

# Sri Lanka between Geopolitical Interests of China and India

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**Abstract-***Sri Lanka has become a point of interest in the Indian Ocean in the 21<sup>st</sup> century due to her geo-strategically attractive position. Precisely, the pearl of the Indian Ocean is now in dilemma due to the conflicting interests of rising powers of Asia; India and China. India is the mighty neighbour lying nearest to Sri Lanka. Both countries have had crucial relationships from the past days. For India, Sri Lanka can impact on India's strategic and security interests. Thus India is reluctant to the presence of another major power like China in Sri Lanka. On the contrary, Sri Lanka lying on one of the busiest sea routes has attained the economic companionship of China. As a result eventually Sri Lanka had to encompass into the power politics within these countries.*

*India and China are the largest countries in the world when it comes to population. According to Revision of World Population Prospects (2015), India with approximately 1.24 billion people in 2014, and China 1.39 billion of people in 2014 covers together 36.41% of total population of the world. Even when it comes to global power politics both these countries are considered great powers in global politics.*

*The paper will provide a discussion on Sri Lanka approach to balance good ties between these two regional superpowers. The objective of this study is to assess the importance of support given by both India and China. Information in this regard will be derived from secondary sources i.e. reference of text books, electronic data bases, journals, etc. Most importantly the paper will propose that this location of Sri Lanka has a great advantage towards the country's successful development if professionally used.*

**Keywords-India, China, Geopolitics, Sri Lanka**

## I. INTRODUCTION

Kaplan describes Sri Lanka as a geo- strategic hub in the Indian Ocean as most international business supply will be conducted through this route. This undermines the significance of the Island Nation falls under the mighty Indian Ocean. The independent Sri Lanka retained with the policy of non-alignment ensuring protection and survival from other major state players in the game. Prime Minister Sirimavo in one of her speeches stated, "Underlying the policy of non-alignment is the belief that independent nations, although small and militarily weak, have a positive role to play in the world today. This attitude is completely different from that of washing our

hands of these matters, which was perhaps the idea behind the classical theory of neutralism. That was non-involvement — remaining in splendid isolation. There is, Hon. Senators would agree, a world of difference between this and non-alignment." (Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike on Sri Lanka's Non-aligned Foreign Policy, speech given to the Senate on 23 January 1964) Therefore the implications made by this speech were as, though Sri Lanka was nonaligned, she did not play the role of a neutral state. Despite that, Sri Lanka had close ties with India from the ancient times and both countries shares common values. At present Sri Lanka is known to be the India's second largest trading partner in SAARC and India in turn is Sri Lanka's largest trade partner globally.

On the other hand, Sri Lanka's ties with China has made drastic developments on the country's economy. With China bilaterally developing strategic ports dotted across the region, the project has concerns on Sri Lanka's Hambantota harbor linked to the string of pearls in the Indian Ocean. Given that the string of pearls includes other port as Chittagong, Marao, etc. Hambantota harbor will be the most influential in economic development of the region for its proximate location in the strategic Indian Ocean East-West shipping arterial. Taking Hambantota as a key port in the string of pearls, China intends to secure its place in the Indian Ocean to expand their interests.

One of the important questions raised here is that China having invested in the Western countries throughout the past year is now turning towards the Asian countries to invest. China's ties with the island nation is mainly based on soft power diplomacy. It is assumed that Currently, Chinese companies are involved in a number of infrastructure, communication and port development projects which enhance the strategic importance of Sri Lanka funded by Chinese bank loans. These include the Hambantota port project Phase-I completed at a cost of \$360 million and 85% financed by the Chinese. (Colombo Telegraph, 2013). The Mattala Rajapaksa International Airport near Hambantota built at an estimated cost of \$ 210 million completed in March 2013. The Colombo South Container terminal built by a joint venture company in which China Merchant Holdings Company holds 85% share makes Colombo Port complex one of the biggest in the world. Moreover greater attention has been paid over the Chinese deals to build telecommunication and information technology networks in Sri Lanka as the Nelum Kuluna (Lotus Tower) project. It is stated that Lotus

Tower will facilitate the transmission of signals of 50 TV Channels and over 35 FM Radio Stations with (TRC, 2014). The said constructions led by the investments of China would be a great leap forward for Sri Lanka's development.

However India despise Sri Lanka's relationship with China. India has led to predictions that the Lotus tower would increase China's options to espionage on Indian military and Indian Ocean communication and to carry out electronic warfare. Nevertheless, later it was published in Hindustani Times, Karunasena Kodituwakku, the Sri Lankan ambassador to China, had told media persons that Colombo will not allow China to set up a military facility at any port in the country. Further Chinese investors have also been informed that no civilian facility will be allowed to be used militarily so as to prevent befall of any complicated situation.

#### A. China's geopolitical ambitions

In geopolitical terms Sri Lanka falls within the politics of China. According to the maritime strategist Alfred Mahan, 'Whoever controls the Indian Ocean will dominate Asia; the destiny of the world will be decided on its waters.' (Tamil Nation, 2007) China with the motive of taking control over the Indian Ocean is engaging with development projects in Sri Lanka whose strategic position in the Indian Ocean. The proposed 21<sup>st</sup> century silk route is a diplomatic initiative taken to keep closer ties with South Asian countries, and Sri Lanka will act as the hub that connects Asia and Africa. Thus China's goal to create a Sino-centric Asia is gradually achieved through strategic cooperative partnership with other Asian states.

China has become persuasive during the past years. They have now economically empowered passing US. With the decline of global economic output by United States, China's contribution has risen every year. China had not only increased her economic engagement but also the military engagement. Particularly where China's navy expanding its defensive power throughout artificial islands in the South China Sea unveils her interest in dominating the Oceans. In addition, China's concerns over cyber warfare has escalated with the years and at present China plays an active role in cyber espionage which has become a threat to the regional politics. Targeting cyber-attacks on Hong Kong government agencies before the city's first legislative election is one incident which China was alleged of involving.

#### B. China's geopolitical interest towards Sri Lanka

China is the world's largest economy by purchasing power parity terms and at the same time the largest trader in the world. China now will be the next great super power challenging the dominance of US. Moreover they are in their extreme level of economy. To develop their economy they must enhance the investment and the trade actions with the third world. Thus it will be an enormous opportunity for Sri Lanka with Chinese ongoing projects.

China has proposed two main projects; 21st century maritime silk route and the land route. Sri Lanka is going to be a big part of this maritime silk route. Therefore it is very important to Sri Lanka as it gives ample of opportunities.



Figure 1. A map of Indian Ocean with sea routes

China's Defence Minister General Liang Guanglie visit's Sri Lanka in August 2012 was kept at a low profile. However, the Chinese press release on the visit was a little more explicit. It quoted General Liang as saying that political trust between the two countries had deepened with the rapid expansion of exchanges and cooperation in various fields. He expressed the hope that the two sides would continue to work hard to maintain the close and friendly relations and strengthen exchanges and cooperation in the field of non-traditional security and improve the ability to respond to crisis together, so as contribute to regional peace, stability and development.

As revival of Tamil separatist insurgency in Sri Lanka appears remote, Sri Lankan armed forces training for such security situations would give them the option of working with Chinese military assistance in such an eventuality. China's active military cooperation in Sri Lanka, literally in India's 'backyard', would complicate India's security situation.

#### C. India's geopolitical ambition

India's economy is projected to reach the No. 3 spot by 2020 according to some analysts and metrics. It is said that India will surpass Japan, and trailing only China (No. 1) and the U.S. (No. 2). Not only economically but India has also aimed in expanding its land area, especially where India annexed by capturing Sikkim in 1975. Especially India is highly focused on keeping SAARC countries under her reach except for Pakistan. The diplomatic tension between India and Pakistan even made India to boycott the 19<sup>th</sup> SAARC summit which was originally planned to host in Islamabad, Pakistan.

India has already started her journey to become a nuclear super power. Though India is not a signatory to the nuclear

non-proliferation treaty, they made nuclear weapons, made air craft carriers, missile development space programs. Thus India is carefully projecting herself to a regional power by ending nuclear dependency. India's intent to use nuclear power on both levels of civil and military can be determined as a clear-sighted act to stand alongside with the other globally powerful actors.

#### *D. India's geopolitical interest towards Sri Lanka*

During the era of President J R Jayewardene, he intended to have more relations with US and other Western countries. There was a time where an American company bid was approved over an Indian company bid. India's dislike towards J R Jayewardene's foreign policy eventually led India to support internal Tamil militant groups across Sri Lanka. This proves India's interest on keeping Sri Lanka under her control. What Sri Lanka has to understand as a small country is that India's on a clean path to become a global superpower. Aggrieving India would not make any difference to Sri Lanka's development. However keeping close ties with India would help Sri Lanka in her long term success.

India's relationship with Sri Lanka has been troubled during the recent years, mostly due to internal frictions between Tamil interests and the interests of the central government of New Delhi. India's geopolitical interest toward Sri Lanka is not a novel one. It is evident that India dislikes when Sri Lanka joins with external powers. Particularly India despise Sri Lanka keeping close ties with China. If China is to stabilize her power over Sri Lanka it would be an enormous threat to India's security. The Lotus Tower that China built in Colombo gains the fears (that others dismiss) that China will use this tower to intercept Indian intelligence.

President Modi's visit made for the Vesak festival secured that India has her own political motivations towards Sri Lanka. This was the second time President Modi visited Sri Lanka. The first time was in 2015 soon after President Sirisena came to power. President Modi's intentions of having a pro-Indian government in Sri Lanka is one of the main focuses on his foreign policy.

India's another concern is Trincomalee oil facility. However when the present government tried to make a deal with India to jointly operate a strategic oil facility, the state petroleum entity's trade unions staged the strike against the proposal and halted proceeding with the agreement.

India's interests over the Sri Lankan port are probably more strategic than economic. In order to counterweight China's presence on Hambantota and to dominate the Indian Ocean, India is planning to build Trincomalee Port. At the same time, India is intended to reduce the Chinese influence over the island nation.

#### *E. How Sri Lanka can balance the interests of China and India*

Indeed, Sri Lanka's political situation will be influenced as a result of her strategic location in the Indian Ocean. India being the next door neighbour of Sri Lanka is mindful on China's strategic policies in the Indian Ocean. Especially, India is well concerned on the strong Sino-Lanka relationship. Therefore, Sri Lanka has to balance the geopolitical interests regarding China and India. Being a small country Sri Lanka cannot antagonize either China or India at any cost.

In fact, Sri Lanka needs the support of China's investments on massive development projects. The projects that have been conducted so far by China benefitted both nations. Inarguably these projects made Sri Lanka's location more decorated and eminent. It is only natural for India to be worried if China strengthens its ties. Yet Sri Lanka should understand that she needs India's assistance in shaping the peace inside the country and preserving her national interests. Deepening the defence ties with India is a one factor that contributes to ensure national security. Although Sri Lanka keeps defence ties with Pakistan and China, India continues to host and train a large number of security personnel of Sri Lankan Armed Forces than any other country in the world.

Carefully handled negotiation with India will account for a positive influence over the Sri Lankan Tamils as well. The strong anti-Sri Lankan favor of Tamil Nadu politics which has caused serious damage to India's relationship with Sri Lanka can only be overcome through peaceful discussions. The issue of "Palk bay" became a contentious issue throughout the years due to the continuous influence by the Tamil Nadu politics. And these kind of issues should be measured sensitively without going into extreme decision. India and China are highly militarized countries in the region. If an armed confrontation occurs between these two states it will be a threat to Sri Lanka's national security. Therefore, Sri Lanka has to take a lead role in establishing a movement that demilitarizes the Indian Ocean by building a regime for peaceful cooperation. Sri Lanka should not welcome any military establishment by China as it will highly affect the diplomatic policies Sri Lanka holds with India.

The policy of non-alignment has always favored Sri Lanka for its existence. And knowing the fact that China and India are the two main donors of foreign direct investments in Sri Lanka, inclination towards only one party will harness the interaction with the other party. Aftermath of the war Sri Lanka is now on the transition for a better peace, therefore mutual understanding between Sri Lanka- China and Sri Lanka- India is principle in gaining momentum for a positive peace and development.

## II. CONCLUSION

Due to the strategic location in Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka has attracted the geopolitical interest of the global powers in

the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the rising powers of Asia, India and China has high geopolitical interests in Sri Lanka. With more than 1/3 of the global population and fast economic growth, both India and China are changing the global geopolitical and economic structure in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As the part of China's initiative to develop a 21<sup>st</sup> century maritime silk route, China is investing heavily on the countries in the Indian Ocean. Sri Lanka has become particularly important location for China under this initiative. The highway projects, Port city projects, Nelum Kuluna etc. are massive Chinese investments in the island nation. But the developments in regard to Chinese involvement Sri Lanka is looked at by India with suspicion due to obvious geopolitical reasons. India worry these economic interventions can someday leads to a Chinese military establishment in the island nation, endangering the national security of India. As a country with massive population and the regional hegemon of South Asia, and also a country with future super power ambitions, India will have a closer eye on the Sri Lanka's external relations. If Sri Lanka move towards the Chinese sphere of influence without addressing the interest of India, Sri Lanka can experience the same kind of treatment it received from India in 1980s. India can always use the Tamil political issues in Sri Lanka, with the backing up of Tamil Nadu political influence to put pressure on Sri Lankan politics. In this background Sri Lanka has faced with a dilemma to balance the geopolitical interests of China and India. It seems Sri Lanka is faced with an unavoidable geopolitical paradox that will bring lots of challenges and opportunities to the island nation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Sri Lanka should have a strategy for 21<sup>st</sup> century to not to antagonize the regional hegemon India and to gain opportunities from both China and India.

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