

The Port Policy of Small Island Powers: Sri Lankan Perspective

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Abstract— This paper discusses the requirement of reorienting the port policy of Sri Lanka. The port policy directly concerns national interest and the fundamental values of the state that are strategically significant for acquiring, managing, and controlling the global power strategy. At present, Sri Lanka is expanding port policies due to the shift in the power of the global economic arena. Therefore, Hambantota and Colombo port have given significance to Sri Lanka and made them maritime influencers in their own rights. In this context, each of the global powers will see a threat to itself if the Government of Sri Lanka is to favour one over the other. Even though Sri Lanka has applied the non-alignment policy approach, the littoral state, port policy of Sri Lanka faces the dilemma of balancing or bandwagoning strategy with the state and non-state actors. The objectives of the present research are to explain the geo strategic importance of Sri Lanka in terms of port power and to critically examine the challenges to the port policy of Sri Lanka, to investigate the positive and negative impact of challenges to the port security of Sri Lanka. Research methods of the present research deal with both descriptive and analytical in nature. The study is mainly based on secondary sources. This research found the unstable port policies with the frequent change of domestic government resulted in chaos in the economic stability. Observation has made the reluctance of co-operation and difficulty of managing and understanding maritime agreements, and lack of coherent functionalism in the port policies. Thus, a non-aligned strategic approach would be the best port policy for Sri Lanka. Further, the structure of the international system is influential, and Sri Lanka must not persuade the individual character of the leader where port policies must base on an in-depth understanding of the maritime concepts and theories and apply them into function.

Keywords— *geopolitics, power, port policies*

I. INTRODUCTION

At present studies of port policy are considered a distinctive field, helping policymakers to distinguish between port policies and other policies since port policies directly concern national interest and the fundamental values of the state that are strategically significant for acquiring, managing and controlling the global power strategy.

The location of Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) creates interest over regional and extra-regional countries for maritime expansionism. Indian sphere of influence is inevitable at this juncture. China's One Belt One Road (OBOR) strategy is growing importance in the 21st century maritime civilization. On the other hand, containment strategy over China's maritime expansionism proves the revisionist power of the United States of America (USA). They have operationalized this into Indo - Pacific strategy. The term called 'Power' is determined the structure of the international system. Super Powers, great powers, and regional powers have the potential to influence small powers such as Sri Lanka in terms of strategic significance. Sri Lanka's strategic location in the IOR is the main bargaining power to a small state. However, each state has to survive on its own in the international system. Even though all states are equal in the international arena, their capabilities are different. Sri Lanka is the only country in the IOR to become a maritime hub with her strategic location, and she could be the facilitator to maritime trade in the IOR. Islanders of Sri Lanka used ports and harbors for maritime trade with other countries with expanding maritime civilization. Chinese are great maritime explorers in world history. Whenever they landed carved stones in commemorations, there is a stone near Galle in Sri Lanka to signify the greatest maritime explore Admiral Zheng He's visit. In the 21st century still, these powerful countries are desperately seeking opportunities for their maritime expansionism. At this juncture, Colombo and Hambantota ports are vital strategic locations situated in the western and southern part of the mainland of Sri Lanka.

This is the container age of maritime trade in the 21st century. The geostrategic location of Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean is highlighted by the fact that it is almost in the strategic hub of South Asia. It is midway in the maritime trade route between the West part of the world and the Eastern part of Asia. This position is essential not only for the economic development of Sri Lanka but also for balancing the global power competition in the IOR.

At present, Sri Lanka is in the process of expanding port policy due to the shift in the power of the global economic arena as well as the rapid market growth of Asia. Therefore, Hambantota and Colombo port have given significance to Sri Lanka and made them maritime influencers in their own rights. The recent interest of India in the West Container Terminal and Chinese foothold in Colombo International Container Terminal (CICT) at Colombo harbor and economic growth in maritime trade at Hambantota harbor are direct maritime economic influencers to Small Power Sri Lanka. In addition to China and India, there is increased competition between the large global powers, including the USA and Japan, to acquire or manage Sri Lanka's port power. Due to its unique geographical nature as well as its global position, the port and port policy of Sri Lanka have become a prime target for the global and regional powers. In this context, each of the global powers will see a threat to itself if the Government of Sri Lanka is to favor one over the other. Even though Sri Lanka has been applied the non-alignment policy approach, the littoral state, port policy of Sri Lanka, faces the dilemma of balancing or bandwagoning strategy with the state and non-state actors in the geopolitical context. Thus, the port policies of Sri Lanka, vital to reconsider to exploit maximum opportunities as a small island power.

II. METHODOLOGY AND EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN

This research is about the social behavior of maritime components by applying international relations theories in to practice. This broader area of social science needs to prove with logical reasoning of theories based on laws of cause and effect. This will be helpful to understand the ontological and epistemological path to this study. The objectives of the present research are to explain the geostrategic importance of Sri Lanka in terms of port power and to critically examine the challenges to the port policy of Sri Lanka, to investigate the positive and negative impact of challenges to the port security of Sri Lanka. Further, to identify an alternative/possible policy

paradigm for managing the challenges and the negative impacts on the port power of Sri Lanka. Research methods of the present research deal with both descriptive and analytical in nature. The study is mainly based on secondary sources. The secondary data is collected from various journals, books, official reports, magazines, newspapers, websites, articles, video and audio materials, dissertations, monographs etc.

III. RESULT

A. Conceptualization of the existing literature

Even though the ports of Sri Lanka have been considered strategically significant, there is a massive shortage of studies on the port policy of Sri Lanka in academia. In cooperate with the realistic approach, some of the existing literature on the recent development of ports, national security and foreign policy studies of Sri Lanka have somewhat examined Sri Lanka's port policy from the geostrategic point of view during and after the Cold War period (Kaul, 1974; Keerawella, 1992; Kodikara, 1992). Moreover, the role of international systemic stimuli in the Indian Ocean, such as the nature of the balance of power system and influence of global and regional powers, has been the outstanding focus of existing literature on the port policy of Sri Lanka. Therefore, the majority of the literature has neglected the complex nature of Sri Lanka's port policy.

Some other studies highlighted the power struggle between the contemporary global and regional powers for acquiring or managing port policy of Sri Lanka. Similarly, several studies have argued that hegemonic pressure from global and regional powers such as the USA, China, Japan and India consistently influenced the outcomes of the port policy of Sri Lanka (Jayatilleka, 2015; Lahiri, 2010). It is clear that the existing studies of Sri Lankan port policy mainly focus on either influence of other associated domestic, regional and international variables rather than the systemic levels (Bhumitra, 2019).

After 2009, a new trend has appeared in the studies of Sri Lankan port policy, where the neo-realist approach, which accounts for domestic level variables, was employed to analyse the port policy context of Sri Lanka (William. 2013). Specifically, a large number of contemporary studies have differently analyzed the domestic level variable such as the role of executive leadership that heavily influenced port policy outcomes in Sri Lanka.

Nevertheless, existing studies on the port policy of Sri Lanka devoted only marginal attention to the nature of the wider significance of the port policy of Sri Lanka with the new development of maritime trade and commerce. Therefore, the recent research endeavours to generate a more comprehensive understanding of cause-and-effect that associated with system level variables while filling the gap of the existing body of knowledge where significant factors have not been given adequate attention.

B. Theoretical consideration

The small island, Sri Lanka, is fluctuating with strategic decisions with the hegemonic ambitions of larger states. Domestic politics in Sri Lanka is heavily influenced by larger polities. The military and economic power, as well as power over opinion, are influential. Meanwhile, port security in Sri Lanka is facing a 'Security Dilemma' with its strategic location. The security dilemma is the basic concept of neorealism and explains the behaviour of actors such as causes of war. Especially the egoistic nature of hegemonic powers works based on suspicion and power and force. Therefore, this research considers the theory of structural realism, where the structure of the international system articulates how states behave. Further, professor John Mearsheimer and Kenneth Waltz well-versed and argues that domestic politics doesn't influence the international system and states are in the attempt to persuade power and powerful as much as possible in the international system (Mearsheimer, 2014)

The 'Power' depends on the context. Sri Lanka is considered a small island power with its strategic location, which is a qualitative feature of a small state. On the other hand, larger powers have certain potential to influence the international system, such as USA and China. Thus, power matter in the international system and it determined the structure, and each state has to survive on its own; both the liberals and realists accept the term 'Power'. Therefore, balancing and bandwagoning are two concepts to discuss with the security dilemma in Sri Lankan context. According to Vayrynen, balancing means alignment with the opposing great power against the source of danger, while bandwagoning involves alignment with the threatening power (Vayrynen, 1997).

C. Sri Lanka to Bandwagon or Balance

In realist's view, International anarchy is the immediate background to create a security dilemma in the world. However, they argue, "the fundamental

nature of international relations has not changed over the millennia. International relations continues to be a recurring struggle for wealth and power among independent actors in a state of anarchy" (Gilpin, 1981). The structure of the international system and the behavior of larger states directly affect the stability of the small states in geopolitics. When the larger nations are anticipated to be powerful in the international system, a great imbalance of power could create either economic or military capacities. This is the juncture where a small state like Sri Lanka could be squeezed in between larger polities. Therefore, Sri Lankan domestic politics must understand the international dimension of port diplomacy when creates port policies.

The 'diplomacy' is basically the management of international relations. Maritime diplomacy is management of international relations through the maritime domain (Miere, 2014, p. 7). Port Diplomacy is directly coming under the field of maritime diplomacy. Thus, Port Diplomacy is the vital area of concern in Sri Lanka foreign policy in today's context. The modus operandi to port policy must consider the overall geopolitical multivariate role. To construct the port city in Colombo and port in Hambantota was the strategic choice of Sri Lanka. These were the decisions taken with the executive leadership of Mr. Mahinda Rajapaksha during the period of presidency, and decisions have been gone through cabinet approval before came into the act. However, Mr. Maithripala Sirisena was sworn as the executive president of Sri Lanka in 2015; after that, Colombo Port City development was temporarily shutdown. This is a notable example of individualism and its implication to other peripheral areas of interest. Thus, the Executive Presidency of Sri Lanka is a culminating point where decisions are critical when dealing with larger polities. Therefore, Sri Lanka, to maintain a balance of posture towards larger governments, need to revisit the foreign policies and select the best method to interact with international state and non-state actors. nevertheless, revoking is not a solution for Sri Lanka in this paradigm, and proactive port policies are the solution to interact with regional and extra-regional powers without hedging. China's OBOR initiative is a new geopolitical strategy in the 21st century and economic, political and military expansion growing resistance from countries including the US, India, Japan and Australia (Chatham House, 2021). The USA, Indo - Pacific strategy is a tool to counter balance China's expansion. However, small states like Sri Lanka

neither a political, military, or economic power. Only the strategic location is the bargaining power to Sri Lanka. According to Rahul Saigaonker (Saigaonker, 2021), Sri Lanka, in the existing geopolitical context bandwagon with stronger partner China, has been verified during the issues related to the East Container Terminal in Port of Colombo. The same argument made by Abeyagoonasekera shows that Sri Lanka's growing Chinese influence has significantly swayed the Indo-Lanka relationship. He reminded that a single Chinese submarine visit to Colombo could hamper Indo -Sri Lanka relations and impact domestic politics (Abeyagoonasekera, 2021). Therefore, bandwagon with China shows the lack of port diplomacy in Sri Lankan port policy.

It was a choice of Sri Lanka to build a port at Hambantota and even expand the port of Colombo and Port City. According to Wanigaraja, the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) Port City, factors like a business-friendly regime, strong diplomatic relations with neighboring countries, comprehensive trade and investment agreements provided the confidence for investors to invest and make it a success. He also said that the formulation and the implementation of a coherent policy framework were essential to realizing the full potential of Port City Colombo (Wignaraja, 2021). The understanding of the overall geopolitical paradigm is the cornerstone to formulate specific policies based on strategic outlook. The main area to be concerned is understanding how the interested partners/states have perceived these situations. Therefore, either convergence or divergence is a vital decision that must come with the entire gamut of the geopolitical system.

The visit of the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to Asia (October 2020) denotes the strategic interest of the US towards Indo - Pacific region. He has pressed Sri Lanka to guard against lending and investment by the Chinese, described as a "predator", whereas the USA comes as a friend and a partner. His message comes a day after signing a defence pact with India, urging closer cooperation to counter Beijing's threats. China has replied to the USA on their official Twitter account of the Chinese embassy in Sri Lanka 'Sorry, Mr. Secretary, we are busy promoting China - Sri Lanka friendship and cooperation, not interested in your Alien vs. Predator game invitation; the US can play two roles at the same time as always'. This was a crucial period for Sri Lanka's foreign policy as well as port policy in which two giants in world politics and economics and country are between the competition and clashes of two giants create security dilemma.

The Indian sphere of influence to Sri Lanka is inevitable due to the close proximity of the location. According to Sri Lanka's Foreign Secretary Jayanath Colombage, the port city is a Sri Lankan project and gives a gateway to Sri Lanka to face a new century. He further argues it's incorrect to give connotation to this as a Chinese project, whereas this has given Chinese companies infrastructure development and construction. Furthermore, he has highlighted that Sri Lanka is not a platform for anyone to lay their military foothold. In contrast, he welcomes all partners for investments and economic projects for development (Derana, 2021). Sri Lanka's Foreign Secretary further said that Sri Lanka will always have an India-first approach as far as strategic security is concerned (Business Standard, 2020).

The literature discussed in this research signifies the location of Sri Lanka in the IOR, taking greater attention from regional and extra-regional countries. India is mainly concerned with its national security and cannot create national security policies without considering Sri Lanka. Similarly, Sri Lanka has to understand the India's strategic requirement since situated closer to her, there are many other factors to be considered when engaging with her. According to Sathiya Moorthy, the 'China factor,' the 'Sri Lankan ethnic issue,' and the attendant 'UNHRC resolution' and fishermen's issue have negatively impacted bilateral relations between Indo-Sri Lanka (Moorthy, 2021).

Structural realist argues, domestic politics and the composition of the state would not be much influential for how state behave inside the international system. But, they strongly believe, the state always wants to be powerful in the international system with an anarchic nature. Thus, regional power India always considers the extra-regional influence to the IOR. India considers Chinese investments in Sri Lanka, as a predominant threat to national security. Even though Sri Lanka pledged that Beijing is on a peaceful rise and is in economic expansionism, India continues to see this as a predatory threat. At the same time, countries such as the USA, Japan, and Australia are also strongly adhering to a containment strategy to avoid Chinese presence in the IOR. According to the theory of structural realism, states are in the attempt to maximize their power. China, USA and India are notable players in the maritime dimension in the IOR. Therefore, Sri Lanka, as a small state, must consider the overall geopolitical context when creating foreign policies. The strategic location is the main bargaining power of Sri Lanka, and port policies need to be created based on non-aligned foreign

policies to survive in the international system. This must reflect from port policies and strategies and come into practices.

The hegemonic competition in the IOR influences the Sri Lankan maritime policies. This research resulted in understanding the structure of the international system, which could impact domestic politics in terms of power. The argument of structural realists is supported to understand the anarchy nature of the international system. Moral values are minimally crucial in Sri Lanka as a maritime hub where leaders give more consideration to their stability and good investment environment in their maritime expansionism strategies. When selecting the maritime policies, countries such as China's ambition are win-win situations through soft power. On the other hand, regional power India and military superpower USA are attempting to contain China with their hard power deterrence. This research found as small power, Sri Lanka must maintain transnational relations when developing the port and harbours with seeking assistance from larger states. Co-operation with other governments, irrespective of their posture to any other partner in the international system, is another network ability where Sri Lanka needs to improve. This research further found the unstable port policies with the change of the controlling party of domestic government resulted in chaos in the economic stability. Observation has made the reluctance of co-operation and difficulty of managing the understanding between maritime agreements, with the policymakers' lack of interest in maritime concepts and theories. Nevertheless, either bandwagoning or balancing depends on the respective domestic political party in the power of the existing situation in the particular case. Thus, a non-aligned strategic approach would be the best port policy for the small island power Sri Lanka. The small island power must not persuade the individual character of the leader where port policies must base on an in-depth understanding of the maritime concepts and theories and apply them into overall geopolitical context.

IV. CONCLUSION

Today, Sri Lanka has become one of the most vulnerable nations among the growing South Asian nations. The empirical findings support that the strategic geographical location, aspiring regional trading hub and contributor to global public goods are the three interrelated reasons for the Sri Lanka's vulnerability to internal and regional constrictions in

terms of port power. Among many systemic level variables, the Executive Presidency and the non-aligned strategic approach have been the two main variables considered as decisive factors in the port policy of Sri Lanka.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are suggested.

- a. Maintain transnational relationships with larger states with non-aligned foreign policy for the development of ports and harbours.
- b. The individual Character of the Executive Presidency is a key influential factor in a small state, Sri Lanka has to decide either bandwagon or balance and the researcher found balancing as the most suitable concept to adopt.
- c. The area of maritime diplomacy is a notable academic discipline where a separate division of experts in this field should guide the strategic level decisions.
- d. Institute of National Security Studies (INSS) is needed to conduct a national level in-depth study about the port policy of Sri Lanka considering the overall geopolitical context.

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