strengthened the friendship between Sri Lanka and India.⁷



Source: Hindustan Times

The basis of threat perceptions and suspicions that Sri Lanka and India have towards each other creates a security dilemma for Sri Lanka.

The Ethnic composition:

Most Sri Lankans' culture, language, and religion are similar to the population of India. Tamil is spoken in Tamil Nadu and northern Sri Lanka. At the same time, Sinhala is related to north Indian vernaculars such as Hindustani, Marathi, Gujarathi, and Bengali. People of both states' border areas are very similar to each other. Though Sinhalese are the majority community in Sri Lanka compared to Tamils, they share a minority complex with Tamils in Tamil Nadu, India. These two factors have influenced Sri Lankan points of view and the course of events in both countries. On

⁷ Gassaway, Cory N. "A Diamond in the String of Pearls: The Strategic Importance of Sri Lanka for Indian Ocean Regional Stability." *ResearchGate*, May 4, 2011. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/235056881_A_Diamond_in_the_String_of_Pearls_The_Strategic_Importance_of_Sri_Lanka_for_Indian_Ocean_Regional_Stability.

the other hand, India cannot ignore the concerns expressed by its Tamil population about the Sri Lankan government's treatment of its Tamil population.⁸

Because of this, India has always sought to influence the Sri Lankan government to reduce the country's national threat. This Indian influence creates a security dilemma for Sri Lanka. When the country is in political turmoil, this security threat grew more dangerous.

A direct threat to territorial integrity

India is a massive country in terms of territory, economy, and population compared to Sri Lanka. This situation naturally creates a direct threat to Sri Lanka. India does not perceive an immediate threat to India's sovereignty from Sri Lanka. Still, it is concerned that if China becomes an ally of Sri Lanka and gains a foothold, it might be a security threat to India. In addition, the island nation's place in India's naval defense perceptions is an important issue when dealing with the security perceptions of India's other immediate neighbors, which is interestingly not an important aspect when dealing with Sri Lanka's security.⁹

Terrorism and insurgencies:

Sri Lanka and India have a history of ethnic clashes as both countries treat their minority negatively. There are active non-state actors in both countries. Because of historical clashes, different interest groups have been created, and they are a massive threat to both countries.¹⁰ Sri Lanka is going through a difficult time politically. In this context, it creates a grave security dilemma for Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka's Relation with China

China intends to gain ground in the Indian Ocean region to maintain its integrated economic development and military expansion strategy. China is investing across the subcontinent to strengthen its position in critical commercial and military waters. Though Sri Lanka's bilateral

⁸Gassaway, Cory N. "A Diamond in the String of Pearls: The Strategic Importance of Sri Lanka for Indian Ocean Regional Stability."

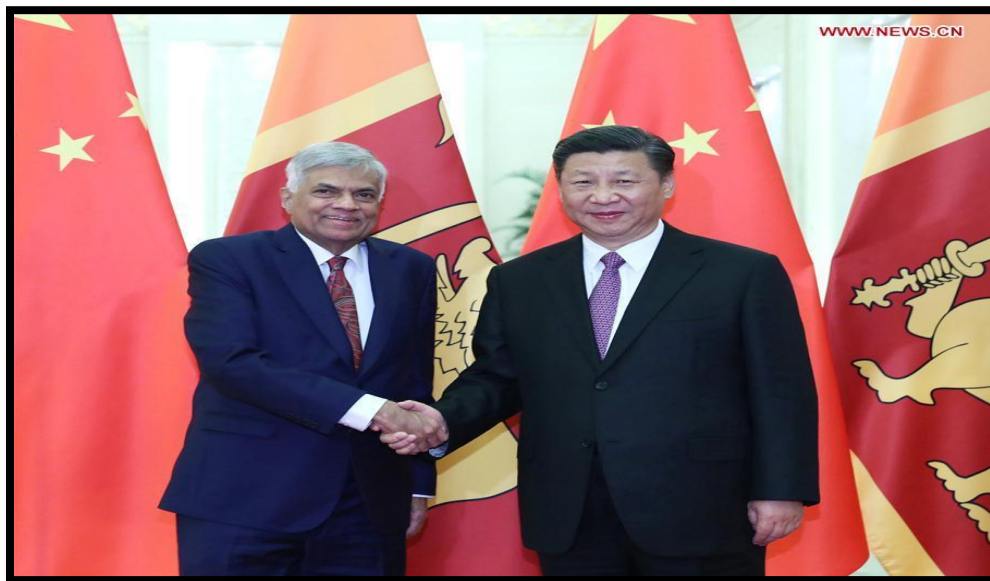
⁹ ibid

¹⁰ Aryasinha, Ravinatha. "Terrorism, the LTTE and the Conflict in Sri Lanka." *Conflict, Security & Development* 1, no. 02 (April 1, 2001): 25–50. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14678800100590607>.

relationship with China is not as old as with India, the relationship is developing expeditiously. As China rises, Sri Lanka is a crucial piece of China's plans.

China intends to construct the modern Silk Road, an infrastructure project that will link China's mainland to the port of Sudan in the Horn of Africa and Europe. The Silk Road passes through several significant straits, including the Bab el Mandeb Strait, which connects the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. The Malacca Strait connects the Malay peninsula to the Indonesian island of Sumatra. The Persian Gulf's Strait of Hormuz and the Strait of Lombok.¹¹ However, Colombo, Sri Lanka's commercial capital, is one of the significant maritime checkpoints on China's Silk Road. So, Sri Lanka is known as one of the most precious pearls in “the string of pearls” of China.

Prime Minister Wickremesinghe visited China in April 2016, where Sri Lanka and China issued a joint statement. The two countries declared their commitment to "mutually beneficial cooperation" and their "willingness to maintain close relations between the two countries in defense" in the statement. Sri Lanka has also "reiterated its active participation in China's Belt and Road Initiative."¹²



Source: China Daily

¹¹ Wang, Zhen, and Feng Ye. "China–Sri Lanka Relations in the Context of the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road: Motives, Challenges, and Prospects." *Asian Perspective* 43, no. 3 (2019): 481-503. doi:10.1353/apr.2019.0020.

¹² Gassaway, Cory N. "A Diamond in the String of Pearls :The Strategic Importance of Sri Lanka for Indian Ocean Regional Stability."

Case study: The Hambantota Seaport

As mentioned before, because of Sri Lanka's strategic importance, it is crucial for China to influence Sri Lanka. Hambantota is known for the debt-trap diplomacy of China. China has invested over 6 billion dollars in the Hambantota seaport, but it has become a security dilemma for Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka took this colossal loan from China but could not service the loan to China because of its inefficient profit. Sri Lanka could not pay the debt to China, so the port was handed over to China for 99 years in 2017.¹³

Having a port under the control of another powerful country threatens national security. Though China has not yet set up a formal military base in Hambantota, that does not mean it will not. In that case, it will be a massive security threat for Sri Lanka. India will not take it positively to have an enemy naval base so near to its homeland, which will also create problems for Sri Lanka.



Source: Economic Next

¹³ Gangte, Lammuaniam. "The Debt-Trap Diplomacy Revisited." *Artha Journal of Social Sciences* 19, no. 2 (April 1, 2020): 53–66. <https://doi.org/10.12724/ajss.53.4>.

India-China rivalry regarding Sri Lanka

India and China are trying to establish their influence over Sri Lanka to maintain the balance of power in the Indian Ocean. Sri Lanka's closeness towards China regarding trade, investment, and cooperation is a significant concern for analysts. India fears the rise of Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean region will increase. India is concerned about Sri Lanka allowing Chinese warships and submarines to dock at the port of Sri Lanka. Moreover, China's frequent visit to Sri Lanka has become a concern for India. However, India has expressed their concern about this matter in a non-aggressive way. India has always been an investor in Sri Lanka, but in recent years, China has started to invest in Sri Lanka's economic and infrastructure development. The involvement of China naturally raises concern for India as it is clear now China is trying to increase its influence in the South Asian region.¹⁴

A 1987 agreement between India and Sri Lanka stated that their territories would not be used for activities jeopardizing the other's unity, integrity, and security. However, India has recently expressed concern about the possibility of an aircraft maintenance facility being built in Trincomalee, an eastern port city that India regards as a strategic location in terms of national security. Colombo is changing course, reopening a stalled port project, and identifying Beijing as the front-runner for a planned special economic zone. India is concerned about losing control of Sri Lanka, while China's advance into the Indian Ocean and the likelihood of dual-purpose civilian-military provision in Sri Lanka is causing concern elsewhere.¹⁵

Conclusion

Over the last few decades, the strategic importance of the South Asian region has increased immensely. As China rises as an economic giant and continues to spread its influence over the Indian Ocean, the South Asian region has become a center of attraction for global powers. Sri Lanka is a valuable state due to its geopolitical location. Though China claims its rise as a peaceful economic rise, it is clear that China plans to establish itself as a hegemon. To achieve its goal,

¹⁴ Brewster, David. "An Indian Ocean Dilemma: Sino-Indian Rivalry and China's Strategic Vulnerability in the Indian Ocean." *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 11, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 48–59. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2014.994822>.

¹⁵ Sirilal, Shihar Aneez Ranga. "Chinese Submarine Docks in Sri Lanka despite Indian Concerns." *U.S.*, November 2, 2014. <https://www.reuters.com/article/sri-lanka-china-submarine-idINKBN0IM0LU20141102>.

China sees Sri Lanka as its trump card. India is concerned about the increasing Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean. The regional hegemon wants to increase its influence over Sri Lanka to achieve its motive. This situation creates a significant security dilemma for Sri Lanka. It leaves Sri Lanka with no choice but to balance India and China.