

# Power rivalry in the Indian Ocean

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A report in The Island of May 29, 2018 states: "Japanese government plans to invest in port development in three Indian Ocean nations – Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh – as part of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's 'free and open Indo-Pacific strategy' informs the Jakarta Post. The three sites that are under consideration for port development are Dawei in southeast Myanmar, Trincomalee in northern Sri Lanka and Matarbari in southeast Bangladesh.



A currently existing small port of Trincomalee on the northeast coast of Sri Lanka will be expanded by Japan, Sri Lanka and India into a trade port to be able to handle large vessels. The cost of this project is expected to be about JPY10 to 13 bin (around USD 115 million)."

Continuing, the report states: "Obviously these projects highlight the concerns of Japan and other nations over China's growing footprint in the region. China has obtained the right to use Hambantota Port in southern Sri Lanka for 99 years and also supports the development of harbours in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Myanmar. Its major role in infrastructure development in the Indian Ocean countries based on the announced 'String of Pearls' maritime strategy raises concerns, particularly in Japan and India, which a year ago announced the launch of their own joint initiative, the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC)".

AAGC is meant to be a sea route from Japan to Africa, taking in ports of India and those of other South-East Asian countries. It looks like India and Japan are bound to compete with OBOR (One Belt One Road) in the Indian Ocean building ports in friendly nations to expand mutually and reinforce trade".

Since the report in the Jakarta Post, cited above, echoes comments made during my presentation at the morning sessions of the Vijayathmaga Annual Convention, 2018, at the Shangri-La Hotel on May 13, 2018, particularly with reference to Sri Lanka, relevant excerpts from that address are extensively presented below:

"The post-conflict period in Sri Lanka saw the engagement of two Great Powers in the island's affairs. One was India to some degree and the other was China to a much greater degree. With the current administration coming into force starting January 8, 2015, the United States has made a discernible impact on the affairs of Sri Lanka by requiring the installed regime to co-sponsor UNHRC resolution 30/1 in order to make Sri Lanka a tool in the pursuit of geopolitical interests of it and its allies in the Indian Ocean. Consequently, there are three Great Powers currently pursuing their respective interests in Sri Lanka. It is reported that other powers such as Japan and Singapore are also likely to engage with Sri Lanka (the former in Kandy and the latter in Trincomalee), whether by invitation of the Sri Lankan Government or at the behest of the US as partners in a US-led grand coalition, in order to curb China."

#### Coalition of forces

"What is interesting about this coalition of forces is that both Japan and Singapore have been longstanding strategic partners of the United States. On the other hand, India is new to the relationship but one that is growing in strength under the Modi administration. The Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement that the US and India recently signed attests to this emerging relationship. Consequently, as far as Sri Lanka is concerned, no Government in Sri Lanka would know at any time whether the four powers (US, India, Japan and Singapore) are acting individually or in collusion. What impact their individual actions or their joint collaborations would have on Sri Lanka would be of little or no concern to these countries."

"Since all of them are converging on Sri Lanka, not for the benefit of Sri Lanka but solely for what is best for each of them individually or collectively, how Sri Lanka handles these great power relations should be a matter of deep concern because the games that Great Powers play leave in their wake, the unintended consequences that countries such as Iraq, Libya and Afghanistan are now facing, and Sri Lanka would have to prepare itself to face in the near future. In addition, if Sri Lanka hopes to emerge unscathed by the interplay of the US-led grand coalition and China in and around Sri Lanka, it is not only being delusional but also reflects a failure to acknowledge its limitations."

"The present policy of President Xi's One Belt One Road is a complete turnaround of former President Deng Xiaoping's geopolitical philosophy of hide capacity, bide time and never claim leadership. The land and sea connectivity provided by One Belt One Road policy is ambitious and aggressive. Apart from this policy being one to revive the old Silk Road that connected China to Europe the One Belt One Road links China both through land and the sea. As far as the India

Ocean is concerned this policy is making other global powers led by the US seriously concerned. The reason for the rivalry in the Indian Ocean is in order to prevent China getting a foothold in the Indian Ocean; a policy that is being vigorously pursued by China."

### Compelling reasons

"From China's perspective, one of the compelling reasons for a foothold in Sri Lanka and other Indian Ocean Rim countries is to develop ports for access to the marginalized rural western regions of China where disparities between the rural west in comparison with the urbanized and developed east are significant. The other compelling reason is that the Straits of Malacca is a critical choke point that could cripple China's economy. This makes it imperative for China to find alternative routes to deliver material to western China by building ports at Gwador in Pakistan, Chittagong in Bangladesh and Sittwe in Myanmar. These ports along with road and rail links connect the Indian Ocean to the west and south of China. Sri Lanka on the other hand serves the maritime arm of the One Belt One Road. Collectively these projects are referred to as the "string of pearls."

"The One Belt One Road being a very ambitious concept that is touted purely for economic and connectivity reasons is making the US and India very nervous. For the US it means accepting the presence of a rising super power in a region that it held sway as the sole super power, and for India it is the presence of China in a region that is traditionally considered as its regional preserve. India's deep concern is because the naval infrastructure that is being installed by China in pursuit of its national interests has the potential to serve its military interests as well, if the need arises."

### Lesson from the Maldives

"Commenting on developments in the Maldives, Dr. David Brewster of the Australian National University stated: "In the last few days we have seen growing strategic rivalry between major powers such as China and India as they expand their roles in the region. We are now also seeing new players competing to build their own areas of influence and blocs in the Indian Ocean and this could be another concern for India...India is particularly alarmed by the growing Chinese presence in the region and is responding...Experts believe that the Maldives is just another front for the Chinese. The small island nation has become a significant target for Beijing's ambitious economic expansion. Its international Airport, the major road connecting it to the capital and other projects fall under "One Belt, One Road" (The Island, February 24, 2018)."

"The lesson for Sri Lanka from the Maldives is that great power rivalries end up in creating internal political rivalries. These rivalries are invariably between the agents of the great powers. The result is internal political instability arising from political regimes that are installed to carry out the dictates of their great power backers. The current political situation in the Maldives is a

case in point, with President Abdulla Yameen cracking down on the opposition in order to consolidate power. Since Sri Lanka too has its share of sympathizers of great powers, how Sri Lanka could avoid similar potential pitfalls is the burning question."

"US involvement in Sri Lanka's internal affairs extending to shaping the structure of the State, the role it plays in directing the stand taken by the UN Human Rights Council and about potential bilateral training between the US and Sri Lanka in a Pacific Partnership along with foreign militaries, is no secret. All of this is possible because of the current regime in Sri Lanka. How Sri Lanka extricates itself from this entrapment is compounded by the several and varied interests and ensuing rivalries of the great powers involved in the Indian Ocean."

### Strategy for Sri Lanka

"In this background of great power rivalries the all important question facing the nation is how a small country like Sri Lanka which by its strategic location is like the keystone in the arch of the Indian Ocean Rim extending from South Africa all the way to Indonesia, could survive without being bruised. Should Sri Lanka continue with its 20th Century policy of non-alignment or more importantly could such a policy help Sri Lanka to survive in today's emerging complex geopolitical challenges? If not, what foreign policy architecture would Sri Lanka's professional diplomats recommend to enable Sri Lanka to best protect its interests at minimum cost to its core values, sovereignty and its interests? I say 'minimum', because Sri Lanka would not be able to escape unscathed."

"The options for Sri Lanka are either to do nothing and be client State of one of the two power blocks or to stay aloof and unfriendly to both power blocks. A third option suggested by some is that Sri Lanka should stay away from the rivalries of great powers and pursue our interests with care and diligence by engaging with as many countries on a basis of neutrality and friendship. This is easier said than done, because the reality is that physical expressions of this rivalry would manifest itself in the form of tempting offers of infrastructure projects on Sri Lanka's land, its territorial waters and greater economic zone. Therefore, whether Sri Lanka likes it or not it is bound to be affected by activities associated with great power rivalries."

"One possible option for Sri Lanka is therefore to accept the fact that it would be affected by great power rivalries, and to be mindful of the opportunities that inevitably would be presented and use it for the benefit of Sri Lanka, while remaining friendly and neutral with all, to the best extent possible. Since such opportunities are bound to be in the form of infrastructure projects the great powers would likely want Sri Lanka to bear the cost of such projects notwithstanding the fact that they essentially would serve their interests to a far greater degree than that of Sri Lanka. For instance, since Hambantota is the closest port to the sea lanes between the Malacca Straits and the Straits of Hormuz serves China's interests far more than that of Sri Lanka why should Sri

Lanka bear its entire cost? If Sri Lanka yields and bears the cost of projects such as those planned by Japan and India in Trincomalee as it was in the past Sri Lanka would be bearing the cost of projects that essentially serve the interests of the great powers far more than that of Sri Lanka."

"Instead of falling into their trap, the concept that should guide Sri Lanka's foreign policy relating to developments in the Indian Ocean should be based on the premise that the interests of the great powers far outweigh the interests of Sri Lanka. This being the case instead of participating in projects that further their interests Sri Lanka should declare that its primary focus is internal and therefore its priority is Human Development based on a strong middle class society for its people. Therefore, as far as projects go, since projects such as the Port City in Colombo as a financial hub serve China's interests far more than that of Sri Lanka, China should bear the costs. The inability to recognize these opportunities has cost Sri Lanka dearly, and prevented it from negotiating for the construction of both projects, if not free of cost, at least on far more favourable terms than having to pay for it in full. The same concept should apply to intended developments in Trincomalee and the Tank Farm and infrastructure projects such as the road link with India that primarily serve India's interests much to the detriment of Sri Lanka."

It is apparent from the material presented above that the challenges that Sri Lanka would have to face are far more complex than what professional diplomats in Sri Lanka normally have to face. Furthermore, the fact that the report in the Jakarta Post is only two weeks after the warnings given at the Viyathmaga 2018 Convention means that events are moving so fast that events and developments could very well outpace the normal pace of "soft diplomacy" that Sri Lanka is accustomed to. If, as stated in the Jakarta Post report, Trincomalee is to be "expanded by Japan, Sri Lanka and India into a trade port to handle large vessels," Sri Lanka's contribution should be only location without any participation in the capital cost. Therefore unless our Foreign Policy Experts put together a team to develop a hard-nosed strategy and Sri Lanka depends on the usual "soft power" approaches of our professional diplomats, Sri Lanka would be swept up in a whirlwind of great power rivalries at great cost to the nation for decades to come.



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