
Island Nation Adapting to Challenges from the Great Power Contestation

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Abstract

An Island Nation can hold a unique strategic location in any ocean attracting the interest of major powers of the world. The challenges and influences of major powers or combinations of such powers could be circumstantial, and diversified in nature and proportions. This paper addresses this common reality, focusing on Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean attracting major power influence and interest from Australia, China, India, Japan, and the USA. In addition, it covers the numerous techniques island nations might adopt to align to challenges not only from the great powers named above but also from other regions. It also discusses Sri Lanka's foreign policy, diplomatic ties, economic development, regional cooperation, and security.

Introduction

An island nation is a country or state generally surrounded by water on all sides, that does not share land borders with other countries.

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Easy access to water bodies and openness to major sea routes play important strategic roles as surveillance and warning posts, logistic bases for friendly navies, and strategic fortifications to prevent seaborne hostile intrusions against mainland targets. For example, Guam Island plays a key role as the strategic node in US defence in the Pacific, which is referred to as the “tip of the spear”—a place from which the United States can project military might. Sri Lanka (SL) is an island nation located in the Indian Ocean very close to giant India, and has concerns unique to itself, like power contention among great powers.¹ SL’s geographical position has made it vulnerable to challenges arising from great powers. This contention has had significant implications for SL’s foreign policy, diplomatic relations, economic development, regional cooperation, security and public perception. Therefore, an island nation like SL requires an unprecedented level of integration among the great powers and enhanced cooperation with other nations.

Since ancient times, the Indo-Pacific region has drawn considerable attention and has become a major geo-strategic point in the international system. In the 21st century, the region is playing a significant role and influencing international affairs. Admiral Alfred Mahan’s statement demonstrates the present value of the region, “Whoever governs the Indian Ocean dominates Asia. This ocean is the gateway to the seven seas. The destiny of the globe will be determined by its waters in the twenty-first century”.² The influence and interest of Western countries are also a major factor in the Indo-Pacific region.

SL is involved with numerous countries in this area and has established bilateral and multilateral collaborations that cover a variety of topics such as trade, security, socio-cultural, and infrastructure development. With these strategic initiatives and practices underway, SL stands to benefit greatly from its involvement in the Indo-Pacific region, focusing on a multi-layered regionalism approach as a chance to establish itself as a trade and maritime hub in the Indo-Pacific region. This paper primarily examines

how SL, as an island nation, is adapting to challenges arising from Great Power Contention in the Indo-Pacific region. It also explores the potential opportunities that SL can leverage by engaging with the major players actively involved in the Indo-Pacific region. As the great powers engage in various contestations, tensions in the global arena are escalating, and the focus of the power struggle is gradually shifting from the West to the East. Therefore, this study aims to highlight how SL, as a small island nation, must address the impact of such challenges and adapt to new geopolitical trends emerging from the Indo-Pacific region's great power contestation.

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Methodology

This part of the paper gives an overview to explain the methodology used for this study, and it gives the methods and techniques used to abstract the required data for the paper. It is planned to conduct a qualitative research method to obtain the solutions to the problem raised in this paper. Methods and techniques were based on knowledge gained from a literature survey. Empirical studies, questionnaires, use of statistics and data published by recognised institutions and scholars will be used for this study.

Qualitative methodology systematically organises the information in a planned way. The overall approach to addressing the problem will be from the observational foundation, and careful study of a preliminary literature survey for the collection and analysis of data. Primary and secondary data sources were also used for the data gathering including informal discussions on ground realities with those who have engaged with the

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related duties of the diplomatic field. To this end, the research utilises secondary data from reputed scholarly journals, books, reputed web articles, theses, journal articles, conference proceedings, and previous studies.

Literature Review

The existence of a sovereign state in the world is dictated by relations with other nations.³ In the international arena, the power shifted from a bipolar to a unipolar system after the end of the Cold War. The United States (US) influenced the world as a superpower in the international arena. With the emergence of the US as the unipolar superpower, many countries felt the need to balance US influence and power. In this way, some countries have evolved to become great powers in the world order, especially China which has become a challenge to the US today.

The US Indo-Pacific strategy focuses on advancing long-standing issues related to economic interests, security, and strengthened governance. Nations always seek to protect themselves from external consequences and act in their national interest. Thus, island nations must also shape their foreign policy strategies accordingly and wisely.

SL frequently relies on other nations and great powers due to its lack of capability to be economically or militarily strong. Food and energy security is a key factor in this regard. Every nation acts in its national interest. They do not make decisions without weighing the costs and benefits. This is identified as Bandwagoning or Balancing. Balancing means teaming up with others to balance against a common threat. Meanwhile, Bandwagoning with the great powers increases a nation's security, regardless of ideology of power or type of government.

Stephen Walt's balance of threat theory suggests that nations will mostly select to balance against threatening nations. Stronger nations tend to balance with weaker nations, while weaker nations tend to align with other weak nations but may bandwagon against stronger nations if they are threatened.

A key strategy for small island nations having limited resources and capabilities is Bandwagoning with great powers rather than balancing with them. SL's strategic position at the crossroads of major shipping lines also makes it important for the country to identify other important nations for support and to gain advantages in the Indo-Pacific region. As these nations lack military and economic capabilities, they seek alternate ways of engagement. As a result, small island nations have lobbied for collective security as a strategy and forged partnerships with great powers. For instance, SL has backed China's "One Belt-One Road" economic initiative. Realism dictates States should judge based on a cost-benefit analysis, and SL is comfortable that China could drive the country's economic progress.

The current scenario is assessed to be the result of a mix of fundamental flaws in the global order and power contention among great powers. Hence the importance of these powers engaging in constructive conversation is emphasised to avoid further crises and disputes. Accordingly, the importance of constructive and productive communication between SL and all relevant global powers is a priority. Over the past few years, the great powers in particular have used their economic resources to impose political influence. They use economic measures such as trade policy, Foreign Direct Investments (FDI), economic and financial sanctions, policies, and aid, to participate in geopolitics. Previously, governments attempted political and military colonisation to demonstrate their supremacy.

Due to great power contention, island nations are also impacted in terms of foreign policy, diplomatic relations, economic development, regional cooperation, and security. Island states in the Indo-Pacific

Even as the dynamics of great power contention continue to grow in the Indo-Pacific area, the region's island nations are keen to retain their independence, resist interference, practise defensive posture and defend their objectives and interests.

Region have diverse interests that are unconnected to the Quad's (the US, India, Japan and Australia) or China's aims. In terms of regional frameworks, China's rise came inside pre-existing frameworks such as ASEAN, which many nations desired to preserve. Members are concerned about the recent growth of great power rivalry beyond these frameworks. The Indo-Pacific idea has gained traction, owing mostly to

increased challenges from great powers. As a result, regional dynamics, and collaborations, such as the Jakarta Concord within the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), have been reassessed.

The Indo-Pacific region's power balance is altering, creating a more favourable atmosphere for island nation economic collaboration. Even as the dynamics of great power contention continue to grow in the Indo-Pacific area, the region's island nations are keen to retain their independence, resist interference, practise defensive posture and defend their objectives and interests.

Military alliances and direct hardware support to island nations large or small with land-based establishments for mutual security is a reality in the Pacific. Although there are no such developments in South Asia and Asia region during non-conflict periods, the presence of Nuclear States with maritime assets in the Indo-Pacific pose a legitimate concern to all in the region.

Challenges Faced by Island Nations

The efforts of great powers to build connections with countries that share similar values are raising alarm among island nations, who think

new competition would pose obstacles. Great Powers are now using their economic resources as a political instrument, employing a variety of economic measures such as trade, finance, FDI, sanctions, and aid programmes. These methods are employed to advance and protect national interests, allowing great powers to achieve their objectives.

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a formidable undertaking that has resulted in considerable investment in infrastructure projects in nations such as SL. Given its key location on global transportation routes, the BRI poses both benefits and concerns for SL. Policy coordination, connectivity, financial integration, commerce, and people-to-people linkages are the project's five main goals. Through cultural and intellectual exchange and tourism, it has an impact on SL's macroeconomic policies, infrastructural development, trade flows and investment cooperation, financial sector activities, and social values.

However, some Western officials and scholars have criticised the BRI, labelling it "debt trap diplomacy" since China supports infrastructure improvements that leave nations with unsustainable debt and then utilises this financial and political influence to coerce those governments. For example, after the Sri Lankan government failed to repay its Chinese loan, the Hambantota port in SL is currently leased to China for 99 years. This port provides SL more control and benefits over the sea passage from the Gulf of Hormuz to the Strait of Malacca, allowing more merchant marine activities supporting the SL and Chinese economy.

Investment is an economic strategy used by great powers to achieve their geopolitical objectives. Great powers can provide financial support to SL in the form of FDI. Another aspect of economic connections is development aid. Following independence, the four Indo-Pacific area power holders gave development aid to SL to suit its diverse development needs. Loans, grants, and interest-free loans are the three primary types of development aid. Following that, China became SL's top bilateral development aid supplier. The Millennium Challenge Corporation

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(MCC), which aspires to decrease poverty through economic growth, receives US development support. Because of its strategic position, SL has become a transit point for products to many nations.

Geopolitical variables have grown increasingly crucial in influencing a country's internal and foreign policy in recent years, particularly for island nations like SL. The country is influenced differently by two great powers, India and

China, which influence its internal and foreign affairs in diverse ways. India has a considerable geopolitical interest in SL and is a big influence on its foreign and internal policies.

Indian influence may be found in a variety of domains, including the economic, political, and social. For example, India was instrumental in establishing the provincial council system in SL in spite of its small square area of land and the government pays substantially to keep these councils running. India's impact stems mostly from its economic and political goals. Through the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), India has funded several development projects such as northern housing projects, rail and the real estate industry and some more are pending accomplishment.

China, on the other hand, is utilising economics to influence Sri Lankan affairs. Chinese economic participation in SL is prompt and may be seen in the Hambantota Port, Colombo International Financial City, and several road and infrastructure construction projects. These instances highlight the importance of economics in preserving regional dominance. During the terrorist conflict (1983-2009), SL had a close defence

connection with China, which included obtaining diplomatic backing, weaponry on credit, and military training, while the US was hesitant to participate with direct military hardware support owing to negative lobbying and other compulsions. However, under its FOIP strategy, the US has participated in increased bilateral security cooperation since 2015, after lasting peace was achieved in 2011.

In 2018, the Navy's hospital ship, the United States Navy Ship (USNS) Mercy, was deployed in SL in support of the Pacific Partnership (PP). The PP is an annual mission of forces aimed at enhancing bonds and enhancing emergency relief capabilities with regional partners.⁴ The PP exercise involves humanitarian and civil aid. It demonstrates the distinct role of military public affairs. Public affairs professionals play a critical role in ensuring that such events and actions are discussed not only with a concerned domestic public but also with foreign nations.

This collaboration involves military equipment donations, maritime domain awareness, capacity building, and political discourse, primarily in the maritime sector. This tendency can be seen among other great powers like Australia and India, which are attempting to build security relations with vital Indian Ocean littoral states like SL. This scenario is being exacerbated by increased worldwide concern about non-traditional marine security threats such as Maritime Piracy, Maritime Terrorism, Drug Trafficking and Arms Smuggling, Environmental Security, Illegal Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing and Climate Change.

In the geopolitical landscape, small governments confront several obstacles. "Balance or bandwagon" is one of these issues. Great powers utilise economic methods including assistance, credit lines, and FDI to keep minor states at bay. Hence SL is particularly vulnerable. The US has an interest in the South Asian area as well.

According to Ambassador Robert D. Blackwill, China claimed practically all of the oil and gas-rich South China Sea and rejected opposing claims from Taiwan, Brunei, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia.

Instead of military intervention, the strength of America's Asian allies and India's economies will be a critical factor in their ability to resist China's economic and financial instruments and maintain balance among Asia's current powers.

Japan and China also have a territorial dispute over islands in the East China Sea. In each of these examples, Beijing attempts to influence the policy of these governments using economic mechanisms, most notably access to the Chinese market. Instead of military intervention, the strength of America's Asian allies and India's economies will be a critical factor in their ability to resist China's economic and financial instruments

and maintain balance among Asia's current powers while attempting to shape China's future external behaviour. SL must balance its ties with China, India, and other great powers with an interest in the Indian Ocean while it participates in the BRI and MCC. Due to many aspects of external and internal pressures and threats, balancing relations with all powers is a serious task. SL, on the other hand, will gain if they play the game wisely, and smartly.

So far SL has benefited from its non-aligned foreign policy, economically, politically, and militarily. SL is a founding member of the non-aligned movement and has voiced to declare the Indian Ocean as a nuclear-free zone. SL works together with all major powers, including those having different political ideologies, and their own interests in the Indian Ocean which are mostly conflicting and sometimes complementary. SL is trying to obtain the benefit from all major powers having a vested interest in the region without antagonizing any of them. If SL deviates from the non-aligned foreign policy, it will find itself in a Pandora's Box. In geopolitics, it is difficult to please everyone and satisfy them all.

SL with no interests and ability for military aggression, but practising defensive nonaligned posture is considered the best meeting platform

for all regional and global military and economic powers interested in the Indian Ocean to engage in meaningful dialogue and exchange of conflicting views for conflict resolution without aggression. In 2010 Naval and Maritime Galle Dialogue that was inaugurated, and the SL Navy's 60th Anniversary celebrations and US' engagement at the same table for three days in Sri Lanka were a clear example to the Naval leaders of the world, including Naval Chiefs of India, Pakistan, Australia, UAE, and Bangladesh and Admirals from Thailand, Indonesia, Russia, China, UK, France, Canada, South Africa.

SL understands there is an undeniable influence of India. However, SL being mindful and sensitive to this fact maintained good relations with China and the United States at the same time without SL making a hot spot for them. SL does not have a choice to be away from this influence given its strategic location in the Indian Ocean.

SL still acts just like a beautiful young lady who attracts men but does not give her consent to marry anyone and keeps on getting gifts. It seems to be a dangerous game to play but as long as the country does not lean towards any, it could survive and flourish. SL needs to understand the real interest and sensitivities of the major powers on SL. SL has a reasonably good relationship with all major powers economically, politically and militarily. India, China Australia and the USA are the largest providers of military equipment and training facilities for SL. All the above countries have provided the SL Navy with ships as grants or on credit.

Balancing and maintaining a good relationship with all would be more beneficial than bandwagoning as geopolitics and interests of major powers would change as happened in the recent past. One thing SL understands is that SL cannot be away from the Indian sphere of Influence. However, diplomacy has mitigated the influence so far for her benefit out of the strategic competition of the major powers. Sri Lankan authorities have explicitly expressed that SL will not let any nation use it in such a way that it causes any threat to the Indian national security, nor to any other.

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The Sri Lankan situation in the present world geopolitical stand could be described as Strategic Convergence, Strategic Competition and Strategic Dilemma. Strategic Convergence means all major powers have an increasing interest in SL in their own Indian Ocean Strategies.

Strategic Competition means all these major players try to lure the country for their own strategies. Therefore, they naturally work well with the Sri Lankan government in the areas of economy, politics and the military. The Strategic Dilemma means SL cannot give more attention to anyone without being affected by its own national security. One of the reasons for the successful military victory over the LTTE terrorists to usher in an honourable peace after 30 years of conflict was the Sri Lankan non-aligned foreign policy and strong political leadership focusing against terrorists. Friend to all and enemy to none, SL got the moral, military, intelligence and material support from the world powers to eradicate terrorism from the country thanks to its stance of neutrality.

SL has leased the port of Hambantota to China and at the same time, it has also let India have their business in the port of Colombo. SL slipped to a serious economic crisis in the year 2022. It was India which first came to assist the country to come out from the brink of economic collapse. At the same time, SL needs the support of China for the debt restructuring. Therefore, SL has to work closely with China as it holds its largest external debt. The blue economy is SL's main focus to get the benefit from sustainable use of ocean resources. SL faces numerous non-traditional threats emanating from the sea. At the same time, it could enjoy enormous economic benefits of a blue economy to the distant future mainly by claiming water column and seabed resources, beyond the exclusive economic zone.

Adaptation Strategies

Recent diplomatic, political, security and economic events have important policy implications. Policymakers in many fields, such as political, economic, diplomatic, security and industrial policy, cannot function in isolation. They must collaborate and carefully craft their strategies by examining global trends regularly. Foreign policymakers must recognise that the development and implementation of foreign policy now involves a broader range and variety of players than in the past. This implies that policymakers must comprehend the political economics of support for and opposition to various development projects, that the government may accept or reject. It requires a cost-benefit analysis. Economic metrics alone are insufficient for evaluating development initiatives.

SL is already in a debt crisis, and to avoid sinking further into it, an economic diplomacy strategy that goes beyond political diplomacy is required. The country having natural resources both on land and in the vast ocean must aim to become an Indian Ocean tourist, commercial, and maritime hub. This necessitates significant infrastructure expansion and modernisation, as well as improved connectivity to regional markets and value chains. Financial assistance is available from BIMSTEC, BRI, and MCC. As a result, strategic units for studying and designing foreign and economic policies should be developed. Due to its strategic location in the Indian Ocean, SL maintains a policy of neutrality to handle pressure from great powers. Nonetheless, for commercial and cultural reasons, the government maintains friendly relations with all nations. Such engagements and developments of an island nation with political stability should be sustainable in the future, addressing the environmental sensitivities and challenges as well as rule-based ocean surveillance and governance.

Given the geographical proximity (distance) of an island nation to a major continental country, any physical connectivity between them would alter both external and internal dimensions and landscape and will be sensitive to those interested and engaging with the island country.

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The political leadership of influencing powers and not so powerful smaller island nations must realise and be sensitive to the importance of the status of each other's population, their well-being, democratic framework, and their fundamental rights for existence. Any decision that would harm the survival of the population must be avoided and alternatives must be explored and pursued through dialogue with

genuine commitment, always giving economic prosperity, non-aggression, and peaceful existence a chance.

Irrespective of the geo-strategic and geopolitical circumstances of any island nation, its location, natural resources, national security, human safety, and the economic well-being of its population determine how such a nation adapts not only to external challenges but also to the internal demands and indigenous social fabric as well as public and domestic perception.

Conclusion

Given its strategic location in the Indo-Pacific region, SL has become a priority focus for several great powers. China and India, as close neighbours, have a considerable effect on SL's domestic affairs, although the country also maintains connections with the US and Japan. Finally, being a small island nation, SL cannot live on its own and must adopt an acceptable method. It has the option of following the bandwagon or balancing itself with great powers as well as neighbouring countries.

However, due to the fact that small nations constantly depend on larger powerful nations, their security frequently faces uncertainties.

This decision must be based on a cost-benefit analysis and sovereign independent identity. Given the increasing competition in the Indian Ocean and the looming uncertainty, SL should remain non-aligned. SL's greatest strategy is to adapt itself to great powers that have welcomed SL as a friend with no compulsions attached.

The Indo-Pacific area, like the global economy, politics, and military alliances, may no longer follow the same curve as before. The region's future is riddled with problems that will need a far better grasp of strategic concerns and economic interests. Nations are attempting to transition from globalisation to regionalisation. Protectionism has been on the rise throughout the world in recent years. Although these tactics may provide short-term advantages, they have the potential to decrease economic development and raise poverty, and political and social turmoil, particularly in small island nations like SL.

SL needs to maintain its non-aligned foreign policy in order to face the Strategic Convergence, Strategic Competition and Strategic Dilemma in the Indian Ocean placing SL at the centre. Great powers should be gracious and honest in their approach to uplift the living standard of such island nations and win the hearts and minds, gratitude, and friendly stance of the population. It would be a valuable insurance for peace in the region.

Notes

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