



Indian Council
of World Affairs



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Post - 2009

DR. SAMATHA MALLEMPATI





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First Published, February 2022

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ISBN: 978-93-83445-73-8

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ABSTRACT



Since 2009, India-Sri Lanka relations have undergone significant changes. Geo-political interests, security needs, economic diplomacy, development assistance and post-armed conflict reconciliation are some of the important factors that determined India-Sri Lanka relations. In this context, “India’s Neighbourhood First Policy” and “Sri Lanka’s India First” approach had to encounter a number of composite problems, which eventually shaped present-day relations. The end of nearly three decades of internal armed conflict in Sri Lanka, its focus on economic recovery, and emphasis on Asia-centric foreign policy, recalibrated India-Sri Lanka bilateral relations. At the regional level, the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has become a theatre of power play and influence involving regional and extra-regional powers. This has also led to reshaping of relations, based on respective outlook towards IOR, and positions have been taken on issues pertaining to maritime security, peace and stability in the region. Therefore, the paper, discusses the domestic and external factors that are influencing the security dynamics in post-war years, such as ethnic issue, reconciliation, fishermen issue, role of perception, outlook towards the Indian Ocean peace and security, the role of external actors in moulding India-Sri Lanka relations and at the end made observations on post 2009-security dynamics.

Key Words

Indian Ocean, security, reconciliation

INTRODUCTION



India as a major regional power had to encounter various difficulties in nurturing relations with neighbouring countries since independence in 1947. India's policy towards its neighbouring countries has evolved from treaty-based security arrangements (Indira Doctrine) to reciprocity in relations (Gujral Doctrine).¹ India's desire to keep external powers at bay in the region to maintain its security interests resulted in various security arrangements² such as, the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship with Nepal, the 1949 Treaty with Bhutan, the Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation signed in 1972 with Bangladesh and the 1987 Accord with Sri Lanka, notwithstanding the India-China War in 1962, the India-Pakistan War (1965, 1971, 1999), Operation Cactus in Maldives (1988) and the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) experience in Sri Lanka. These developments brought extra-regional powers in the regional security dynamics, to balance India's interest in the region. Pakistan's engagement with the United States (US) and China, Sri Lanka's relations with the UK and China, development of Diego Garcia as a naval base for the US are seen as examples in this regard. Since the 1990s, India's geo-strategic position in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), has naturally led India to strengthen its relations with countries beyond South Asia. Therefore, South-East Asia became India's extended strategic neighbourhood³. In the absence of a functional South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) is playing an important role in bringing together the countries in the Bay of Bengal region on one platform.

Sri Lanka's relations with India in the post-independence years can be seen in this context. Sri Lanka is an important strategic partner to India in the region. Sri Lanka's geographical location makes it a strategic gateway to the Indian Ocean.⁴ Not just in strategic terms, Sri Lanka is an import partner for India in terms of cultural, religious and people to people ties. However, India-Sri Lanka relations are described as power relation between small and medium powers that is governed by fear and suspicion.⁵ Unlike the other states in South Asia, Sri Lanka's (then called Ceylon) independence from Great Britain was peaceful. Lee Kuan Yew, in his memoir – From Third World to First wrote, "Ceylon was Britain's model Commonwealth country."⁶ However, Sri Lanka's policy makers exhibited an ambivalent attitude towards India due to asymmetry in size, economy and geography.⁷ For instance, the Defence Agreement with Britain and relations with the Commonwealth were regarded as pillars of Sri Lanka's security in post-independence years to balance India's dominance in South Asia.⁸ However, for most part of the independent history of Sri Lanka, its strategic and economic potential remained underutilised due to internal ethnic issues. India has pursued various approaches from intervention to supporting mediation and facilitation by third party to resolve the ethnic issue, but none of the approaches were

for most part of the independent history of Sri Lanka, its strategic and economic potential remained underutilised due to internal ethnic issues. India has pursued various approaches from intervention to supporting mediation and facilitation by third party to resolve the ethnic issue,

successful to find a political solution to the most pressing issue in Sri Lanka's domestic politics.

The year 2009 was important for Sri Lanka. The thirty-year-old ethnic armed conflict between the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) came to an end. Consequently, Sri Lanka embarked upon a new journey of reconciliation, Asia centric foreign policy, emphasis on peace and security in the Indian Ocean. In this context, geo-political interests, security and economic needs, quest for development assistance and post armed conflict reconciliation are some of the important factors that have greatly influenced Sri Lanka and India-Sri Lanka relations in the last decade. India supported Sri Lanka in its endeavour to gain economic and political stability and sought to enhance economic and security cooperation in order to assuage India's safety and security concerns. At the same time, India's "Neighbourhood First Policy" and "Sri Lanka's India First", approach had to encounter a number of composite problems due to various domestic and external factors. Therefore, this paper will look at how both these factors have shaped security dynamics between the two countries since 2009 and implications for the future. At the outset the paper reflects on pre-2009 developments. In domestic factors, the paper looks at progress towards reconciliation, fishermen issue and role of majority perception. In the second section on external factors, the paper looks at developments in the IOR, India and Sri Lanka's

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outlook towards peace and security in the IOR, convergences and divergences, and Sri Lanka's engagement with the US and China and implications. Besides, the paper also looks at 2022 developments in Sri Lanka and implications. At the end the paper made a few observations on post-2009 security dynamics between India and Sri Lanka.

Reflections—Pre-2009 Developments

Amidst the shaping of its security and foreign policy after independence, the Sri Lankan elites have consciously worked towards consolidation of the Sinhala identity, sometimes by reversing the apparent gains other communities acquired during the colonial rule. The voting rights given to Up Country Tamils of Indian origin in 1931, Sri Lankan Tamil dominance over the economy, civil service, and the demographic consolidation of the Tamil community in the North and North-East and central parts of the country led to fear of losing Sinhala dominance in state structures after independence.⁹ At the time of independence on February 4, 1948, 'Sri Lankan Tamils and Up Country Tamils in total constituted thirty-three percent of Ceylon's population.'¹⁰

Disenfranchisement of Up Country Tamils through the Ceylon Citizenship Act of 1948, the Sinhala Only Act of 1956, Standardisation of Education Policy of 1972 and the district quota introduced in 1974 deprived the Tamil community of their rights through constitutional and legislative means. These developments cemented ethnic discrimination and raised Tamil militancy that refused to die down for most part of Sri Lanka's post-independence history. Violence against the Sri Lankan Tamil community in 1956,

Amidst the consolidation of ethnic identity politics within the island nation, India and Sri Lanka tried to resolve bilateral issues in an amicable manner. One example in this regard was the repatriation and resettlement of Up Country Tamils.

1958, and 1974, only consolidated support base of militant Tamil groups who advocated insurgency. Along with Tamil militancy, the State in Sri Lanka also faced armed uprising in the South of the country in 1971-83, and 1987-89 by Sinhala youth led by the Janatha Vikmuthi Peramuna (JVP), against economic and foreign policies of the government.¹¹The Sri Lankan government suppressed the JVP rebellion using police force and it is believed that thousands of youths were killed during the protests. Internal political developments were accompanied by constitutional changes in 1972, and by 1978 it had given foremost place to Buddhism, and the Sinhala language, and defined Sri Lanka as a Unitary State. These post-independence political developments according to scholars swiftly 'transformed Sri Lanka from democracy to ethnocracy.'¹²

Amidst the consolidation of ethnic identity politics within the island nation, India and Sri Lanka tried to resolve bilateral issues in an amicable manner. One example in this regard was the repatriation and resettlement of Up Country Tamils. Since 1964, more than six lakh Up Country Tamils have been given Indian citizenship. Sri Lanka also granted citizenship to 7,40,985 Up Country Tamils and their natural increase through various acts.¹³However, after the July 1983 anti-Tamil riots (also referred to as Black July), India took a serious note of internal developments within Sri Lanka as the spill-over effects and Tamil Nadu's concern could not be ignored. It led

India to provide covert politico-military support to Tamil militant organisations.¹⁴Besides, Sri Lanka's foreign policy outreach to the West, Israel and Pakistan to deal with internal ethnic issue from 1977 to 1983, was another factor that concerned India. Way back in 1984, the US President Ronald Reagan denounced the Tamil armed struggle as 'terrorism' and a 'cowardly form of barbarism.'¹⁵The United Kingdom (UK) Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher also condemned the activities of the LTTE, in 1985. The Jayewardene-led government allowed the US to set up a Voice of America facility in the West Central coast of Sri Lanka and also gave a contract to restore the Trincomalee Oil Tanks to an American company.¹⁶Around the same time the US decision to set up a military and intelligence base in Diego Garcia in the Chagos Archipelago, in the Indian Ocean became a concern in bilateral relations of India and Sri Lanka.

Amidst these developments in Sri Lanka, India opted for direct military action in June 1987 and dropped food and medicines over Jaffna Peninsula. The 1987 Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement and Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) presence in Sri Lanka could not secure a permanent solution to the ethnic issue as expected by India, but the Agreement took care of India's security concerns to some extent. The Annexure III of the Agreement talks about not using respective territories for activities prejudicial to each other's unity, territorial integrity and security. Sri Lanka agreed to be mindful of India's concerns about matters such as allowing Trincomalee to be a military base for any country, and reviewing agreements signed with foreign broadcasting organisations to ensure that the facilities were not being used for military and intelligence purposes. India



Norway was invited to facilitate and subsequently involved in the Sri Lankan peace process from 1997 to 2009, to find a political solution through negotiations.

also agreed to provide training facilities and military supplies for Sri Lankan security forces.¹⁷

After the assassination of Indian Prime Minister (PM) Rajiv Gandhi in 1991, India dissuaded itself from intervening in the Sri Lankan conflict, but encouraged Sri Lanka to find a political solution through third party facilitation and mediation. India became the first country to ban the LTTE in 1992 and designated it as a terrorist organisation. Norway was invited to facilitate and subsequently involved in the Sri Lankan peace process from 1997 to 2009, to find a political solution through negotiations. A Ceasefire Agreement was signed in February 2002 by PM Ranil Wickramasinghe and the LTTE supremo Prabhakaran.¹⁸ An International Ceasefire Monitoring Mission (ICMM) led by Norway monitored the ceasefire. The U.S, EU, Japan, and Norway acted as co-chairs of the peace process. India was kept in loop of the developments in the peace process by Norway.

Around the same time, the 9/11 attacks in the US helped the Sri Lankan government to mobilise international opinion against the LTTE's tactics of war. The unilateral suspension of peace process in 2003 by the LTTE also did not help the organisation to get the required international support to its cause for a separate Eelam. These developments worked in favour of the Sri Lankan government headed by Mahinda Rajapaksa. Sri Lanka tried to

counter the campaign of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora, who stood behind the LTTE cause, in the West, by successfully convincing the host governments to ban the organisation. Proscription of the LTTE by the US in 1997 and the UK in 2001, severely constrained LTTE's arms supplies. But this did not stop the West to question Sri Lanka's human rights record. This move was followed by several other countries and at present it is banned in nearly 33 countries that include entire Europe, South East Asia, US and Canada.

Overall, the peace process brokered by Norway was fragile from the very beginning as it quickly entered a protracted 'no-war, no-peace' stalemate.¹⁹ Six rounds of talks between the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE could not reach a settlement. The window of opportunity that opened for all stakeholders to work together to rebuild the nation after the Tsunami in December 2004, was submerged due to conflict over aid distribution provisions.²⁰ Both the Sinhala and Sri Lanka Tamil community had faced the brunt of Tsunami waves. The split in the LTTE in 2004 also worked in favour of the Sri Lankan government.

By 2009, the LTTE had lost much of its ground to Sri Lankan armed forces, and the Government of Sri Lanka tried to counter the pressure by the West on accountability for human rights violations, through diplomatic outreach.²¹ For instance, Sri Lanka stood its ground and defended its human rights record at the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) during the final war with the LTTE in 2009. According to the US, 'Sri Lanka's assertive actions at the UNHRC appealed to Non Alignment Movement (NAM) countries and sent a signal that Sri Lanka was willing to stand up to the West, which was unfairly picking on it.'²² Wikileaks cables between 2007

and 2009 on Sri Lanka also point out that the West was taken aback by the assertiveness shown by Sri Lanka in defending itself at the Council and how it tried to play off the West against less developed countries.²³ At the Special Session on Sri Lanka in 2009, it managed to get support from India, China and Russia and avoided a Security Council resolution.

Sri Lanka's long-time allies China, Pakistan and Russia and others helped Sri Lankan armed forces in the final phase of the war with the LTTE in 2009. India took a pro-active role and dealt with the internal war situation in Sri Lanka through "troika" mechanism (2008-2009), which could take decisions on behalf of their respective governments to deal with India-Sri Lanka relations amidst the war. Both humanitarian as well as security concerns were addressed simultaneously through this mechanism.²⁴ India also did not entirely oppose the actions of the Sri Lankan government but tried to find a middle ground, for the safe passage of an estimated 70,000 civilians caught up in the war zone. It also acknowledged the use of civilians as human shields by the LTTE."²⁵ Offshore Patrol Vessels (OPV) provided by India to the Sri Lankan Navy, non-lethal equipment supplies and an air defence support system helped in restricting the supply chain of the LTTE, by increasing maritime surveillance. Nevertheless civilians trapped in the war zone remained a main concern for India.²⁶ In May 2009, the LTTE was defeated. In his address to the nation on May 19, 2009 President Mahinda Rajapaksa celebrated the defeat of "terrorism" and promised that a compromise would be reached to address Tamil grievances.²⁷ But the final showdown in 2009 between the

Pre-2009, the main security challenge Sri Lanka faced was from within rather than from outside. Internal political dynamics within Sri Lanka were too complex to understand even for the powerful external actors, who were involved in brokering peace with various stakeholders

Sri Lankan forces and the LTTE led to civilian casualties, nearly 40,000, and many went missing.²⁸

Internal conflict also led to increase in defence budget and focus on armed forces within Sri Lanka. For example, the military budget rose from \$35 million (1.3% of GDP) in 1978 to \$1,600 million (3.9%) in 2008.²⁹ In 1985 the military had about 22,000 personnel and by the end of war in 2009, the military had recruited 223,000 personnel. In 2009, the country had 1,099 active-duty military personnel for every 100,000 people; the comparable ratios for India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal were 227, 543, 136, and 293 respectively, making Sri Lanka the most militarised country in South Asia.³⁰

Pre-2009, the main security challenge Sri Lanka faced was from within rather than from outside. Internal political dynamics within Sri Lanka were too complex to understand even for the powerful external actors, who were involved in brokering peace with various stakeholders. Internal ethnic dynamics, transformed the Sri Lankan polity and the economy to a great extent. The polity became more fluid and the society was divided on majority and minority identity lines. This ultimately led to a protracted ethno-political conflict, which could not be solved through Indian intervention and Norway's facilitation and mediation. Any concessions given to the



Sri Lankan Tamils during the negotiations, such as the proposal to consider a federal solution and international donor support was vehemently opposed by the Sinhala majority, who saw a threat to their identity. Giving legitimacy to the LTTE through any process was simply not acceptable to the collective consciousness of the Sinhala majority.

DOMESTIC FACTORS



This section below looks at domestic factors such as progress towards reconciliation, fishermen issue, and role of majority perception in relations.

Post-2009

Even after the war ended in 2009, 'ethnic nationalism remained a strong embedded motivating force in the Sinhala society that determined the politics of Sri Lanka and eventually the progress of reconciliation.'³¹ In this scenario, India had multiple concerns in the post-2009 years. Some of them were the rebuilding of the war-ravaged North and East provinces of Sri Lanka, containing the spill-over effects, convincing the Sri Lankan government and other stakeholders, such as the Sri Lankan Tamil parties, to find an amicable political solution, dealing with reactions in Tamil Nadu and avoiding international direct involvement in the post-war reconciliation process.

India accorded highest priority to rehabilitation and rebuilding of North and East of Sri Lanka in post-war years. Just after the war, it provided Rs. 500 crores for relief, rehabilitation and resettlement

work for the immediate relief of 300,000 Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) within Sri Lanka.³² India's humanitarian efforts were also extended in later years to building nearly 65,000 houses in the North, East and Central provinces of Sri Lanka,³³ construction of railway lines in northern Sri Lanka with a \$800 million Line of Credit, and restoration of the cultural centre in Jaffna, etc.

India's position on the ethnic issue in Sri Lanka has evolved over the years and has gone beyond the 1987 agreement expectations. In early post-war years, India believed that "end of armed conflict in Sri Lanka created a historic opportunity to address all outstanding issues relating to minority communities."³⁴ India also believed that 'dialogue between the government of Sri Lanka and the Tamil parties, and building upon the 13th Amendment to the constitution could create necessary conditions for reconciliation and a political solution within the framework of a united Sri Lanka, acceptable to all communities.'³⁵ At the same time, it was careful in responding to the UN reports on the human rights situation in Sri Lanka to avoid any possible international action, sponsored by the West. For example, India was careful in responding to the report by the UN Panel of Experts on accountability issues in Sri Lanka in 2011, and raised concerns on allegations of human rights violations showed in a Channel 4 documentary. India said it was the 'responsibility of the Sri Lankan government to investigate and inquire into human

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rights violations through a transparent process.³⁶ There was an implicit concern that any assertions by India may have implications on bilateral relations, therefore, it tried to figure out how to assist Sri Lanka in the process of reconciliation and enhance the dialogue between stakeholders of peace.³⁷ Nevertheless, India could not completely ignore domestic sentiment and demands concerning the plight of Sri Lankan Tamils, emanating from the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. The ruling Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in Tamil Nadu, a coalition partner of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government in India persuaded the Central Government to vote against Sri Lanka at the UN in 2011 and in 2013. In the same year, the Tamil Nadu Assembly passed a resolution asking India to push for a referendum on creation of Eelam.³⁸ Since 2009, successive Chief Ministers (CMs) of Tamil Nadu belonging to both the DMK and All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIDMK) have written a series of letters to the central governments in India, highlighting the ethnic and fishermen issue. These developments within India have kept the Sri Lankan Tamil issue alive in the post-war years and influenced India's vote at the UNHRC.

The Sri Lankan government responded to the pressure to demonstrate progress on reconciliation during the tenure of the Mahinda Rajapaksa government (2010-2014), in two ways. One was at the foreign policy front, through a clear preference in engaging with China under the rubric of strategic partnership.

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Second was at the domestic front, by setting up of “Lessons Learned and Reconciliation Commission” (LLRC) which recommended significant steps towards reconciliation and investigation into alleged human rights violations. China supported Sri Lanka at the UN on the ethnic issue. Interestingly, earlier Colombo supported China’s BRI during the visit of China’s President Xi Zing to Sri Lanka in 2014, which was seen as a balancing act by Sri Lanka to tide over the pressure from the West and India on reconciliation. India welcomed the Commission report as the report recognised that “a political solution is imperative to address the root cause of the conflict.”³⁹ In this context, India asked the Government of Sri Lanka to put in place independent and credible mechanisms to investigate allegations of human rights violations.⁴⁰ However, the Sri Lankan government’s unwillingness to fully implement the LLRC recommendations led to international concern. The GST+ concession by the West was tied to progress in reconciliation.

Despite all the concerns expressed by the international community, the ground situation in Sri Lanka did not change much. Centralisation of power into the hands of the President through the 18th Amendment to the Constitution of Sri Lanka, unlawful use of Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), attacks on journalists and civil society activists, and militarisation of civilian areas in the North and East of Sri Lanka, led to call for the UN investigation into a serious violations of human rights in 2014.⁴¹ Internally, Sri Lanka also witnessed increased attacks on the Muslim community by ultranationalist Buddhist organisations in the South of the country, which otherwise supported Sinhala political parties at the centre for long. This has resulted in aligning of political forces



belonging to Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim parties. The 2015 elections saw a “rainbow coalition” consisting of Sinhala political parties, the United National Party (UNP), Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), Tamil National Alliance (TNA) and Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) come together to defeat the Rajapaksa-led coalition, United People’s Freedom Alliance (UPFA). India was dragged into the internal electoral politics of Sri Lanka. Mahinda Rajapaksa blamed India and the US for his defeat in the 2015 elections.⁴²

The results of January 8, 2015 presidential elections were a significant departure from the past majoritarian electoral politics of Sri Lanka. Consensus candidate Maithripala Sirisena, won the election. The change was described as “New Sri Lanka” where leaders promised to strengthen good governance, ethnic harmony, democracy, economic growth, accountability and reconciliation.⁴³ After the formation of the National Unity Government (NUG), John F. Kerry visited Sri Lanka in May 2015. It was the first official visit by a US Secretary of State to the island nation in 43 years. Indian PM, Narendra Modi also visited Sri Lanka in March 2015, the first official visit by an Indian PM in 28 years and the first PM of India to visit the war-ravaged northern Sri Lankan town of Jaffna. Various economic and investment cooperation agreements were agreed upon between India and Sri Lanka since then.

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The NUG spoke of reconciliation and development as twin objectives and tried to demonstrate to the international community that it will walk the talk.

will walk the talk. Return of land in High Security Zones to people, permission given to foreign media to enter the former war zones, the 19th Amendment to the Constitution of Sri Lanka that established a Constitutional Council and Independent Commissions such as Judicial Service, National Police, Public Service, Elections, Bribery and Corruption and National Human Rights Commissions were positive developments. The NUG, sought to address the ethnic issue, by co-sponsoring the US led UNHRC 30/1 resolution titled “Promoting Reconciliation, Accountability and Human Rights in Sri Lanka.”⁴⁴ The UK, Macedonia and Montenegro were other countries that co-sponsored the resolution. As per the guidelines given in the resolution, Sri Lanka established Office of Mission Persons (OMP) and Office of Reparations by 2018. Public consultations, the first of its nature, were carried out by the Consultation Task Force on Reconciliation Mechanisms. The TNA leader R. Sampanthan was appointed as leader of opposition in the Parliament. India supported the UNHRC resolutions on Sri Lanka during the NUG.

However, the Sri Lankan government’s endorsement of the UN resolution on Sri Lanka did not change the contradictory perceptions about what constitutes reconciliation between the Government of Sri Lanka and the Sri Lankan Tamil political parties. The NUG at the UN argued in favour of national independent judicial mechanisms.⁴⁵ It defended Sri Lankan military, which is hailed as War Heroes, at the UN by asserting that “there are no proven allegations against individuals on war crimes or crimes against humanity in the OHCHR Investigation Report on Sri Lanka (OISL) in 2015 or in



any subsequent official document,”⁴⁶ Sri Lanka also asserted that any international involvement and appointment of foreigners as judges, in investigating war crimes, required “amendment to the Constitution by 2/3 of the members of the Parliament voting in favour and also the approval of the people at a referendum.”⁴⁷ However, the OISL specifically concluded in its findings that the role of paramilitary groups, the Karuna Group (a breakaway fraction from the LTTE), different branches of the security forces, including the Army’s Special Operations units, the Intelligence branches of the military, and the STF of the police should be investigated.⁴⁸ The OISL report was welcomed by the TNA as the report called on Sri Lanka to establish a special hybrid court to investigate human rights violations. The TNA also called on the Tamil community to introspect.⁴⁹ The positive momentum in Sri Lankan politics after the formation of the NUG did not last long. The government collapsed due to differences between the PM Ranil Wickremasinghe and the President Maithripala Sirisena in 2018. India once again was pulled into the domestic politics of Sri Lanka. President Sirisena, blamed India’s intelligence agency the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), of a plot to assassinate him in a Cabinet Meeting on 16 October 2018.⁵⁰ But on 17 October 2018, the President of Sri Lanka called on the Indian PM and “categorically rejected the reports in sections of media about him alluding to the involvement of India in any manner whatsoever in an alleged plot to assassinate the President and a former Defence Secretary of Sri Lanka.”⁵¹

Amidst the internal political turmoil, the April 2019 Easter Sunday bombings in Colombo by ISIS-inspired youth from Sri Lanka

changed the political and security scenario in the country. New non-traditional security threats emerged within Sri Lanka. The window of opportunity in finding a political solution to the ethnic issue had shrunk after the formation of the SLPP government led by Gotabaya Rajapaksa in 2019. The government leaned towards consolidation of power around executive presidency. There was a clear move towards militarisation of civilian spaces and appointment of military personnel, even accused of war crimes, to important administrative positions such as the appointment of Lieutenant General Shavendra Silva as the Army Commander. Once again the focus has shifted to human rights issues. The US imposed a travel ban on the Commander of the Sri Lankan Army and Chief of Defence Staff, Shavendra Silva and his immediate family in 2020, due to his alleged role in war crimes committed during the final phase of the war. In 2021, two more Sri Lankan Army personnel were banned. The Sri Lankan government took a strong objection to this move.

In 2020, Sri Lanka completely withdrew from the UNHRC resolution. The move was seen as a setback to reconciliation mechanisms that were taking shape under the UN watch. The SLPP government's lack of assurance in implementing the 13th Amendment to the existing constitution of Sri Lanka, or to include it in the new constitution, which the government planned to bring through parliament, remained a concern. Given the internal developments in Sri Lanka and the lack of interest shown by the Sri Lankan government in addressing issues related to reconciliation led India to abstain from voting at the UNHRC in 2021. The 2021 resolution on Sri Lanka was very critical of the nation's human rights record and asked for



monitoring and reporting on the human rights situation, including the progress on accountability and reconciliation.⁵²

Assessment

Post-2009 India's position at the UN on Sri Lanka was mainly guided by two considerations, "One is support to the Tamils of Sri Lanka for equality, justice, dignity and peace. Second is ensuring the unity, stability and territorial integrity of Sri Lanka."⁵³ Internal developments in Sri Lanka and India's response to the same also indicate that India's support for a negotiated political solution in undivided Sri Lanka was crucial in continuing engagement with Sri Lanka. India's nuanced role during and after the war has been well recognised by Sri Lanka. For instance, former President Mahinda Rajapaksa said "the troika mechanism which helped sustain India-Sri Lanka relations during the war should have been continued."⁵⁴ India's position on the implementation of 13th amendment to the constitution of Sri Lanka has been echoed, in various high-profile visits to Sri Lanka as well as at the UN forums such as the UNHRC. While proscribing the LTTE, India tried repositioning itself in Sri Lanka's ethnic politics as a country which will stand for the unity of Sri Lanka. However, fluid ethnic politics of Sri Lanka continue to remain a security concern for India. In the absence of any genuine efforts towards a long term political solution to

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the ethnic issue within Sri Lanka, counter-terrorism efforts by the Government of Sri Lanka is not enough to entirely dismantle the LTTE's overseas networks. Even after the decimation of most of the prominent leaders of the LTTE leadership, including the leader of the organisation Velupillai Prabhakaran in May 2009, the organisational network of LTTE is trying to persist through various means. For instance, reportedly funds are being raised to revive the LTTE, though there has been no overt activism reported in terms of attacks and other violent activities.⁵⁵ The US Department of State report of 2017 identified both Sri Lanka and India as areas of operation by the LTTE operatives. Since 2014, Malaysia has cracked down on LTTE supporters and networks and 13 LTTE supporters were arrested for allegedly planning attacks against US and Israeli diplomatic facilities in India.⁵⁶ In 2019, nearly 12 people were detained in Malaysia due to their alleged links to the organisation.⁵⁷ In January 2022, Tamil Nadu police arrested a Sri Lankan national who was allegedly raising funds to revive the organisation.

Given the history of how the organisation functioned and operated across the Palk Strait and through global networks, the signs of revival are a definite worry for both the Indian and Sri Lankan governments. The Indian government had extended the ban on the LTTE in 2019 for another five years on grounds of, 'continued violent and disruptive activities prejudicial to the integrity and sovereignty of India and adoption of a strong anti-India posture which can pose a grave threat to the security of Indian nationals.'⁵⁸ It may be difficult for the LTTE to revive quickly, given the enhanced maritime cooperation and surveillance in the region and intelligence sharing between India and Sri Lanka. But these efforts need to be followed

Unresolved ethnic issues will probably remain a challenge in bilateral relations in years to come. The security challenge for India is the spill-over effect it had in the past and will possibly have in future, if a political solution is not found.

up with finding a political solution to the issue, and addressing genuine concerns of the Sri Lankan Tamil community regarding power devolution, accountability and human rights. Otherwise, because the government's inability to accommodate interests of the Tamil minority community can possibly disturb the relative peace achieved since 2009.

Unresolved ethnic issues will probably remain a challenge in bilateral relations in years to come. The security challenge for India is the spill-over effect it had in the past and will possibly have in future, if a political solution is not found. There are around 58,543 Sri Lankan Tamil refugees living in 108 camps across Tamil Nadu and 54 in Odisha. Another 34,135 refugees are staying outside the camps.⁵⁹ During the peak years of ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, from 1983 to 2012, nearly 3,04,269 Sri Lankan refugees had entered India.⁶⁰ India is a natural choice for Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in the times of distress, thus internal stability in Sri Lanka has always been indispensable to India's own security.

The Fishermen Issue

Another issue that continues to be a concern in bilateral relations is the fishermen issue. Sri Lanka's proximity to Indian territorial waters has often blurred the line for fishermen on both sides in

pursuit of fish stock. Way back in 1921, British colonial authorities from India and Sri Lanka calculated the risks that can arise from over-exploitation of marine resources and demarcated the waters as ‘fishing line.’⁶¹ Demarcation of waters through International Maritime Boundary Line (IMBL) Agreements signed in 1974 and 1976, and India’s decision to cede the Katchchathivu Island to Sri Lanka in 1974 under the maritime agreement, much to the disappointment of the Tamil Nadu government, could not stop the fishermen, particularly the Indian fishermen from crossing the line, because, for centuries, the waters between India and Sri Lanka were considered traditional waters for the community.

Illegal crossing of IMBL and Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing continued for much of the post-independence years. The use of sea routes by the LTTE for supply of essential items and weaponry became a thorny bilateral issue. At the peak of the LTTE war against the Sri Lankan state, its naval organisation was considered as the most formidable non-state navy in the world.”⁶² The ‘Sea Tigers’ of LTTE operated and controlled sea routes in the northern waters for many years with formidable grip, leaving marginal manoeuvring space for the Sri Lankan Navy. After the defeat of the LTTE, both countries have tried to find an amicable inclusive solution that can address the concerns of all stakeholders. But the arrests and shooting of Indian fishermen by the Sri Lankan

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Navy crossing the IMBL continue to trigger protests in India. This has become a flash point in relations in post-2009 years. As per information provided by the Indian government ‘nearly 500 Indian fishermen were arrested by the Sri Lankan Navy between 2019-2021 and a total of 73 Indian boats (42 in 2019, 11 in 2020 and 20 in 2021) were confiscated by the Sri Lankan authorities.’⁶³ According to Sri Lankan Navy, till September 2022, it has seized 25 trawlers and nabbed 189 Indian fishermen in Sri Lanka’s waters.⁶⁴ Since 2019, six fishermen have lost their lives in separate incidents following alleged collision between their vessels and Sri Lankan naval crafts.⁶⁵ These figures reveal the extent of problem near the maritime border. In July 2022, the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister requested the External Affairs Minister (EAM) of India to deal with arrests of Indian fishermen by the Sri Lankan Navy, as ‘arrests are intimidating the fishermen of Tamil Nadu and likely to create a sense of insecurity and fear in the coastal areas of the state.’⁶⁶

Since 2016, a Joint Working Group on Fisheries (JWG), mechanism is in place to address the immediate concerns of fishermen of both sides and to find a permanent solution to the issue.⁶⁷ The setting up of JWG, involving concerned ministries was an outcome of an understanding that was reached in October 2008, between the two governments, to treat the matter on humanitarian grounds and encourage fishing practices in safe, secure and sustainable manner.⁶⁸ The fifth Joint Working Group on Fisheries meeting was held in March 2022. This mechanism was helpful in addressing the release of detained fishermen on both sides, but the release of confiscated boats by the Sri Lankan navy has been slow owing to various procedures involved in releasing the boats. As of July 2022, nearly 92 boats from the state of Tamil Nadu are under the

custody of the Sri Lankan navy. To release a boat, the owner has to appear before a Sri Lankan court in person to claim the ownership. This condition by Sri Lanka has not been well appreciated in Tamil Nadu, which has requested the Central Government for strong and coordinated response to release all the boats.⁶⁹

In this regard, a few initiatives taken in India, both at the central and state level are important to address the plight of fishermen. A deep sea fishing scheme named “Blue Revolution,” was launched by the Indian PM in July 2017.⁷⁰ One of the aims of this 1,500 crore project was to help the fishermen convert bottom trawlers to long deep sea liners. The Tamil Nadu government in January 2022, announced INR 5.6 crores as compensation to 125 fishing boat owners, whose boats were damaged by the Sri Lankan Navy.⁷¹ Sri Lanka banned bottom trawling in 2017 through Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Act. Sri Lankan fishermen from the North have also formed a Northern Fishermen’s Action Committee (NPFAC) to highlight their plight. Some of the demands put forward by the Committee include, “abolition of all debts, ending the oppressive military pass system for fishing and a guaranteed price for fish and nationalisation of multinational fishing industry companies.”⁷² Jaffna has been witnessing protests against actions of Indian fishermen near the territorial waters.

The fishermen issue is a humanitarian issue linked to the livelihood of fishermen families on both sides of the border. Use of bottom trawls, and IUU fishing, is not only affecting the marine environment, but also impacting the livelihood of northern Sri Lankan Tamil fishermen, who bore the brunt of a three-decade long conflict. The community is mainly dependent on the sea as their primary source of livelihood. To address the issue, both the

countries are working on alternative solutions such as deep-sea fishing, and alternative livelihood methods, but seem far from arriving at a permanent solution to the issue.

Majority perception

Another issue that has moulded security dynamics between India and Sri Lanka is the perception about India in Sri Lanka. The asymmetrical nature of relations for most part played an important role in shaping the majority view of India-Sri Lanka relations. The perpetual threat to Sri Lanka's sovereignty from India based on historical and post-independence accounts reflected in general opposition to India's role in economic and investment sectors as well as in the security sphere. India's involvement in the ethnic issue of Sri Lanka has also mostly consolidated the fear factor in post-independence years. A general lack of trust concerning India's role in Sri Lanka is evident despite the support India extended to post-armed conflict reconciliation process, and significantly enhanced economic and investment cooperation.

Sri Lanka is one of the major recipients of development assistance provided by India and India's "overall commitment to Sri Lanka is more than US\$ 5 billion, of which around US\$ 600 million is grant-in-aid and the rest is concessional loan. In total, 13

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Lines of Credit worth US\$ 2.68 billion have been extended to Sri Lanka.”⁷³ Since 2017, India has entered into nearly 20 agreements with Sri Lanka that covered range of areas including community development projects, economic cooperation projects, up gradation of infrastructure, and in the field of agriculture, etc...⁷⁴ India’s flagship project, 1990 emergency ambulance services is provided countrywide, with a total cost of more than USD 22.5 million. Close to 300 ambulances were provided by India under this project.⁷⁵

However, the trust deficit led to, change of decisions on some of the agreed projects in the last decade. After coming to power the SLPP government came out with national policy framework document titled “vistas of prosperity and splendour” that was released in December 2019. The framework, mentioned that Sri Lanka would follow ‘friendly and non-aligned foreign policy to ensure the ownership of strategic assets and economically important natural resources.’⁷⁶ It also highlighted the need to “revisit the harmful bilateral trade agreements signed in past five years and prevent any agreements harmful to the domestic economy.”⁷⁷ The case in point was the cancelation of the 2019 tripartite agreement, with public-private partnership between India, Sri Lanka and Japan to develop the East Container Terminal (ECT) at the Colombo Port, much to the disappointment of India and Japan, the two most important bilateral partners for Sri Lanka.⁷⁸ The Sri Lankan cabinet later decided to award the West Container Terminal of the port to India’s private port development company, the Adani Group in 2021. Even in the case of development of the Trincomalee Oil Tank Farm by India, there was substantial opposition to India’s involvement. Trincomalee is very important for India’s security, a



natural harbour located in the East of Sri Lanka. For many years, Sri Lanka's reluctance to involve India in developing strategic assets has been a challenge. But some progress has been made in early 2022, with regard to economic and investment cooperation, when India and Sri Lanka have agreed to jointly develop/ refurbish 61 of the 99 tanks at the farm over a 50-year period. Out of 99, 24 tanks will be developed by Ceylon Petroleum Corporation and another 14 by the Lanka Indian Oil Corporation (LIOC). It is an important development from the Indian security point of view. The joint development of tanks was part of the India-Sri Lanka Accord of July 29, 1987.

The SLPP Government's decision, to not develop the ECT, in 2021 with the help of India and Japan, was influenced by suspicion regarding India's investment in the South of the country. The JVP perceived the modernisation of oil tank farms as an "expansionist" move by Delhi and a step towards creating a permanent base in the island nation.⁷⁹ In the past, it had opposed vehemently the IPKF presence in the island nation. The Economic and Technical Cooperation Agreement (ETCA) and Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) proposals could not see light of the day due to perceived threat to Sri Lanka's economy, flagged by parties like JVP, SLPP and some professional groups. In general, geopolitical and geo-strategic interests, political calculations

Geopolitical and geo-strategic interests, political calculations coupled with lack of trust towards India's role, acted as a hurdle in lessening the threat perception towards India.

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In spite of few setbacks, both the countries understand the importance of enhancing bilateral relations, and a policy document released by the Sri Lanka Mission in India in 2021, was a positive move. The policy document was titled, "Integrated Country Strategy" for Sri Lanka's diplomatic missions in India. The paper was important in many respects as it showed Sri Lanka's expectations from bilateral relations with India. The seven goals mentioned in the policy paper, talked about elevating the existing close bilateral relationship to a strategic level through increased interactions at the political level; increasing investments; expanding collaboration in the fields of strategic cooperation and defence; enhancing cooperation in the fields of culture, education and science & technology; projecting a more positive image of Sri Lanka in India through public diplomacy; connectivity and promoting Sri Lanka's interests in protecting its ocean resources.⁸⁰

EXTERNAL FACTORS

Indian Ocean Geopolitics: Adjusting to new realities

After the end of the armed conflict in 2009, India supported Sri Lanka in its endeavour to gain economic and political stability



and sought to enhance defence and security cooperation that could mitigate India's safety and security concerns. However, the geopolitics of the region and respective outlook towards peace and security of the Indian Ocean, with a set of goals and interests, led to convergences as well as divergences.

In the IOR, there are many actors who are seeking to advance their interests in the region through multiple alliances and other means. Prominent players in the region are China, the US and India. Japan and Australia have also shown keen interest in engaging with the region in the larger Indo-Pacific framework. The US and its allies believe that the region could become a secondary arena for great power competition in Asia, particularly between India and China.⁸¹ For the powers present in the IOR, securing Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC) is vital for uninterrupted flow of trade and energy. Protecting check points in the region such as the Suez Canal, the Strait of Hormuz, and the Straits of Malacca and Singapore is also a priority.

The region is home to 35% of the world's population and the region's littoral states accounted for 18.5% of global GDP in 2021. With almost '120,000 ships transiting its expanse annually, its waters carrying two-thirds of the world's oil shipments, one-third of bulk cargo traffic, and half the world's container shipments,' the Indian Ocean assumed significance in the strategic calculus of major powers.⁸² In terms of trade the region presents a unique picture. Trade between Indian Ocean states constitutes only 20% of the total trade volume, while the remaining 80% is transported outside the region.⁸³ At the continent level, Asian countries bought the highest dollar worth of imported crude oil during 2021 with

purchases costing \$563.8 billion or 54.8% of worldwide purchase. Asia is followed by European nations at 26.7%, while North America's share is 14.6%.⁸⁴ Organization for Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) is the main source of crude oil import for China (50%), India (68.4%) and for the US (17.4%).⁸⁵ Per capita income in the IOR is expected to nearly double "from US\$3200 to US\$6150 between 2017 and 2025, which would make it an upper-middle income region."⁸⁶ The region's strategic materials and critical resources such as coal, copper, diamonds, natural gas etc., continue to attract extra regional powers. Australia, India and Indonesia possess largest Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) that account for half of the EEZ of IOR.⁸⁷ Dealing with non-traditional challenges is another crucial element.

The rise of China and its increasing strategic investments in vital maritime ports in the region is another important aspect that has been driving the policy towards IOR by countries such as India and the US in the last decade. China's interest in South Asia is largely believed to be driven by access to energy and mineral resources, and access to the Indian Ocean for its landlocked inner provinces.⁸⁸ The geo-strategic contestation China has with countries in the Indo-Pacific, makes it impossible to ignore the assertive role China is willing to play in the region. In the IOR, China is a big factor in India's strategic calculations particularly in its neighbourhood.

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India was absent at the BRI Forum held in 2017 where Sri Lanka was present. India defended its absence in the Forum by stating that its connectivity initiatives “must be based on universally recognised international norms, good governance, rule of law, openness, transparency and equality. Connectivity initiatives must follow principles of financial responsibility to avoid projects that would create unsustainable debt burden for communities; and must be pursued in a manner that respects sovereignty and territorial integrity.”⁸⁹

America’s concern of a rising China is explained in the US National Security Strategy 2021 document. It states “the US should contend with the reality that the distribution of power across the world is changing, creating new threats. China, in particular, has rapidly become more assertive. It is the only competitor potentially capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system”.⁹⁰ On the other hand, the BRI has made significant inroads in the region and estimated to add US\$ 1 trillion in investments in 60 countries.⁹¹ Therefore, the Indo-Pacific vision of the US, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, known as QUAD, the trilateral security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States (AUKUS) and the G7’s \$ 600 billion initiative in 2022, Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII), are seen as vital mechanisms to counter China’s advances in the region.

The major powers engagement with the region, such as the US and China, can also be looked at in the broader context of the contours of evolving foreign policy of these powers viz. Asia. The US’s Pivot

The strategic environment also presents divergences and convergences in India and Sri Lanka's outlook towards the Indian Ocean, impacting the security dynamics.

to Asia (rebalance to Asia) idea under Obama presidency and Asia Reassurance Initiatives Act (ARIA), and China's foreign policy emphasis on "Community of Common Destiny" are examples in this regard, which seek to redefine engagement with Asia and countries in the Indo-Pacific.

The US prioritised its relations with Asia under its Indo-Pacific Strategy.⁹² On the other hand, China's foreign policy seeks to develop a new diplomatic framework, termed as "Major Power Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics." Some of the important characteristics of this policy are the armed forces' proactive role in advancing its foreign policy; high-quality development under the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative; and developing strategic partnerships with likeminded nations.⁹³ As part of its aggressive global outreach, China has modernised its defence forces and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) for effective maritime, air and land operations. The Asia-Pacific community is seen by China as members of a community with shared destiny. However, the economic and strategic competition between major powers brings uncertainties to regional security.⁹⁴ Both India and Sri Lanka's respective Indian Ocean outlook is operating in this strategic environment. The strategic environment also presents divergences and convergences in India and Sri Lanka's outlook towards the Indian Ocean, impacting the security dynamics.



Respective Outlook: Divergences and convergences

India's maritime strategy was greatly influenced by K.M. Panikkar who argued that India's future is dependent on the Indian Ocean. In post-independence years India actively opposed any presence of extra regional powers; the case in point was Russian entry into IOR in 1968 and the leasing of Diego Garcia by the British to the United States in 1970. To realise its security needs, India tried to build a security nexus with the states in the region and responded to security threats. India's intervention in Mauritius in 1982 in support of then PM Anerood Jugnauth, India's intervention in Sri Lanka in 1984, covert intervention in Seychelles in 1986 to save president Albert Rene and the 1988, Operation Cactus, that saved the then government of president AbudulGayoom, from the Sri Lankan insurgent group People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE) are some of the examples of India's assertive role in the region. Indian Navy played an important role in securing India's interests.⁹⁵

India has a vast coastline extending to more than 7,500 km, with more than 1,200 islands, and a large Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of about 2 million sq. Km and approximately 1.2 million sq. km of continental shelf.⁹⁶ Therefore, India's maritime strategy is based on two main aspects. One is a 'holistic approach towards maritime security to deal with rising threats due to blurring of traditional and non-traditional lines and second, ensuring the freedom to use the seas.'⁹⁷ Other aspects that have shaped the Maritime Security Strategy of India are 'unique maritime geography with a central location and reach across the IOR; relations with its maritime

neighbours and India's dependence on the seas for national development."⁹⁸In this respect, maintaining freedom of navigation and strengthening the international legal regime at sea, respecting the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and all-round coordination between various navies to counter common threats at sea are other features that are given prominence in the maritime outlook of India. A substantial amount of India's 'industrial and economic activity is located within 200 km of its 7,516 km long shoreline, including nuclear power stations.'⁹⁹

In the past, security and defence cooperation with other countries was considered inconsistent with India's objective of "Strategic Autonomy."¹⁰⁰ But this thinking changed and security cooperation is increasingly understood as a way of expanding strategic influence.¹⁰¹As part of this belief, India modernised its defence forces to respond to security problems and tried to cultivate security relations with smaller states in the IOR, along with middle powers such as Australia, South Africa and Indonesia.

Regional cooperative approaches for enhancing maritime security such as 'MILAN', the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), and Indian Ocean Regional Association (IORA) are considered important in securing India's maritime interests. Project "Mausam" and Mission SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) are other important policy frameworks which aim to deepen the economic and security cooperation with states in the region, especially with India's maritime neighbours and island states.¹⁰² India's outreach to ASEAN and investments worth USD 55.5 billion (since April 2019 till March 2022), and connectivity initiatives are also important in this context.¹⁰³



Overcoming the hesitations of history, as part of new maritime strategic thinking, India is trying to deepen strategic partnership with the US. An important ‘pillar of this partnership is shared vision of an open, stable, secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific Region.’¹⁰⁴ The Indo-Pacific strategy of the US mentions India “as a leader in South Asia and the Indian Ocean, a driving force of the Quad and other regional fora, and an engine for regional growth and development.”¹⁰⁵ Therefore, the US is willing to support ‘India’s role as a net security provider in the region’.¹⁰⁶ The Malabar exercises started in 1992 provided a platform for the navies of India and the US to conduct anti-surface, anti-air and anti-submarine warfare drills, manoeuvres and tactical exercises between war ships. Over the years, Australia and Japan joined the exercise and also Singapore.

In this context, Indian PM’s visit to Seychelles and Sri Lanka after a gap of nearly three decades in 2015 was considered significant in conveying a message ‘that India’s vision for the Indian Ocean is not directed against any country and it is inclusive.’¹⁰⁷ There is an understanding that India’s “Neighbourhood First” approach can rebuild economic and societal linkages of the subcontinent and can also integrate sea space into the South of India to India’s security calculus”.¹⁰⁸ To take advantage of India’s geographical position in the IOR, India has been extending a Line of Credit to improve maritime facilities across borders. Similar to Sri Lanka,

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India also desires that the Indian Ocean does not become an arena of intense competition.¹⁰⁹

Given its strategic geographical location in the Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka tried to carve its own space in South Asian security dynamics, by moulding its foreign policy to suit domestic interests. For instance, up to 1956, Sri Lanka did not have any diplomatic relations with the communist bloc, but exception was made through the Rubber and Rice Pact, signed with China in 1952, to meet domestic food demand. The US has used Sri Lanka for the fulfilment of its security objectives in the region and to propagate its ideas to other countries via its Voice of America (VoA) transmission tower in Iranawila, Trincomalee, during the Second World War.¹¹⁰The SLFP government led by SWRD Bandaranaike, actively supported Non-Alignment Movement (NAM) by renouncing bilateral and multilateral security relationships Sri Lanka had with relevance to Cold War, such as the Agreement with Britain.¹¹¹At the same time, Sri Lanka allowed the US warships attached to the US Seventh Fleet into the Colombo port in 1975. PM Sirimavo Bandaranaike defended the decision saying “the visit was not associated with a threat or use of force against any coastal or hinterland state of the IOR.”¹¹² The stand taken by the government was criticised by the opposition Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), as it did not reconcile with the idea of Indian Ocean the Zone of Peace (IOZP) propagated by Sri Lanka at the UN in the 1970s.

In recent years, subtle geo-political and strategic competition in the IOR between the US, China and India has been recognised by Sri Lanka as a possible threat to its security interest in the region. According to Sri Lanka, ‘the absence of overarching security



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architecture and institutional frameworks that address security issues of the region remain a serious drawback'.¹¹³ There is a general view that, in spite of having a geo-geographical advantage, Sri Lanka was constrained in leveraging its position for a very long time due to internal ethnic issues. There is also an understanding that 'to ensure a rule-based order and its own security, Sri Lanka should recognise its inherent limitations as a smaller state and pursue a proactive strategy of multi-actor engagement, in military and economic terms.'¹¹⁴ Sri Lanka's emphasis on rule-based order is based on the premise that as an island nation, Sri Lanka cannot afford confrontation at sea. As part of its emphasis on rule-based order, Sri Lanka signed the Jakarta Concord in March 2021, which affirmed freedom of Navigation as "culture of democracy."¹¹⁵

Therefore, in post-war years Sri Lanka took particular interest in promoting multilateral cooperation between the major powers present in the region.¹¹⁶ For instance, the Sri Lankan Navy has taken the initiative of organising an annual Galle Dialogue since 2010. The Dialogue is seen as an important mechanism to exchange ideas and views on common maritime security issues along with reducing mistrust between maritime powers in the region. The October 2019 Galle Dialogue brought together 148 participants from 54 countries and 17 international organisations including, India, the US and China. The BIMSTEC and IORA are seen as the two potential organisations that can deal with maritime security

issues. First Meeting of IORA Maritime Safety and Security (MSS) Working Group was chaired by Sri Lanka on 8-9 August 2019 with the participation from 22 foreign delegates representing IORA member countries and IORA Secretariats.¹¹⁷

Apart from playing a leading role in mobilising littoral states in the Indian Ocean in various platforms, Sri Lanka tried to project its Indian Ocean outlook in various forums. For instance, it hosted the Track 1.5 Conference ‘The Indian Ocean: Defining our Future’ on 11-12 October in 2018. The Conference saw participation of 300 senior government officials and think tank representatives from over 40 Indian Ocean littoral states. It emphasised on an open, free, fair and peaceful Indian Ocean. According to Sri Lanka, these platforms are important because it was unable to address the country’s external risks alone and by convening the conference “it tried to understand the impact of these risks and to address them jointly with other countries in a transparent and orderly way.”¹¹⁸ Sri Lanka’s National Economic Development policies have also incorporated the Indian Ocean as a vital component in its development plan.¹¹⁹

Enhanced maritime security and defence cooperation

In the last decade, security cooperation between India and Sri Lanka has been enhanced in the form of military training and diplomacy, supply of defence equipment and maritime cooperation between the two navies.¹²⁰ The enhanced focus on maritime security, promoted a first trilateral meeting on maritime security in the year 2011. Sri Lanka, India and Maldives have participated actively to identify concerns and possible areas of cooperation in the security realm. After the change of government in Male, the 4th National



Security Advisors (NSA) level trilateral cooperation meeting was held in November 2020 after a gap of six years. At this meeting, a decision was taken to establish the Colombo Security Conclave.¹²¹ The NSA and Deputy NSA-level meetings were held to follow-up on the decisions taken. Setting up of the Trilateral Secretariat on Maritime Security Cooperation on 1 March 2022 at the Sri Lankan Navy Headquarters in Colombo is an important step. The Colombo Security Conclave has been expanded to include other important maritime countries in the region such as Mauritius. In the 5th Colombo Security Conclave held in Maldives on 9-10 March 2022, Bangladesh and Seychelles were invited as observers. The five key areas of cooperation that the countries have agreed to work on are: Maritime Safety and Security; Countering Terrorism and Radicalisation; Combating Trafficking and Transnational Organised Crime; Cyber Security, Protection of Critical Infrastructure and Technology, Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief.¹²² At the 6th Deputy NSA level Colombo Security Conclave held in Kochi on 7 July 2022, maritime capacity building was recognised as an integral part of the security conclave, which includes increasing Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) and training, sharing of data on ship movements, promoting marine oil pollution response cooperation; expanding bilateral 'DOSTI' (friendship) exercises through table top exercises; sharing of the information on illegal maritime activities

For Sri Lanka, participation in the Conclave provided an opportunity to focus on post-war security priorities.

Sri Lanka is conscious of growing digitalisation and impact social media can have on its security.

through existing points of contact; and forming a trilateral subgroup focused on policy and legal issues.¹²³

For Sri Lanka, participation in the Conclave provided an opportunity to focus on post-war security priorities. Sri Lanka is conscious of growing digitalisation and impact social media can have on its security. The Easter Sunday bombings in April 2019, carried out by Sri Lankan youth under the influence of the Islamic State terror networks active in social media, shook the post-war society of Sri Lanka. India helped Sri Lanka in the aftermath and the Indian PM was the first foreign leader to visit the country after the deadly attacks which claimed 260 lives.

Enhanced security cooperation has also led to cooperation in combating Non-Traditional Security (NTS) threats. In the year 2021 alone, the navy has mounted successful narcotic raids in island waters and on high seas and has seized a large consignment of illegal drugs worth over Rs. 15.86 billion in street value.¹²⁴ In anti-drug operations carried out on 74 occasions, both in island waters and in high seas, the Sri Lankan Navy has seized over 1268kg of heroin along with 119 foreign and 22 local suspects.¹²⁵

The lack of a formal defence agreement, however, has not obstructed the level of defence cooperation between the two countries.¹²⁶ Sri Lanka is the largest beneficiary of India's defence cooperation.

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Capacity building and disaster management emerged as important components of cooperation over the years. Training of Sri Lankan defence personnel in Wellington Staff College in Tamil Nadu was scuttled due to objections by Tamil Nadu political parties. Since 2013, the Sri Lankan Armed Forces Personnel (SLAF), have not been attending the foundational Professional Military Education (PME) course.¹²⁷ Despite the objections from Tamil Nadu, India continues to train Sri Lankan officers in various military establishments such as National Defence College (NDA). Nearly 60% of Sri Lankan military personnel pursue young, junior and senior command courses in India.¹²⁸ India gifted a Dornier aircraft to Sri Lanka on 15 August 2002, to undertake Search and Rescue operations. The Annual Defence Dialogue (ADD) between India and Sri Lanka was started in 2012. India considers Sri Lanka as a number one “priority partner”, in the defence sphere.¹²⁹ The Trilateral Maritime Exercise “Dosti,” which has been in place for the last three decades, has been crucial in developing interoperability and enhancing cooperation between the Coast Guards of India, Sri Lanka and the Maldives. The 15th edition of the “Dosti” exercises was held in November 2021. Other than Dosti, Mitra Shakti and SLINEX exercises are helping in defence cooperation. Sri Lanka’s is playing an active role in IORA as a lead coordinator for the Maritime Safety and Security pillar. An MoU was signed to establish a Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC) with a grant of \$6 million from India towards the Sri Lanka Navy Head Quarters in March 2022. These mechanisms of defence cooperation have definitely improved understanding of each other’s security needs.

Another important issue in securing a common framework for maritime security cooperation in the region is the Indian Ocean a Zone of Peace (ZoP), which Sri Lanka propagated in the 1960s and 70s. Sri Lanka asked for India's support to the proposal in October 2021, during the visit of Indian Foreign Secretary, to Colombo. The request must have stemmed from growing concerns about Sri Lanka "becoming a theatre of conflict between China on the one hand and a US-led coalition including India, on the other".¹³⁰ India seems to have supported the idea at the Galle dialogue in 2014, due to various factors, such as the rise of China and the growing interest of major powers in the region, but is yet to commit fully to the idea.¹³¹ In 2014, a Chinese submarine visited Sri Lanka and the same year Sri Lanka supported the BRI.

Above developments indicate that maintaining peace and stability in the region is indispensable for both the countries and this has manifested in various initiatives taken to develop a common Indian Ocean security perspective, despite divergent security needs and interests, which is reflected in engagement with external actors. Therefore, the below section will look at Sri Lanka's engagement with two important regional actors that is the US and China.

Sri Lanka's Engagement with Regional Actors

For Sri Lanka, the post-2009 years were important as it tried to reorient its foreign and security policy to gain the most from a no-war situation. There is a general view among the policy makers of Sri Lanka that due to nearly thirty years of ethnic conflict, Sri Lanka has lost many opportunities in utilising its unique strategic geographical position in the IOR. Therefore, it "must cultivate

Sri Lanka tried to develop a proactive foreign policy centred on commercial and hub diplomacy. But these goals could not be achieved fully, due to its domestic political situation and domestic response to the external actors' role in the region.

a dual identity as both the 'Centre of the Indian Ocean', and the 'Gateway to the Subcontinent.'¹³² This conviction led post-war Sri Lanka's engagement with external actors, as well as its economic policies. Sri Lanka's engagement with the world in the post-war years is based on the belief that there are three major shifts in the international order and Sri Lanka is ready to adjust to these shifts.¹³³ One is the growing power of Asian economies, in which China and India are poised to play greater roles through confident foreign policy initiatives. Second is the weakening of rule-based order and third, growing digitalisation and its impact on security.¹³⁴ These shifts according to Sri Lanka are positive in terms of increasing investments from countries such as India, Japan and China and in finalising Free Trade Agreements (FTA) with China and Singapore. Therefore, Sri Lanka tried to develop a proactive foreign policy centred on commercial and hub diplomacy. But these goals could not be achieved fully, due to its domestic political situation and domestic response to the external actors' role in the region.

The US

The US policy on Sri Lanka, pertaining to internal ethnic issues and human rights violations may not have changed, but since 2015, it has shown interest in diversifying its engagement with Sri Lanka. In general, the scope of the US loans is limited to small sectors such

The US sees Sri Lanka as a partner with shared values to build a prosperous Indo-Pacific

as agriculture, health etc. and not for mega development projects.¹³⁵ The Generalized System of Preferences (GSP)+ concessions given by the US and European Union (EU) to Sri Lanka, are tied to progress in reconciliation. After the formation of NUG, the US promised to encourage US investments and enhance bilateral trade by exploring the possibility of expanding the scope of the present Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA).¹³⁶ As part of the US's outreach program, the Sri-Lanka-US Partnership Dialogue was started in 2016. The fourth partnership dialogue was held on 23 March 2022. Sri Lanka also participated in the 'Our Oceans' Conference aimed at preservation of Oceans, held in September 2016, in Washington DC. The International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) has increased its portfolio to \$265 million in loans, designed to support Sri Lanka's small and medium enterprises, particularly women-owned businesses.¹³⁷ The US has transferred its third High Endurance US Coast Guard Cutter through the US Excess Defence Articles program to Sri Lanka. The King Air program to strengthen Sri Lanka's maritime monitoring capacity and response to humanitarian and post-disaster needs has also been provided. Exchange of visits, including those by US ships and military officials, and counter-terrorism, border security and maritime cooperation have been an integral part of US-Sri Lanka exchanges in recent years. The US, trained and held joint exercises in 2016 with Sri Lanka's first-ever Marine battalion. The US-Sri Lanka Open Skies Agreement is in force since 2002, to modernise



and strengthen bilateral aviation relationship and to expand all cargo and international air transport opportunities.¹³⁸ The US sees Sri Lanka as a partner with shared values to build a prosperous Indo-Pacific.¹³⁹

Sri Lanka has also shown interest in enhancing its defence ties with the West, particularly with the US. The Acquisition and Cross-Services Agreement (ACSA) that was signed in 2007 and renewed in 2017 between Sri Lanka and the US is important in many respects. While signing the agreement in 2007, the US Ambassador Robert Blake stated, “Sri Lanka, positioned astride major sea lanes and at the doorstep to India, can play a significant role in military readiness as political and military efforts shift focus on Asia in the new millennium.”¹⁴⁰

However, the clauses of the agreement were not made public, leading to various speculations about the agreement in public, and whether the agreement favours only the US. The Agreement is tied to the US Federal Law. It allows both countries to transfer and exchange logistics supplies, support, and re-fuelling services, which clearly benefits the US in its military operation in the Asia-Pacific region – specifically the US Pacific Command (USPACOM), which is now the US Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM).¹⁴¹ While the 2007 ACSA permits US military vessels to anchor in Sri Lankan ports on a ‘one-off’ basis, the 2017 ACSA appears to be “open ended.”¹⁴²

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According to reports, the Government of Sri Lanka also tried to renew the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) also known as Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) with the US, with new terms. The agreement proposal is said to be against the security interests of Sri Lanka, as its provisions contain privileges, exemptions and immunities to US personnel and allows free movement of vessels and vehicles operated by the US defence in the territory of Sri Lanka.¹⁴³ The first SOFA was signed in 1995 by President Kumaratunga's government. But the clauses of the above-mentioned agreement of 2020 are a problem. The JVP asked the government in 2020, to nullify the SOFA and ACSA citing the example of Iraq and the killing of Iran's top commander Qasem Soleimani, who was executed by the US with privileges acquired through the 2014 SOFA agreement signed with Iraq.¹⁴⁴

The Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) proposal by the US was also seen as part of US's grand Indo-Pacific strategy. Some argued that if the MCC Compact Grant for Sri Lanka was approved by the country's parliament, it would pave the way for US interference in Sri Lanka's development sectors in a direct competition with China, leading to political consequences.¹⁴⁵ Since the MCC Compact Grants are linked with transportation and infrastructure improvements in Sri Lanka, the US Government would have access to real estate records including those which are leased by China. Consequently, this would play to the advantage of American commercial enterprises and provide intelligence value to US forces stationed in the region.¹⁴⁶ The ACSA (2017), SOFA (2020) and MCC proposal are part of the US Indo-Pacific vision. But the lack of transparency of both the agreements is a worrying aspect



for Sri Lanka. Due to the domestic opposition to the SOFA, then US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo had to cancel his visit to Colombo in June 2019. Domestic response to US engagement also shows that the Sri Lankan society in general is sensitive towards the role of major powers in the island nation.

China

China is an important partner for Sri Lanka in many respects. The assistance given by China to Sri Lanka is in line with the “Strategic Cooperation Partnership Agreement” that was signed in 2014, after the visit of the Chinese President to Colombo. The FTA with China is expected in the future. Sri Lanka’s support to China’s BRI has raised concerns as it has given momentum to China’s age-old Maritime Silk Route revival plans and inroads into the Indian Ocean arena. Both domestic and foreign policy considerations have influenced Sri Lanka’s support to BRI. Sri Lanka pursued it as a boost to its post-war economy and to emerge as a hub in the IOR, and it also acted as balancing act against India. In the post-war years, a number of infrastructure projects ranging from ports, roads and railways to renewable energy projects have been funded by China, through state financial institutions such as the Exim Bank of China. The Colombo Port, Hambantota Port and the Hambantota Port industrial zone, which was leased for 99 years, and the Colombo Port City are considered important BRI investments. These investments

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are designed as flow-through centres for storing of China's manufactured goods destined for the Middle East, South East Asia and other regions.¹⁴⁷ Sri Lanka became the founding member of the Asian Development Bank (ADB), initiated by China. At the same time, China's aloofness towards the internal reconciliation process in general, some argue, has definitely appealed to Sinhala political parties and resulted in accepting China's contributions.¹⁴⁸ Therefore, BRI projects have been welcomed in Sri Lanka despite the loan burden the country has to carry for many years to come.

However, transparency in implementation of projects and possible dual use of ports (civil and military) by China in the future are India's main concerns, despite Sri Lanka's continued assurance of not working against India's security interests in the region. In 2014, when the West and India pushed Sri Lanka to work towards finding a political solution and show progress on reconciliation, Sri Lanka allowed docking of two Chinese submarines at Colombo Port from 7-13 September 2014 and 31 October - 6 November 2014. Even within Sri Lanka, there were protests against Hambantota Port, Colombo Port City and Economic Zone. Concerns were raised against the "environmental damage along a 175-mile stretch of coastline north and south of Colombo and the impact on 80,000 households that make a living from the sea."¹⁴⁹ Hambantota Port development was suspended briefly in 2017, by the NUG government on environmental concerns but later resumed.

What is to be noted is that, Sri Lanka, while being an important BRI and strategic partner of China, tried to exhibit its policy of neutrality in foreign policy, mentioned in various documents such as Mahinda Chintana, a 100-day programme of the NUG government, and in

Sri Lanka, while being an important BRI and strategic partner of China, tried to exhibit its policy of neutrality in foreign policy, mentioned in various documents such as Mahinda Chintana, a 100-day programme of the NUG government, and in Vistas of Prosperity and Splendour by the SLPP government.

Vistas of Prosperity and Splendour by the SLPP government. For instance, while appreciating the idea of the Maritime Silk Route of China, Sri Lanka, on the South China Sea, dispute issue called for “settlement of disputes and differences through constructive dialogue, consultation and cooperation by the parties concerned in accordance with international laws and practices.”¹⁵⁰ The position is in line with post-war foreign policy orientation that ‘along with commercial diplomacy, the country needs to safeguard its security from emerging regional power plays that are already apparent in the South China Sea and on the Korean Peninsula.’¹⁵¹ According to Sri Lankan scholar Asana Abeyagoonasekera, Sri Lanka’s engagement with external actors in post war years demonstrated a dilemma of how to maintain an equidistant foreign policy, for instance, between rising China and emerging India.¹⁵²

Since 2012, China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has conducted joint exercises and training, and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations, with the Sri Lankan counterpart. For instance, Silk Road Cooperation-2015 Joint Counter Terrorism Training for Special Operation Units was held in Colombo in June 2015, and HADR operations were conducted in August 2017. The People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) Task Group visited Sri Lanka, when the country was hit by floods. The task group participated

in disaster relief efforts, provided medical services and epidemic prevention.¹⁵³ It had both the Chinese and Indian militaries participate in the eighth edition of a field training exercise called the Exercise-Cormorant Strike VIII.

The island nation has been welcoming port visits from the vessels of various foreign navies.¹⁵⁴ Sri Lanka tried to display its awareness of sensitivities involved in India-China relations. For instance, former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, before his first official visit to India after assuming office as the President of Sri Lanka in November 2019, said, “we want to work with all the countries and we don’t want to do anything which will harm any other country for that matter, we understand the importance of Indian concerns, so we can’t engage in any activity which will threaten the security of India.”¹⁵⁵

2022 DEVELOPMENTS: NEW CHALLENGES

The year 2022, has once again put India-Sri Lanka relations in a delicate pedestal. The economic and political crisis that Sri Lanka witnessed in 2022 is unprecedented in the history of Sri Lanka. Thirty years of armed ethnic conflict, COVID-19 pandemic, Ukraine War, economic policy decisions taken over the years by successive governments, tax cuts, and a shift to organic farming led to the economic crisis. The Gotabaya Rajapaksa-led government’s failure to provide fuel, and essential food items led to public outrage. Sri Lanka defaulted on its \$52 billion debt and declared bankruptcy for the first time in history. On July 9, 2022, the public occupied the Presidential Secretariat and attacked the PM’s residence. These developments forced the President Gotabaya Rajapaksa to leave the



Amidst the crisis, India stood as a reliable partner for Sri Lanka by extending moral and material support. By mid-2022 alone, India provided financial support of nearly \$4 billion.

country, first to Maldives, then to Singapore and finally to Thailand. He returned to the country in September 2022. Meanwhile, PM Ranil Wickramasinghe was elected as the President of the country by parliamentarians of Sri Lanka on 20 July 2022. But Sri Lanka's problems are far from over. It needs a bailout from IMF and a possible debt moratorium from bilateral partners to revive the economy. Sri Lanka managed to get a staff level assurance from the IMF for a \$2.9 billion assurance in September 2022. It may take a year or two for Sri Lanka to stabilise the economic situation. IMF debt restructuring is also linked to debt relief from bilateral donors of Sri Lanka, such as India, China and Japan. The Paris Club has reached out to India and China asking both the countries to work closely on debt relief for Sri Lanka.

Amidst the crisis, India stood as a reliable partner for Sri Lanka by extending moral and material support. By mid-2022 alone, India provided financial support of nearly \$4 billion.¹⁵⁶ It was used for the supply of fuel, medicines and essential food items. The Tamil Nadu government has also gifted essential items worth US\$ 16 million, as part of larger Indian assistance. After the 9 July 2022 developments, India made a statement that "it stands with the people of Sri Lanka as they seek to realise their aspirations for prosperity and progress through democratic means, values and constitutional framework."¹⁵⁷ This is an important statement from India, as it exhibited India's support to constitutional means of

resolving economic and political crisis in Sri Lanka. India was also concerned about the spill over effects of the crisis on India-Sri Lanka relations. In contrast to the refugee flow that India witnessed during the internal ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, the present crisis did not result in outflow of people from Sri Lanka to India on a large scale. Nonetheless, if the economic and political situation does not stabilise in near future, it may result in refugee flow and other non-traditional threats. Stable Sri Lanka is a pre-requisite for addressing shared maritime security concerns.

Given the delicate geopolitical balance in the region, another concern for India is the use of crisis situation in Sri Lanka by other external actors for their interests. Of particular concern is China. Unlike India, which has responded to the crisis consistently, China chose to wait and watch before providing humanitarian assistance of nearly \$76 million. But it is yet to respond to Sri Lanka's request of a \$4 billion emergency aid to tide over the economic crisis.¹⁵⁸ It also expressed its displeasure regarding the IMF bailout to Sri Lanka, which is linked to the Structural Adjustment Programme of IMF. China's approach to the crisis has been defended on grounds of its stature as a "major global creditor, who is financially exposed to many other countries in financial difficulty."¹⁵⁹ Sri Lanka's outreach to the West for financial support is seen by China as inimical to its interests in the region. For instance, in the middle of the crisis, Chinese premier sent birthday wishes to former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, and underlined the spirit of the Rubber-Rice Pact "independence, self-reliance, unity and mutual support."¹⁶⁰ The message was a subtle reminder to Sri Lanka, probably to follow a neutral and independent foreign policy as envisaged by Sri Lankan



foreign policy makers.¹⁶¹ Sri Lanka owes around \$2 billion in debt to China and overall investments by China in Sri Lanka are estimated to be \$8 billion.¹⁶²

China's reluctance to give any commitment on debt relief did not come in the way of China-Sri Lanka strategic relations centred on the Indian Ocean. Despite India's concerns, China's Yuan Wang 5, a satellite tracking vessel, was docked as a "research vessel" in the Hambantota Port from 16 to 22 August 2022. China defended the arrival of the ship in Hambantota, when Sri Lanka was going through severe economic crisis. China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin said "the marine scientific research conducted by the research ship Yuan Wang 5 conforms to international law and international common practice, and will not affect the security and economic interests of any country."¹⁶³ However, India is concerned about the growing Chinese presence in the region and the remarks made by India's NSA Ajit Doval, in the first meeting of the Multi Agency Maritime Security Group (MAMSG) in June 2022, reflects India's concerns. The statement called for "seamless coordination among various agencies involved in protecting India's maritime interests in the face of emerging security challenges and increasing rivalries and competitions in the Indian Ocean".¹⁶⁴

Sri Lanka yet again ignored India's security concerns amidst the crisis. But, India took a position that 'Sri Lanka is a sovereign

China's reluctance to give any commitment on debt relief did not come in the way of China-Sri Lanka strategic relations centred on the Indian Ocean.

country and makes its own independent decisions and in the context of India and China, India has consistently maintained the necessity of mutual respect, mutual sensitivity, and mutual interest as the basis of development of ties.¹⁶⁵ It remains to be seen how Sri Lanka will handle the political and economic situation taking into account its security concerns as well as the concerns of its maritime neighbour India.

Once again the focus of the West has shifted to reconciliation and human rights issues in Sri Lanka. The EU has been pressurising Sri Lanka to show progress on reconciliation and EU's GSP+ status is tied to the progress. The West and the UN also strongly objected to the use of PTA on activists, who mobilised public against the SLPP government on 9 July 2022.

The government led by President Ranil Wickramasinghe is yet to get public support and this apparent lack of legitimacy is a hurdle to securing a stable government, which is needed to address economic and political issues facing the island nation. The expected unity government involving various stake holders could not be formed, due to lack of common vision among political parties to address the crisis. India's role, during the crisis in Sri Lanka has been well recognised and appreciated, but the China factor may not wither away in the future. According to Sri Lanka, 'China is a friend but India-Sri Lanka relations are special and India's security interests are Sri Lanka's own security interests.'¹⁶⁶ As far as the ethnic issue is concerned, in September 2022, in a strongly worded statement India noted the "lack of measurable progress" in finding a political solution to the ethnic issue at the UNHRC.¹⁶⁷



POST-2009 SECURITY DYNAMICS: OBSERVATIONS

- In the last decade, India-Sri Lanka tried to bridge the gap in asymmetry in relations by developing synergies in the Indian Ocean outlook and maritime security cooperation. Bilateral relations stood the ground despite differences in steps taken by the government's in Sri Lanka, towards reconciliation and engagement with external actors. Despite the differences, partnership with India has been valued in Sri Lanka, and the island nation leadership repeatedly underscored it in various official statements and policy documents.
- Internal political dynamics in Sri Lanka played a bigger role in shaping the India-Sri Lanka relations and might determine the future course. The internal war may be over in Sri Lanka, but the underlying conflict situation remains even today. This is where India's concerns lie. Sri Lanka's inability to address the root causes of the war, demilitarisation of war ravaged north, implementation of draconian terrorism laws such as PTA, and lack of progress in reconciliation will continue to attract international attention. The uncertainty over the Tamil question will continue to be a bottle neck in developing and enhancing political, economic and security relations. What is making it more complex problem to solve is India's response to reconciliation is viewed, differently by the majority and the minority community in Sri Lanka.
- Political and historical complexities in India-Sri Lanka relations are hard to break. The fear of Indian dominance over the territory of Sri Lanka among the Sri Lankans has been a reality since its independence. The degree of fear may have reduced but the trust

deficit remains. It remains to be seen how India will navigate this difficult phase in its mutual relationship with Sri Lanka. Both the countries are well aware of the fact that, general trust deficit in India-Sri Lanka relations remain even today, despite the substantial improvement in relations. But this did not stop India from extending the required humanitarian and financial help to Sri Lanka, during the pandemic, and cooperating in disaster management. For India, not supporting Sri Lanka would mean risking losing a partner in the region.

- Both India and Sri Lanka realise the volatility of the Indian Ocean maritime space and conflict of interests (economic, commercial and strategic) of various powers operating in the region. Though Sri Lanka and India are collaborating in various platforms to ensure peace and security in the region, respective engagement with external actors and divergence in perspectives about what constitutes security is acting as a stumbling block. Docking of ships, strategic investments by China in ports of Sri Lanka, and dealing with NTSs remain a challenge for India.
- Sri Lanka's ambiguity towards an Indo-centric security system in South Asia is a reality which Sri Lanka is trying to adjust with and contend at the same time, by leveraging its geo-graphic position in the IOR. But the main challenge for Sri Lanka rests in balancing the conflicting interests of powers present in the region, such as India, US and China and steering through various foreign policy priorities such as "India First Policy," "One-China Policy", free and open Indo-Pacific and support to BRI. Another challenge is maintaining economic and political stability to ensure that foreign policy goals are achieved. This will determine the policy of Sri Lanka towards India for years to come. Therefore,



Economic crisis and accompanying political crisis
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there is a need to communicate in much more transparent manner, through diplomatic and other channels, regarding development in the region, developments near borders, and how both countries view the development. Maximalist positions may not help from certain domestic quarters in both the countries to develop a common security outlook.

- Economic crisis and accompanying political crisis in Sri Lanka, since the beginning of 2022, can thrust new challenges in bilateral relations. India provided moral and political support. Unlike the past, India is now dealing with the economic crisis in Sri Lanka along with its political crisis. An economically and politically unstable Sri Lanka can be a security threat for India. This can delay economic and investment cooperation, slow down the reconciliation process and bring in extra regional powers. Refugee and fishermen issues remain unresolved. India's substantial financial and humanitarian assistance to Sri Lanka in post-war years to rebuild the war economy is a continuing process. However, the challenge for India is in maintaining a balance between its own interests and the interests of the island nation, in the fast changing geo-political and security dynamics of the region. So far both India and Sri Lanka seem to be able to handle the strategic pulls and pressures in relations, despite respective foreign policy preferences.

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