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Elements of Sri Lanka's Geopolitics: Impact on United States' Foreign Policy¹

Bhagya Senaratne

ABSTRACT

This article examines whether the physical determinants of Sri Lanka have a significant impact on the formulation of the United States' foreign policy. It also analyses whether Sri Lanka's close proximity to the sea lines of communication (SLOCs) has any influence on the United States' urge to link businesses and people, and also to reaffirm its interests and influence in Sri Lanka. The paper will briefly touch upon the security and military advantages that the United States enjoys in South Asia. It also ascertains whether American foreign policy towards Sri Lanka will be largely driven by economic factors, and due to Sri Lanka's location as well as the ability to integrate the island nation to America's future interests in the region.

Introduction

The Indian Ocean has been an important entity in the strategic calculations of great powers of the world, primarily due to its geopolitical and geostrategic importance for east–west maritime trade routes. At the turn of the new millennium, South Asia emerged as the focus of significant international attention. Sri Lanka features prominently in these considerations, especially in the security and economic contexts. According to Zia-ur-Rehman Hashimi, “the [South Asian] region is historically well known for its great strategic salience and enormous market potential”.² This article focuses on whether the United States views Sri Lanka as a strategic partner in fulfilling its economic goals within the region, and also whether the former's foreign policy imperatives for the island nation are attuned to the same.

This paper examines whether the physical determinants of Sri Lanka have a significant impact on the formulation of the United States' foreign policy. In addition it identifies how the United States acts in terms of countries such as Sri Lanka, and its guidelines for interactions with them. The US foreign policy towards South Asia, titled the “New Silk Road”, was crafted to reap economic benefits from the region.³ This four-pronged strategy to bolster regional connectivity as part of the New Silk Road initiative will be discussed at length in this article, with special emphasis on Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka featured significantly in the United States (US) foreign calendar, with several of their high-ranking diplomats visiting the island-state within a span of few months in the year 2015. This is the first time Sri Lanka has witnessed such a large number of visits from

the US Department of State in a single calendar year. These visits are important as they offer an insight into the nature of US foreign policy towards South Asia, and more significantly towards Sri Lanka. These high-level visits include those by the United States Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia, Nisha Desai Biswal; Secretary of State John Kerry; US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (DASD) for South and Southeast Asia Dr Amy Searight; and Counselor of the US Department of State Tom Shannon.⁴ Collectively, the official capacity of these visitors indicates the purpose envisaged in the host country. The visits can be termed even more decisive and crucial due to the nature of the relations the two countries have experienced over the past few years, and also because these showcase the vigour with which the US pursues relations with Sri Lanka.

Geopolitics

Geopolitics, the study of the relationship between geography and politics, plays an important role in the South Asian region.⁵ “Highlighting the significance of these two, and the role the former can play in influencing the latter, underscores the role of geopolitics in influencing both the economy and the foreign policy of a country”.⁶ It is important to note that various dimensions of geopolitics merge around the significance of the placement of states on the world map. A further definition relevant to the geopolitics concerned to Sri Lanka can be identified as the “analysis of the geographic influences on power relationships in international relations”.⁷ This provides a theoretical reference to the reality that Sri Lanka’s geographic position will be crucial when analysing and understanding the power relations pertaining to the United States in the South Asian, Central Asian and Indian Ocean regions. It can therefore be concluded that Sri Lanka’s strategic geographical location is of the utmost importance for defining the nature of the policies that are to be implemented by the island-state, as well as those adopted by other states towards it.

A further definition of geopolitics being “an expression of the foreign policies of states, where those policies are determined by the state’s location, natural resources and physical determinants”,⁸ re-emphasises Sri Lanka’s importance as a country that has abundant natural resources such as water and forests, as well as physical determinants such as strategic harbours (both natural and manmade). Examples of these include Trincomalee – a seaport that played a major role in maritime and international trade, as well as security, in the history of Sri Lanka – and Hambantota.⁹ It is fair to say that Sri Lanka’s geographic location and its strategic harbours have indeed played a decisive role in US strategic calculations, as it considered the island nation a suitable location to propagate its ideas to other countries via its Voice of America (VoA) transmission tower in Iranawila, Trincomalee, during the Second World War. Further, during this time, this strategic position was additionally utilised to advance its spying capabilities. Instances such as these serve to demonstrate that Sri Lanka’s location does indeed play an important role in the US’ foreign policy formulation, especially, in the initial years, for the fulfilment of its security objectives in the region.

United States Foreign Policy

According to George Modelski, foreign policy is the manner in which states behave in the international arena based on global dynamics. It can be further interpreted as the

procedure of explaining the functions of a state according to the operations at the world stage, depicting how a country will act with respect to other countries politically, socially, economically and militarily.¹⁰ The US' foreign policy "is the expression of its goals in the world and of how it proposes to achieve them, a reflection of the nation's interests and a guideline of how to interact with other countries".¹¹ Preference is given to the State Department's construction of the geostrategic worlds into regional bureaus, when formulating the foreign policy of the United States, as they indicate the significance of regions. The policy itself is formulated as per regions, taking into consideration the local undercurrents and US interests therein. Over the past half century, several events in South Asia have featured significantly in the discourse within the US State Department. Therefore, since the early 1990s, South Asia has been viewed as extremely important to the United States, and the creation of a separate division focusing primarily on matters pertaining to the region has helped promote inter-regional coordination and understanding.¹²

US Economic Interests

Referred to as the "New Silk Road" initiative, the US foreign policy towards South Asia was crafted to maintain commercial interests at the heart of their priorities. This vision, which is a strategy divided into four main areas, is designed to bolster regional connectivity. The four criteria are (a) creating regional energy markets that link Central Asia with South Asia; (b) boosting transportation routes and investing in critical infrastructure; (c) improving customs and borders; and (d) linking businesses and people.¹³ As the South Asian region is one of the least integrated regions, with a mere 5% of trade taking place between the member countries, the "United States [considers itself] a convener when it comes to promoting economic integration...", accordingly "promoting the Indo-Pacific Economic Corridor (IPEC) to connect South Asia to Southeast Asia and to spur sustainable development in both regions".¹⁴ The IPEC seeks to strengthen energy, transit, trade, and people-to-people ties – on land and sea. This strengthening will also result in the facilitation of trade and the commencement of new infrastructure projects. The statement also reveals that the US is interested in connecting the subcontinent with the larger Pacific region, thus creating greater connectivity with wealthy countries. A further signal that the engagement with this region is based on economic concerns is that Geoffrey Pyatt, the Deputy Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asia, stated that the IPEC "outlines the vital economic importance of South Asia for US policy towards the continent as a whole".¹⁵ The above statements indicate the United States is interested in furthering its economic advantages via its involvement in the South Asian region. They also indicate that, due to these interests, Sri Lanka will play a crucial role in these strategic calculations, because of the centrality of the island's location in the Indian Ocean region.

"The US positions itself as a protector of human rights and urges post-war reconciliation and accountability issues in Colombo".¹⁶ However, statements such as the above indicate there are ulterior motives behind the high-level US visits, for instance to re-establish economic ties between the two countries, especially because Sri Lanka is located in close proximity to the sea lines of communication (SLOCs) transporting energy, raw materials and finished goods from the East to the West and vice versa. In advancing their interests in Sri Lanka, the United States supported the island in establishing the Colombo Mega Port

Programme which assists in keeping a check on potential radioactive devices and equipment entering the country. The principal objective of this programme is to reduce the risk of illicit trafficking of special nuclear materials (SNM) and other radioactive isotopes that might be used in weapons of mass destruction (WMD) or radiological dispersal devices (RDD), before they reach the borders of the United States. Investment measures such as these further establish the economic interests of the United States. As programmes of this nature require substantial investment, it is safe to say that the United States seeks to further advance its business, trade relations and interests with Sri Lanka in the future.

During his visit to Sri Lanka in 2015, Secretary John Kerry stated,

He [Lakshman Kadirgamar] would see the possibilities of a Sri Lanka reconciled, democratic, and prosperous, with a united and entrepreneurial people dedicated to making their country a shining jewel of the Indian Ocean and of the broader Indo-Pacific. The United States, I am here to tell you, believes in that vision. We believe in the potential of Sri Lanka, the potential of Sri Lanka's people.¹⁷

This statement by the then-US Secretary of State highlights the importance of Sri Lanka to the United States. The island has witnessed increasing Chinese involvement and presence, and this involvement has threatened the interests of many countries including the United States. Therefore, the US has identified that it needs to urgently re-establish ties with the geostrategically located island country, thereby gaining access to the region and perhaps positioning itself over the East Asian nation. Relations between the two countries have been strong, with the United States providing more than US \$2 billion in development assistance to Sri Lanka since the latter's independence in 1948.¹⁸ It is also the largest single importer of Sri Lankan goods, amounting to approximately "2.88 billion US dollars".¹⁹ The visits of high-ranking US officials to Sri Lanka can thus be identified as a mechanism to realise one of their four strategies of the New Silk Road initiative, i.e. to link businesses and people and to also reconfirm their interests and influence in Sri Lanka.

Infrastructure development projects are a key component in the US foreign policy towards Sri Lanka. However, over the years it was observed the Chinese received prominence in these matters over any other nation. Due to recent developments in the international system and current trends in the Indian Ocean region, the United States seeks to position itself as an established figure. According to Robert D. Kaplan, the "Indian Ocean is where the rivalry between the United States and China in the Pacific interlocks with the regional rivalry between China and India".²⁰ Therefore, it can be assumed that Kerry's visit, amongst others, to Sri Lanka was to reinstate the US as a friend and a possible donor country to help Sri Lanka achieve its development goals and prosperity, thus making use of its extremely capable soft diplomatic powers. Assisting Sri Lanka in developing its infrastructure network which includes roads, bridges, electrical transmission grids, railways and pipelines to connect energy, goods, services and people permits convenient access to the country for the Americans and furtherance of an allegiance in the strategic region. It is also advantageous for the American economy as their companies and products will be utilised for this purpose. This strategic move allows the US to achieve another of its strategies from the New Silk Road vision, that of boosting transportation routes and investing in critical infrastructure.

The United States believes Sri Lanka “with its strategic location near deep-water ports in India and Myanmar ... could serve as the fulcrum of a modern and dynamic Indo-Pacific region”.²¹ And, it is confident it can work with Sri Lanka as “a leader, because [it has] a strong economy and an ability to be able to project, but also we see our role as a convener, and most importantly, as a partner”,²² thus indicating the long-term role it intends to play with Sri Lanka. And this can be further ascertained from Kerry’s statement: “we look forward to working with the Sri Lankan Government as it increases trade and investment with its neighbours in the Indian Ocean and beyond”.²³ Such statements reinforce the certainty of these policies and also highlight the fact that the US is resolute on implementing them.

The United States envisages further economic opportunities in energy, telecommunication and communication sectors. These are areas it can benefit enormously from, as it has a comparative advantage due to possession of the necessary technology and the know-how. The US also has the capacity and the capability to invest in markets like Sri Lanka. Further, due to the location and the efficacy of Sri Lankan labour, the United States is likely to establish business process outsourcing (BPO) centres on the island. Furthermore, easy access to the South Asian region and the greater Asian continent is likely to have enhanced economic cooperation between Sri Lanka and the United States. Ambassador Tom Shannon, during his visit to Sri Lanka in December 2015, stated, “We want you to be successful for your own benefit, for our benefit and for the benefit of the world”.²⁴ This too showcases that there is an ulterior motive for the US’ interests in the region. And it can be deduced, as per Shannon’s statement, that this motive is driven by the advantages the United States sees for itself in this region. It can be further understood that Sri Lanka has a definitive role to play in enabling these benefits for the western power.

It has been observed that over the years, the military relationship between the two countries has somewhat dwindled, and therefore in 2014 the United States expressed its interest in the “resumption of a more comprehensive military relationship” with the government of Sri Lanka.²⁵ With the Sri Lankan army defeating a well-organised and intelligent terrorist group, which terrorised not just Sri Lanka but several countries around the world, it is now able to share its skills and expertise on irregular warfare to other states, similar to the United States educating other national forces on intelligence gathering, fighting techniques, etc. The assurance that Sri Lanka is a safe country located strategically alongside one of the world’s busiest shipping lanes is reassuring to the Americans as they are aware that the country has the capability to provide security to its businesses, investments and people.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a message reiterated during the visits by senior US government officials is that “Sri Lanka can count on the United States to be a partner and a friend on the way forward”.²⁶ Further, with rapid developments in global geopolitical dynamics, it can be safely assumed that Sri Lanka’s importance in the US diplomatic calendar is only going to increase significantly, due to the former’s geostrategic location in the Indian Ocean and the latter’s vested interests in developing further economic ties between the two countries and also in increasing investment opportunities in the

island nation. The United States would not only savour the opportunities in investment and in providing technological know-how, but would also attempt to reap the advantages offered by the natural strengths of Sri Lanka. Therefore, it can be predicted that the character of United States' relations with Sri Lanka will be highly economic in the future and that Sri Lanka's geostrategic location is indeed of substantial importance for US foreign policy towards the South Asian region in general, and the island nation in particular.

Notes

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