

## Sri Lanka's Strategic Relevance in the South Asian Region: An Analysis of India's Indian Ocean Strategy and China's Maritime Silk Route Initiative

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**Abstract** - Both China and India have shown an increasing interest towards the Indian Ocean and have towards this end, engineered several key strategies and initiatives, i.e. the Maritime Silk Route initiative by the former and the Indian Ocean Strategy by the latter. Both these nations have also identified Sri Lanka, with its strategic location in the Indian Ocean as an ideal focal point to implement their policies and objectives.

China's plans are underway to re-establish the ancient Maritime Silk Route thereby reaping economic benefits by enhancing regional connectivity and securing its energy requirements. Whilst India is increasing her maritime and security ambitions via its strategic initiatives with smaller island nations in the greater Indian Ocean region. The latter is more inclined towards maritime security cooperation with lesser emphasis on economic partnerships which the former is more predisposed towards.

In this context, this study will focus on the political situation in the world with special emphasis on the Indian Ocean Region. It will also address the strategic importance Sri Lanka plays in the region and the diplomatic role it has to master in collaborating with these two regional giants. The region has emerged as a catalyst in strategic planning for most of the world's dominant powers. Accordingly, Sri Lanka has been identified as a means for regional dominance. Further this will also address Sri Lanka's need to take a more assertive role in promoting and projecting herself in the international arena.

**Keywords** - Sri Lanka, Indian Ocean Strategy, Maritime Silk Route, Diplomacy

### I. INTRODUCTION

Since time immemorial, the Indian Ocean has been an important location in the strategic calculations of the great powers of the world, primarily due to the economic impact of the Indian Ocean in the east-west maritime trade.

Over the past decade, South Asia and its Indian Ocean Region have emerged as a focus of tremendous international concern. It should be noted that "the region is historically well known for its great strategic salience and enormous market potential..." (Hashimi, undated). It is established that this region has always played a significant role in the politics of international relations.

Sri Lanka, unlike the other South Asian nations, is located in the centre of the Indian Ocean at a strategically convenient position. As such, "Sri Lanka has not been immune from these strategic calculations and speculations" (Hashimi, undated). Sri Lanka's former High Commissioner to India, Prasad Kariyawasam stated "... [Sri Lanka] will always act in a manner that contributes to strategic stability in the region. This also serves our national interest of securing enhanced maritime security in and around the Indian Ocean as well as ensuring peace in the region" (2012). This statement by Kariyawasam is testimony to security being at the heart of Sri Lanka's interests in the region. It also shows there is an element of security interest vested in the strategic positioning of South Asia. And maintaining friendly ties with neighbouring countries is vital to the existence of a state, as it determines the security elements therein.

Therefore, it can be comprehended that the South Asia region is without a doubt located in one of the important, if not the most important locations, in the world. Furthermore, it can be established that this region's strategic importance in terms of commerce and trade too can be noted by the Chinese Admiral Zheng He's visits to the region and Sri Lanka in particular since 1405 (American Asian Press, 2012). This is almost a century prior to Vasco da Gama's visit to this region in 1498 (Winsor, 2012) and these historical incidents too confirm that South Asia as a region and Sri Lanka as an island nation have been of importance to others for many centuries.

And due to the strategic relevance both China and India have shown an increasing interest towards the Indian Ocean and have towards this end, engineered several key strategies and initiatives, i.e. the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Route [MSR] initiative by the former and the Indian Ocean Strategy by the latter. They have also identified Sri Lanka, with its strategic location in the Indian Ocean as an ideal focal point to implement its policies and objectives.

#### A. The Indian Ocean Region

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is playing an important and central role in global politics and has begun featuring prominently in international dialogue. The sea lanes in the Indian Ocean Region are considered among the most strategically important in the world. Two thirds of the global trade passing through this route accentuates the importance the world has placed on the region. According to the *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, “more than 80 percent of the world’s seaborne trade in oil transits through the Indian Ocean choke points...” [De Silva-Ranasinghe, 2011].

In addition to being strategically located and being the main route for sea trade, the IOR is also crucial for energy security and natural resources, both of which are found abundantly in the region. Therefore, all the countries are seeking access to the new material produced and available in and around the Indian Ocean littoral. And according to Kim Beazley, Australia’s Ambassador to the United States, “In the long-term the Indian Ocean is going to be massively more significant in global politics than it has ever been before” [De Silva-Ranasinghe, 2011].

As per Robert Kaplan the IOR will be the “centre of global conflicts” and where the “21<sup>st</sup> century’s global power dynamics will be revealed” (2010). Kaplan gives two reasons for this; one, “...because most international business supply will be conducted through this route” and two, because “...it is in this region the interests and influence of India, China and the United States are beginning to overlap and intersect” (2010). This showcases the importance of the IOR, being the lifeline of global business and also due to the Chinese moving west in to the Indian Ocean and the Indians playing a more dominant role in the region, moving eastward. This illustrates the importance the Indian Ocean plays in terms of global politics and can be further understood by Admiral Alfred Mahan’s statement, “Whoever controls the Indian Ocean dominates Asia” (American Asian Press,

2012). It is for these reasons, i.e. the surge in trade routes and the centre role it plays in global politics, that the Indian Ocean Region will be the focal point for global interactions and increasing Sino-Indian interests. It also depicts why countries would want to establish dominance in the region. This illustrates the role the Indian Ocean currently plays and is set to play in global politics.

#### B. India’s Indian Ocean Strategy

The IOR is becoming increasingly significant in the global arena and the Indians are particularly concerned about the Chinese ‘string of pearls strategy’.

India imports about 70 percent of her oil through the IOR. Therefore a key objective of her strategy is to safeguard her imports and secure her prominence in the region. And to this end she has been enhancing her strategic influence through the use of soft power, wherein she invests in regional mining, oil, gas, and infrastructure projects. In addition to the soft power politics played by India, she has also heavily invested in military and mainly naval capabilities in and around the region. Thus, India is taking steps to safeguard her status in the region by aggressively expanding her naval presence to all corners of the region, such as Seychelles, Madagascar and Mauritius; thereby securing its security interest in the greater IOR.



Figure 1: The Great Indian Ocean Game  
Source: The New Indian Express

India further perceives the Indian Ocean as her ‘rightful domain’ and insists she has a significant role to play in ensuring regional peace and cooperation. And this notion further enables India to envisage that she is able to dominate the Indian Ocean or even to transform the Indian Ocean into India’s Ocean. These are the reasons underscored in India’s Indian Ocean Strategy and it illustrates the need for India to be the



beneficial....” Therefore the strategic location of this region and the importance of its countries at an individual capacity further highlight the region’s importance.

Sri Lanka is seen as a strategically relevant state in the IOR. Therefore in this context it is necessary to gauge how Sri Lanka can leverage this position to maintain better relations with both China and India. One of the key stances Sri Lanka needs to take in this regard is to develop as assertive diplomatic role in balancing the two global powers. An assertive diplomatic role needs to be played by Sri Lankan diplomats in using the location as a linchpin to drive professional relations in the region. To this end, diplomats need to understand the strength Sri Lanka’s location provides her, thus enabling better bargaining powers when conducting negotiations on trade, bringing business opportunities to the country, security etc.



Figure 3: China's and India's dominance in the region for trade route dominance

Source: <http://www.indrastra.com/>

Secondly, Sri Lanka needs to start positioning her strategic location in order to attract business to the country and she needs to leverage this to her advantage when negotiating and signing trade agreements with the two powers. Sri Lanka has a lot to gain by leveraging this position especially from exporting to these two populous nations and signing transshipment partnerships with the two nations. Further the two global giants can utilise Sri Lanka’s easy access to both the east and the west, in conducting trade with the external world. Furthermore, Sri Lanka’s neutral venue will be an added advantage to them to provide their goods and services to other countries.

Sri Lanka needs to ascertain progressive and proactive relations with these two global giants by bargaining her strategic positioning in the region and attracting investment opportunities that both India and China have in store for the region. In response to China’s MSR initiative, India is manifesting accelerated efforts to improve bilateral ties with the Indian Ocean littorals. China has already commenced investing in infrastructure and development projects such as the Hambantota Harbour and the Mattala Airport via the Maritime Silk Route in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka needs to bear in mind that both these two countries are prepared to invest heavily in the region. Therefore, strategic use of their capital will be beneficial for our nation’s well-being. As such, Sri Lanka needs to identify areas that need development and require fiscal support and seek the assistance of the two global giants in developing them.

Due to Sri Lanka’s naval strength, she can assist India in expanding and securing the maritime security interests of the IOR. As previously mentioned, keeping Sri Lanka’s maritime security at the heart of the country’s security interests in the region will be one of the top most priorities for the country. Therefore, asserting a neutral role and assisting these global giants to ensure the safety of their trade and oil shipments through the region will be of utmost benefit to the country. It must be noted that India is eagerly looking to bolster its security ties with the island nation. And Beijing is currently engaging with Sri Lanka by docking submarines in Colombo for re-fuelling and refreshment purposes. Thus, another security perspective Sri Lanka can implement is to act as a neutral venue catering for all maritime requirements of both commercial and military vessels.

Further, Sri Lanka can expand her tourism industry by tapping into the vast touristic potential in the two countries, by striving to achieve significantly more than merely attracting tourists to meet the 2.5 million target for 2016. In this regard, there are many avenues Sri Lanka can initiate to achieve the aforementioned. One such is by becoming a hub for flights coming through to the region, especially from India. In this manner, due to Sri Lanka’s central location between the east and west, she can become an airline hub for flights from around the world. This will further encourage cruise liners to select the country as a transit port and not merely a turnaround port, attracting more tourists to the country. Additionally, Sri Lanka can initiate a tourism plan

reviving the Ancient Silk Route, spanning from China to Sri Lanka enjoying the cultural aspects of the route and targeting maritime tourism with our position in the Indian Ocean by making Sri Lanka the most favoured Indian Ocean destination. This will enable Sri Lanka to leverage her strategic relevance against China and India.

Moreover Sri Lanka can benefit from the vast knowledge both these nations have to offer in terms of health and education. This is by understanding and offering both traditional and modern health services to locals and foreigners; thus becoming a place of healing. The other is in terms of education where Sri Lanka provides quality and affordable education to not only locals but to foreigners as well. Expanding on Education and Health Diplomacy will further help generate and retain foreign revenue within the country and enable Sri Lanka to utilise her strategic positioning to her benefit.

### III. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the geo-strategic conditions in the IOR are still developing. The current trends seen indicate that the three main powers involved – India, China and the U.S. - have their own priorities, with potential for clash, may not be conducive to the establishment of regional peace and prosperity, a priority for all concerned nations.

Although confrontations and conflicts between China and India have been predicted in this region, particularly with the rise of China's maritime power, their different strategic goals may lead to different results. Further predictions of conflicts may arise from the relations these two countries have with the Indian Ocean littorals such as Sri Lanka. Thus Sri Lanka has to be professional and assertive in her diplomatic relations by using her location as a means of driving relations in the region. Further, Sri Lanka needs to educate diplomats to professionally gain the best from the country's strategic position to develop requirements in the region. Therefore Sri Lanka has to be professional in the way it bargains its strategic relevance in the region and attract investment that will benefit the country. Given China's policy aims, intent and capability, the Peoples' Republic of China cannot afford to challenge India. But with the rapid growth of its economic and military power, India is likely to adopt a more assertive maritime presence in the Indian Ocean.

China is intent on positioning herself in the region through the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road initiative, therefore Sri Lanka's understanding of this is vital as she stands to gain immensely from the trade and investment opportunities China has in plan for the region. Therefore a professional and diplomatic approach to the relations with China is in line for Sri Lanka.

Further, India too is keen on asserting herself in the region and especially in Sri Lanka. Therefore, Sri Lanka stands to benefit if she acts with farsightedness in attracting the investment opportunities and security capabilities India has to offer as the latter is increasing her military and naval presence in the region.

Sri Lanka can also take on the role of ensuring that there is a level playing field in the region. Thereby ensuring everyone benefits from the interests both China and India have in the IOR. Another mechanism where Sri Lanka can utilise her strategic positioning is by leveraging herself as an Indian Ocean Region nation, for doing so will assist Sri Lanka in obtaining investment and other benefits from the two global giants.

Additionally, Sri Lanka needs to be mindful that the IOR is geared to be the Century's most intense point of conflict. Therefore Sri Lanka is bound to face challenges in maintaining her sovereignty and international commercial status in the region as there are vested interests in Sri Lanka maintaining and dominating commercial ventures in the region. And due to the growing interests of India and China in the IOR, Sri Lanka is bound to face further, more complex challenges. Therefore, Sri Lanka definitely has to be vigilant in terms of avoiding and mitigating the issues she will be facing as a country positioned centrally in the IOR.

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