

# CHINA-SRI LANKA AND MALDIVES RELATIONSHIP AND ITS IMPACTS ON INDIA

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Sri Lanka and Maldives geo-strategic location caused apprehension to Indian security because of the possibility of the involvement of foreign powers with those countries against India's strategic and security interests. New Delhi perceives that presence of any foreign powers in the Island nations can possibly sham a serious threat to the security of India, Indian Ocean as well as to regional stability. When considering the components of the growing India-Sri Lanka-Maldives strategic narrative the real worry for India is growing Chinese activism in the Indian Ocean region. China's efforts at calming the Indian Ocean rimcountries have been a concern for New Delhi. In response, New Delhi has pursued many paths to build link with these neighbors, including bilateral, trilateral, and multi-lateral conversations in the region. Very recently(2020)after the fourth national security level tri-lateral(India, Maldives and Sri Lanka) maritime security cooperation meeting the joint statement of press release is as follows:

*The three countries also exchanged views on common security threats and agreed to broad-base cooperation by expanding the scope to improve intelligence sharing and include issues like terrorism, radicalism, extremism, drugs, arms, and human trafficking, money laundering, cyber security and effect of climate change on maritime environment, according to the statement.*

During the past three decades China emerged as the most important investor of Sri Lanka in financing strategically important infrastructure development projects. Funding the development of Hambantota port and airport, expansion of Colombo port project, building Nuraichcholai power plant, recentlyhybrid renewable energy systems in small Islands in Northern Sri Lanka,and laying of expressways were mainly carried out with Chinese assistance. China has built the Maldivian Foreign Ministry building as well as a museum, which houses the Ministry of Culture and Heritage. The Chinese have also built several housing funded in Malé, apart from building roads as well as the drainage system in the city.

India and China share a border with each other and the contradictions and the conflict between the two countries over this continue unresolved. India, therefore, does not favor the growing close ties of China with Sri Lanka and Maldives and involved in activities that will defeat this relationship. Nevertheless, China has friendly established its authority in the backyard of India: Sri Lanka and Maldives. In this presentation the impact on India as a result of the strengthening China-Maldives and Sri Lanka Relationship, in addition to India's strategic response is discussed.

## **Introduction**

The 'neighbourhood' has always been a major aspect of India's post-independent foreign policy in the neighbor countries with special concern on Sri Lanka and Maldives. It was recently emphasized by the BJP government through its 'neighborhood first' policy as a SAGAR doctrine (Security and Growth for all the Region). Within this construct, India-Maldives and Sri Lanka relations have come into focus due to many reasons - the most glaring of which is the fact that while Prime Minister Naranthira Modi has visited all South Asian countries except Pakistan, immediately after assuming office.

## **China-Sri Lanka Relations**

According to one retired Sri Lankan diplomat, stable relations between Colombo and Beijing today is an excellent policy in Sri Lanka. At the regional as well as international level both countries have established very close diplomatic ties. This has led to the growth of the dominance of China at a regional level and consequently it has been included in the group of countries competing for control of the Indian Ocean, giving China enhanced power to exercise authority in the region. Also China and Sri Lanka close relationship faces more challenge sin Sri Lanka by the Western countries and India. Because United States of America and India very close to activities of regional and international level post-post-cold war period. It is not only, and emergence of enmity to Chinese activities under the leadership of United States of America and Indo-Pacific strategic development but to counter China's policies of 'one road one build' and 'string of pearls strategy'.

## **Diplomatic Move**

Sri Lanka-China relations in the post-post cold war period have been strong, with a number of diplomatic visits and high level dialog which were attended by representative from both countries. These dialogs have contributed to further reinforce close relations between the two countries for the last few decades. There have been several visits by Rajapaksa to China since 2005 despite the fact that the Premier Wen Jiabao visited Sri Lanka only one in 2005. Altogether there have been 35 high level dialogs of Chinese and Sri Lankan officials between 2004 and 2016 (Wheeler: 2012. p.11, Deysaperia: 2019. p.365). In 2007, the 'China-Sri Lanka Friendship Year' was announced to landmark 50 years of full diplomatic ties between these nations. A series

of eight bilateral agreements were signed to mark their strengthened relationship. In addition, the former president Rajapaksa visited China in 2009, for the signed two bilateral connections: the Economic and Technical cooperation agreement, and the friendship city relationship agreement between the city of Guangzhou in China and the district of Hambantota in Sri Lanka. (Deysaperia: 2019. Pp 367-368). At the same time several MOU's were officially signed by both the governments of China and Sri Lanka in the field of contraction, Radio Film and Television, Red Cross society, Academic and Foreign studies, Investment facilitation and Strengthen long term economic linkages. These official agreements during the tenure of the former President Rajapaksa period can be considered the springy politics era of China centric infrastructure development in Sri Lanka. Especially China became the key sponsor for most of the mega infrastructure development projects in Sri Lanka. China has funded a number of projects, including the Nuraichcholai power station, Mattala Airport, Hambantota Port, Southern and Katunayake Expressways, Lotus Pond Theatre (Nelum Pokuna), the Lotus Tower in central Colombo, the Colombo Port city (now renamed the International Financial City) project, and the Northern Road Rehabilitation projects (Deysaperia: 2019. p.368). Recently Sri Lankan cabinet of ministers approved the installation of hybrid renewable energy systems in the small Islands in northern Sri Lanka such as Nainativu, Neduntivu, and Anativu Islands. The proposal was tabled by the Ministry of Electricity and Sino-Sri Lankan joint venture in China (government information: 2021. p.05).

In 2010, in all-round cooperation the two countries conducted frequent high-level interactions. In November, Special Envoy of Chinese President Hu Jintao, and Vice Premier Zhang Dejiang NPC Vice Chairman Sang Guowei, and in June, and Member of the CPC Central Committee and Party Secretary of the CPC Gansu Provincial Committee Lu Hao in September and Governor of Yunnan Province Qin Guangrong were frequently visited Sri Lanka and all the high-level political visitors met with former President Rajapaksa and Prime Minister Jayaratne in their office. Sri Lanka has become a very highly significant country for China (Kumar: 2006). At bilateral relations, there is enormous deal of growth to advance the inclusive and in-depth improvement of respective relationship between China and Sri Lanka.

In October, the former President Rajapaksa attended the opening and closing ceremonies of the Summit Forum of the Shanghai World Expo-2010, and Premier Wen Jiabao met him. In July, the former Prime Minister Jayaratne attended the National Pavilion Day of Sri Lanka at the Shanghai Expo-2010, and took part in the group meeting with former Vice President Xi Jinping. In August, former Foreign Minister G. L. Peiris visited China. Former Vice Premier Li Keqiang met him and Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi held talks with him (Kumar: 2006). Former president Rajapaksa visited China every year he since has assumed power in 2005. He has considered China more important than other countries, including India. The first ever visit and significant occasion by Chinese president Xi Jinping to Sri Lanka was in 2015. In addition foreign policy official Yang Jiechi, who is a member of the Communist Party of China's Politburo and the

Director of the Central Committee's Foreign Affairs Commission, visited Sri Lanka in October 2020.

China made closer moves to Sri Lanka. Colombo allocated an exploration block in the Mannar Basin to China for exploring oil resources. This implies the emergence of Chinese presence a few kilometers away from India's southern tip. This has caused India strategic discomfort (Kumar: 2006). In economic terms, this would end the monopoly held by Indian oil companies in this area and placing them in competition with the wealthy Chinese oil companies. Chinese are building bunkering facilities and an oil tank farm at Hambantota, the southern coast of Sri Lanka. In 2007, Chinese banks funded 360 \$ million for the first phase of the Hambantota port project, which was completed in March 2011. The port is able to berth the largest ships in the world, and has the capacity to handle 20 million containers annually located less than 10 nautical miles off the major shipping lines. Over 100,000 ships (nearly 300 a day) pass by the port every year (Cory: 2011. p.10). More than the economic spin-off, Sri Lanka's strategic location has prompted Beijing to develop a strategic relationship with Colombo.

The other point of great significance is that the year 2007 was declared as the Sri Lanka and China friendship Year. It is rationally appropriate to commend the trade relations between two countries for their historical relationship since 1952 rice-rubber agreements and accelerated development monumentally achieved by China who will indisputably become the giant in trade and industry during this century. In fact, Sri Lanka is fortunately located between the shipping lane and the String of Pearls, a strategic position that has attracted China's attention and in turn has spurred the expansion of trade relations in the recent past (Deyshapperya: 2020. p.369). Sri Lanka's exports to China have in the recent past increased tremendously reaching 153 million US \$ in 2011 from 102 million US \$ in 2010. An import from China to Sri Lanka also has increased to 2, 989 million US \$ in 2011 from 1, 995 million US \$ in 2010. Total trade between Sri Lanka and China has increased by 50% in 2011.

China's engagement in Sri Lanka today is nonetheless overwhelmingly defined by its role in financing economic development: it was the country's largest lender in 2009 and 2010, giving US\$ 1.2billion and US\$8.21million respectively. In 2009, it accounted for 54 percent of total foreign finance and 25 percent in 2010 (Wheeler: 2012. p.12) and to over 400 million US\$ since 2012. While some have seen this only as a recent post-war development, China was in fact Sri Lanka's largest financier in 2005 and even several years before its role received serious attention. In 2011, China was set to be the largest financier again, already committing by July, US\$760 million in loans, ahead of Japan's US\$413 million and US\$105 million from the World Bank (Wheeler: 2012. p.12). The China Development Bank announced in June that it would finance infrastructure projects amounting to US\$1.5 billion over three years. Indeed, following in the footsteps of past Asian donors, such as Japan and Korea, the vast proportion of Chinese finance goes on infrastructure development, mainly in the northern part of Sri Lanka. In addition

a total of \$1.258 billion loan agreement to China and Sri Lanka were signed with the arrival of the Chinese President Xi-Jinping in 2014.

According to the statistics of the government of Sri Lanka, Chinese has increased its aid to Sri Lanka from 2003 by ranging smaller amount funding, between the years 2004 – 06 and then rapidly from 2007 onwards. Most of the aids are concessional loans; grant aid has remained at the same relatively small levels. But, it is not aid that has made China the country's largest foreign financier. As the list of projects shows, much of what is often characterized as Chinese aid is in fact commercially priced loans and export credits from state-owned policy banks, especially China Exim bank (Wheeler: 2012. p.13).

While providing funding for Government of Sri Lanka's infrastructure projects, concessional and Non-concessional loans also serve to subsidize the entry of Chinese business into the Sri Lankan market. As dictated by financing terms, Chinese firms are usually lead contractors on the entire Chinese-funded infrastructure projects and normally at least 50 percent of procurement must come from China. As stated by a Chinese academic, "We do not seek to simply transfer aid to host countries like Sri Lanka, but we hope to help them improve their economic opportunities and ours too. It is not a donor-recipient relationship, but win-win economic co-operation" (Wheeler: 2012.p.13). China's direct investment inflows to Sri Lanka in 2012 were US\$ 185 million, and increased steadily to US\$ 579 million by 2017. It amounted to 35 % increased of FDI in Sri Lanka.

China has been a major supplier of weapons to the Sri Lankan government for many years. By the 1990s, a large part of the Sri Lankan inventory was of Chinese origin. In 1993, Nariño, one of China's main producers and exporters of vehicles, small arms, light weapons, artillery, ammunition (Jonas: 2011. p.45), even set up an arms warehouse in Galle in southern Sri Lanka from which it could supply weapons on very short notice. This arrangement ended in mid-2007, only to be replaced by a similar agreement with another Chinese company called Poly Technologies, offering similar products. As an indication of the importance of China as a supplier, it was reported in 2003 that the warehouse stored equipment worth no less than US\$130 million and that by mid-2002 Sri Lanka had US\$60 million in arrears with payment to Nariño. By mid-2007, this debt was increased with the purchase of grenades from Pakistan, which were delivered from Pakistani army stocks. At the same time, a US\$5 million deal for artillery and mortar shells for delivery within 1 month was agreed upon. However, very soon after the victory over the LTTE, Sri Lanka reportedly cancelled orders from China and Pakistan worth US\$200 million (Riazhaq: 2009. p.14).

On invitation by the Sri Lankan defense ministry, Chinese defense minister and 23 officers arrived in Colombo on 29 August 2012 for an official goodwill visit. It was also the first visit by a Chinese defense minister to the south Asian island country, Sri Lanka. During the visit, defense

minister Liang Guanglie also had discussions with Sri Lankan former President Mahinda Rajapaksa. The President thanked the government and the people of China for standing by Sri Lanka at times when it was facing various challenges internationally and for extending cooperation in the fields of economy and culture (Harikaran: 2012. p.12). In addition, Chinese defense minister General Wei Fenghe, in his two days visit in Sri Lanka 28-29, April, 2021 signed a defense agreement and under the defense protocol signed between the two countries, China provides military training, communication equipment and other services to Sri Lanka as a grant. Both Parties have also had discussions to strengthen the economic and trade cooperation post-pandemic situation.

The Chinese military participated in the Sri Lanka joint exercise "Cormorant -3" from September 10-25, 2012 in Eastern province Vakarai in Sri Lanka. In this exercise along with military personnel of Sri Lanka side by side with military personnel from China, Pakistan, and Maldives, Bangladesh participated (Harikaran: 2012. p.12). Except India, most of the participants were in the South Asian countries.

According to SIPRI data, (2010) there was fairly small share of China's total arms trade with Sri Lanka. At the same time as receiving the credit for Russian arms (Jonas: 2011. p.45). Since then, the only known transfers have been four aircraft delivered from China National Aero Technology Import and Export Corporation (CATIC) in 2010-11. Some observers in Sri Lanka claim that the government of Sri Lanka is still paying off debts to Chinese companies, partially explaining why the military budget remains so high.

Beijing is concerned with the growing US presence in the region and Indo-US naval cooperation in the Indian Ocean. Besides, cushioning the impact of Indo-US strategic cooperation in the region, China wishes to enhance its influence over the sea lanes for communication between Europe and East Asia and the oil tanker routes from the Middle East to this region. Its attempts to craft an 'arc of influence' around India are well known. With Pakistan (Gwadar), Myanmar (Sittwe) and Bangladesh (Chittagong) forming part of this strategic circle (Bhatia: 2012. p.14), Beijing wants to complete this around India by integrating Sri Lanka within it in order to curtail India's presence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region. Sri Lanka is also strategically important to India for its Indian Ocean strategy and for networking its partners in the Indian Ocean Rim Countries. The Chinese presence would thwart the Indian Navy, which has to circle the island nation to transfer its naval fleets between the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea. Besides, military cooperation between Beijing and Colombo, especially to resolve the Sri Lankan ethnic strife, would seriously affect India's stakes in this issue.

### **India's Geo-politics and strategy**

New Delhi needs a strategic partnership with Sri Lanka, in its own national security interests, by a policy of active engagement. If India fails to do this, it would be inviting China to step in. The prospect of China entering a defense cooperation agreement with Colombo would create a

nightmare for India's security calculus in the region. Allowing China to complete its arc of influence around India would spell a setback for India's security interests and adversely affect its aspirations of becoming a regional power.

Former Indian national security advisor Brajesh Mishra, stated, 'The Chinese don't do anything by accident. There is a deliberate plan with Pakistan (part of the string of parts) to encircle India' (Tritle: 2007, p.07). The present Chinese interest is in the use of the docking and refueling facilities that would come up in Hambantota for their commercial and naval ships. There is no proposal at present for a Chinese naval base at Hambantota. In addition, it is very unlikely that Sri Lanka would allow the Chinese Navy to use Hambantota against India (Raman: 2009).

Former Indian high-commissioner of United State of America, William H. Avery wrote, 'It all makes good sense, but the commercial reasons are only part of the story, The Hambantota port is also part of the China's larger geopolitical strategy to encircle the only country that can threaten its complete dominance of Asia, India (Avery: 2012, p.137). In addition, It is not hard to imagine Chinese naval vessels one day securing basing rights in the newly constructed port from there, Red army troops can easily move up the coast of Sri Lanka to Mannar, which is but a hop, skip and a jump to the Indian mainland (Avery: 2012, p.137). Hambantota is not the only instance of India's foreign policy leadership being asleep at the wheel. China is also building ports in Bangladesh, Myanmar and Pakistan in what American military observers has called a string of pearls, strategy (Avery: 2012, p.137). If India is not careful, it could find itself chocked by China's string of pearls. China's strategy will give to multiple access points to threaten the India mainland within a one hour missile flight (Avery: 2012, p.137). In addition India on its current defense spending trajectory has no hope of defeating China in a battle over Sri Lanka (Avery: 2012, p.139).

### **China-Maldives Relationship**

After independence from United Kingdom in 1965 Maldives has established a close relationship with India. This relationship has been maintained by both countries for the past six decades. This situation has changed much in the after Mohamed Nasheed regime, especially after the removal of former president Mohamed Nasheed (2008-2012) from regime in February, 2012 which led to a political power play in the China and involvement in the Maldives and Indian Ocean region's internal and regional politics. The visit by former president Abdul Gayoom to China for the first time in 1984 forged a close understanding with China. He went to China again in September 2006, which further deepened relationship between Maldives and China (Kumar: 2016, p.156). In addition, It is understood that China has engineered a manner of coup by coxing Maldives Abdul Gayoom government to let it establish a base in Marao. Marao is one of the largest of the 1192 coral island grouped in to atolls that comprise Maldives and lies 40 km south of Male, the capital. Coral island makes fine submarine pens. The People's Liberation Army Navy or PLAN

proposes to deploy nuclear submarines fitted with sea-launched Dong Feng-44 missiles and ballistic missiles (SLBMs) in Marao ( Havar:2001,p.72). Chinese former Prime Minister Zhu Rongji visited Male on 17 May 2001 on his four South Asian countries tour. At the same time India has been trying firm to regain stability in its bilateral relations with the Maldives. Maldivian foreign policy during the President Abdul Gayoom era was uncaring to India, although Gayoom successfully managed to create the impression that he was friendly to India. India had involved his regime from more political crises. However, he still did not give any special privileges to India. Indian troops were withdrawn once order was restored, and only a small number of soldiers remained on the island to protect Gayoom for a year. In the later part of his regime, Gayoom tried to maintain a close relationship with China. Therefore, China has tried to make inroads in Maldives, which is of strategic importance to present, by engaging in political, economic and military relationship. Extended high-level executive meeting supported infrastructure project and investment facilitation agreement to strengthen long term economic linkage to Maldives with China. China has built the Maldivian Foreign Ministry building as well as a museum, which houses the Ministry of Culture and Heritage. The Chinese have also built several housing projects in Malé, apart from building roads as well as the drainage system in the city (Kumar: 2016, p.156).

The former president of Maldives, Abdulla Yameen was driven to tackle the economic crisis of the Maldives. As far as China is concerned, the bilateral relationship has continued to deepen under Yameen. Chinese companies have showed interest in major Maldivian infrastructural and communication projects that are on offer such as construction of a bridge between Malé and the island of Hulhule by using their own funds, and maintaining it for a prolonged period (Kumar: 2016, p.159). In addition, the significance visit of Chinese President, Xi Jinping, to Maldives in September 2014 gave a big boost to China-Maldives bilateral relations. This was the first visit of any Chinese President to the Maldives since the independence in 1965. The most important objective of the Xi Jinping's visit to the Maldives was to get Maldivian support for his modern maritime silk road as one road one belt. Maldives agreed to participate actively in the initiative of creating a shipping route from China to Europe via West Africa (Kumar: 2016, p.159). China-Maldives signed nine agreements relating to the expansion of Maldives main international airport, a power station project, road construction, and a bridge to connect the capital island of Malé with nearby Hulhule. Keeping in view the critical importance of tourism in the Maldivian economy, President Xi Jinping reassured the country that China would continue to encourage its citizens to travel to the Maldives, and Chinese enterprises to invest in Maldives tourism industry.

### **Impact of India**

To appropriately understand China-Sri Lanka-Maldives relations, it is important to highlight Chinese interests in the Indian Ocean and South Asia. Firstly, China is interested in political power in Maldives and Sri Lanka. Secondly, China would like to maintain its involvement in the



Indian Ocean by strengthening the relation with Maldives and Sri Lanka to prevent from falling under the influence of India and any force that are unfavorable to its security interests. Chinese political forces can also change the security environment in the Indian Ocean and South Asia.

Though the competition started at the end period of twentieth century, it reached its height in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In order to have constant relation and assurance in extension of trade and economic activity, China is in need to develop its military, navy and air force. Many analysis' opine that the smooth development of defense force will not be restricted, but in contrast, protection of economic growth will contribute to the rise of military power. China has a dominant role based on trade in Indian Ocean. It maintains pleasant relationship with the Indian Ocean Island countries and its port through soft power strategy. The extension of superiority power over Indian Ocean shows the initializing factor for becoming a developed nation. Apart from that, China is also using many small ports and islands for its purpose. Particularly, radar points, Navy camps, and transit points for vigilance activities. The islands such as Cocos in Maldives island that is 150 miles away from Bangkok, the Andaman islands, Zadelki that is near to Myanmar, Mergi situated near the south east direction of China Myanmar's Manaung and Haiggyi ( Harvir: 2001, p.72) were under the deep control and China has dominant power over these regions. As such, President Yameen's visit to India in April 2016, when India signed six agreements with his government, major of which was in the defense sphere. The three day official visit to India by the newly elected Maldivian president Ibrahim Mohamed Solih in November 2018 has allowed both the countries to open new a chapter in their bilateral relationship.

Further India, Maldives and Sri Lanka formed trilateral maritime security cooperation in 2011 for the protection of the Indian Ocean region. Sri Lanka hosted the fourth trilateral meeting on maritime security cooperation with India and Maldives on November 27-28 in 2020 in Colombo while Bangladesh, Seychelles, and Mauritius represented the meeting virtually as the observer states. With the goal of encouraging meaningful maritime cooperation in the Indian Ocean region, India, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives discussed a number of areas for possible collaboration such as maritime domain awareness, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, joint military exercises, capacity building, maritime security threats, marine pollution, and maritime underwater heritage. The heads of delegations decided that they would meet periodically to maintain the momentum of the dialogue and to ensure timely execution of the decisions taken at the national defense security level meetings (Rajeswari: 2020). According to the joint statement, a decision was also made to institute national defense security and maritime security level working group meetings biannually for cooperation at the operational level. Sri Lanka and Maldives have close understanding as maritime level harbor construction and trade development project with China. In addition the Colombo port city project, expected to play a key role in China's strategy 'Maritime New Silk Road and belt' project in India's lost backyard. China had always supported Sri Lanka in global forums, especially at the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), based on a shared understanding of certain basic norms of international relations, such as non-interference in the internal affairs of States.

## Conclusion

China–Sri Lanka relations had made a new dimension in the Indian Ocean. As a result US and India and its allies have formulated their policies against Sri Lanka and countries that are favorable to China and have established close ties with Sri Lanka. This has given rise to a new conflict in the Indian Ocean. Consequently, there is a danger that India–China conflict could arise due to Sri Lanka, especially the Sri Lankan navy. Though Sri Lankan leaderships has tried to handle both countries, yet he has not failed to insist that Sri Lanka is on the side of China. Further apart from China, Sri Lanka has also established close relationship with Iran, North Korea, Myanmar, and Bangladesh. In 2013 when UN resolution against Sri Lanka was tabled two warships of Iran were docked in Colombo harbor and they were ready to attack an Australian spy plane which narrowly escaped before the attack was launched. This definitely shows that Sri Lanka is not interested in maintaining its relationship with US and India. This only further affirms an aggressive and confronting approach of Sri Lanka. The President of China Xi Jing Ping stated over a telephone conversation prior to the Geneva decision the following to the President Kotabaya Rajapakse. 'China and Sri Lanka are friendly neighbors for many years. Their bilateral ties have maintained a healthy and a stable development momentum with fruitful co-operation in all sectors. China firmly supports Sri Lanka's efforts to protect its independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity and would like to continue to provide assistance to Sri Lanka within China's capacity'. This further proves the point that China–Sri Lanka relationship is steadily increasing. India's effort to countermand this should increase. Nevertheless, India does not have economic power and maritime strategy to overcome the soft strategy of China. While considering the initiative of these countries in this regard, it can be stated that China is stronger than India. China has been systematically constructing political, economic and military relationship with Maldives for the last three decades. Considering the proximity of Maldives and Sri Lanka to India, India has been taking initiatives to bring this countries under its influence. However, it could not succeed.

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