

# From vision to mission: transforming to yield from hub status

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**Abstract**— Sri Lanka has been a clear & conscious maritime trading hub ever since commencement of trade by sea. The Arabs & South Indian traders called on Sri Lankan ports on their quest towards east whilst the Chinese & Malays reciprocated on their journeys westwards. The mostly peaceful trade was interrupted on several occasions by missions of hostile nature but until the entry of western colonials, the intentions were not conquering nature. As trade and relations grew, the reputation also grew drawing attention of colonial masters, who arrived with intention of exploiting the resources and opportunities to the hilt. And along with we lost the vision and mission, until a Head of State came in to being with an intention of reviving the lost fame & glory.

The paper will examine the key enablers; ten such are elaborated, to be a maritime hub in fulfilling the aspiration of a vision statement called 'Mahinda Chinthanaya'. As a maritime hub, what would be our strengths, weaknesses, Opportunities and the Threats, and how & where it link to Geo-Politics & Geo-Economics, are the discussion points of the paper. Sri Lanka already is a hub, which no one can ignore of and would it be a positive tool for economic development or negative tool for international relations remains to be seen through own application. The Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC) is a critical component and their safety is directly dependent on the world economy. It says where land divide, sea unites; in this context Sri Lanka's success balances on more and more engagements, collaborations and partnerships.

Having a visionary statement assist in mission planning; hence seeking what avenues offer the opportunities for exploitation and their cross-functionality need deep study and understanding as in maritime affairs, nothing remains isolated. With six of world's top ten container ports towards our east and world second biggest consumer market right next door, with import-dependent economies to our west, Sri Lanka's stake could not be coming better than this to actively engage to yield results from surging economic waters.

**Keywords**— Maritime, Geo Politics, SLOC

It was one of our greatest Kings, Parakramabahu the Great, hundreds of years ago during his reign in 1153-1186 AD, who said "not even a drop of water falling down from the sky must flow into the sea without being used"; indeed a visionary statement on how & what to do with the water for the betterment of the nation. His vision was made to a mission through series of undertakings to improve the infrastructural facilities such as reservoirs, dams, irrigation canals, water distribution systems and agricultural

facilities. Notwithstanding, the Great King embarked on another mission to build ships and naval forces, train crews and send delegations to neighbouring countries mostly on missions of goodwill & trade, but at least on one occasion with a mission of military intention influencing the internal politics of another country. He remains foremost in the chronicles in using oceans and naval forces for governance from a regional perspective.

Since then, careful study into the chronicle would reveal that there was no visionary outlook on water or oceans until 2005 when 'Mahinda Chinthanaya', which is a vision for the future, was made public during the Presidential election. In 'Mahinda Chinthanaya', the vision statement of His Excellency the President says, "I am determined to make our country the centre of the Asian silk-route once again taking advantage of its unique geographical location. I intend to develop it into a navigation, aviation, trading & commercial centre linking the east and the west"<sup>1</sup>. The pivotal role the country played in the Asian silk-route remains uncontested although the technology has changed from sails to engines; which may not be necessary to make a stop-over in long voyages today. The principles of businesses continue to remain the same; to make profit wherever the opportunities are present. Taking advantage of this geographical location, the vision statement focuses on providing services and facilities and by doing so reviving the long lost heritage of an island nation.



Fig 1. The land based Silk Route (red colour) and sea based Silk Route (blue colour)

Sri Lanka had been a key player in the sea based silk-route connecting Far-East with Far-West (see Figure 1). The great

<sup>1</sup> Mahinda Chinthana, Page 66 (English version)

port of Mannar, called Mahathiththa (Manthota) played the key role in the Sri Lankan context in this ancient silk-route. Many traders, ranging from Greeks, Arabs to Chinese have written about this port in their recordings of history. The famous Chinese Admiral Zheng

He, had had visited Sri Lanka in his seven expeditions to the western seas (Indian Ocean was known as Western Sea among the Chinese seafarers). These are from the recorded history, from inscriptions in Galle to what is on display at Nanjing museums which speak volumes about his voyages<sup>2</sup> (see Figure 2).



Fig 2. Zheng He's voyages in Western Seas (Source: Zheng He's Voyages Down the Western Seas)

Some of the modern day Statesmen who understood the value of the oceans also have commented on the use of oceans for national developments. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the late Prime Minister of India has said: "to be secure on land we must be supreme at sea", and it is quoted in the Indian maritime doctrine<sup>3</sup>. Accordingly the national strategies were formed with oceans in mind mostly to benefit from economic opportunities they present.

Sri Lanka paid dearly for not doing just this. As an island nation, for not paying sufficient attention since independence to defend the sea boundaries, the country paid for nearly three decades with loss of lives and property. In achieving the vision through mission, understanding of certain concepts is a necessity. The foremost concept that need to be understood is the Maritime Power, defined as the ability of a nation to use the seas to safeguard and develop its national interests avidly described the relationship of said vision even in historical context. The national interest of this island nation is to be the 'Wonder of Asia' through the five hubs that have been listed in the Mahinda Chinthanaya. In achieving this maritime status or the hub status one requires to be a maritime power, and a maritime power not necessarily is looking at Naval supremacy but rather at a composition of several enablers which need discussion. These enablers are of several types; types that denote the means and ways in achieving end results which ultimately contribute to the overall strategic aspirations.

<sup>2</sup> Zheng He's Voyages down the Western seas, China Intercontinental press

<sup>3</sup> Indian Maritime Doctrine 2009

The 1<sup>st</sup> enabler is the geography, the geographical location or the advantageous position of the country in the Indian Ocean. For example, India being a peninsular land mass with a coast line of over 7500 kms, stands at disadvantage due non availability of a continuous navigable channel connecting its east coast with west coast. Every time they need to traverse it had to be circumnavigating the island of Sri Lanka, whereas for this island nation, located at the southern tip of the Indian sub continent, access to both coasts remains at arms-reach. Even in the history when the trade winds dictated terms, the location mattered as Sri Lanka was reachable in both South-East and North-East winds in the Indian Ocean. Today the significance has further heightened as the geographical location is right close to the busiest shipping lane that connects Far East with Far West with much of the cargo and oil in which the global trade depends on.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> enabler is the maritime affinity of the people and the leaders. This island nation had been a maritime nation long time ago, own and other nation's history leaves evidence to say that Sri Lanka were indeed a great maritime nation. There are reports of how ships were built, how sea borne trade was carried out, how the delegations were despatched to the Court of Rome, and to the Suite of Egypt, and even on bringing elephants from Myanmar. The island nation's involvement in trade disputes with Myanmar and South India and how the naval power projection were used in settling those disputes indicate that the country at one point of time was a maritime power because oceans were used for own advantage<sup>4</sup>. But then how was this maritime power lost? The evidence points out to the colonial invasions which effectively eliminated the maritime traditions. The local industry could not sustain the capability of the technology, and the know-how of the industry was wiped out because the invasions basically affected the coastal provinces and as a result the country lost the maritime affinity along with it.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> enabler is the size of seafaring population, and the Philippines remains a good example. When compared with Sri Lanka, with over 250,000 seafaring populations and an earning capacity of more than five billion US dollars in the year 2011, Philippines stands forefront. In Sri Lanka, the seafaring population was just over 7000 as per the statistics maintained by the Director General of Merchant Shipping in the year 2011 with revenue of insignificant value in comparison<sup>5</sup>. This is one area which needs attention and has capacity to improve if the vision is to be achieved for maritime power and a maritime hub.

The 4<sup>th</sup> enabler is the fishing. The size of the fishing fleet is a matter for consideration in determining the maritime power. The traditional fishing industry would prove

<sup>4</sup> Evolution of Technological Innovations in Ancient Sri Lanka, M.Asoka T. De Silva

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.dgshipping.gov.lk>

sufficient for local consumption but industrial fishing is a necessity in economic terms in earning revenue for the country. The industry needs to develop the associated technology for better harvest, better productivity and sustainable fishery. The necessary scientific knowledge is still lacking in the industry to maintain the sustainable fish-catch, for post harvest activities and to yield better productivity. The issue of poaching is also a matter of concern in addressing this enabler as traditional industry is still financially unsound for a larger investment to curb the poaching menace.

The 5<sup>th</sup> enabler is the offshore commercial activities, exploration for hydro carbons, gas and oil or any other minerals. Certain initiatives have put the pursuance on track as exploration for Oil and Gas is progressing, providing services to the ships which are calling in Outer Port Limits (OPL) are on the increase with most remarkable being the providing of onboard security teams. The On Board Security Teams (OBST) is widely believed to be the national contribution to the safety of the sea lanes of communication to curb the menace of piracy. Sri Lanka has the best model of Private-Public Partnership and through this has become the largest provider of maritime security personnel to the entire world fleet right now. The victorious Navy, which has evolved through three decades of war against the most ruthless guerrilla organization in the world with an international maritime capability and the de-facto sea arm called Sea-Tigers, has geared to lend service to the defence of the motherland. The area of focus is the deep sea or the EEZ for policing & surveillance and it should be emphasized that whatever the amount of money spent developing a formidable Navy right now can be considered as an investment for the future.

The 6<sup>th</sup> enabler is the ship building capability of the island nation in the quest to become a maritime hub. Sri Lanka has the Colombo Dockyard Limited with certain ship building capabilities. But looking at the history, one might wonder what has happened to once a great ship building industry. The historical evidence suggests that ships from Oman and Yemen came here to obtain items necessary for their shipping. And also there had been orders undertaken to provide ten ships per year to Oman. The Chinese inscriptions talk about the big ships built in this island arriving in China for trade. The availability of all the essential ingredients for ship building at that time, as the timber which grew inland and suited for ship building could be floated down the rivers to various places of anchorage. Some of those items used for the ship constructions were coconut tree for the mast, Coconut fibre for the cushioning and flanking. Coconut ropes for the rigging and coconut oil for lubricating of pulleys and blocks. The Yathra Doni (see Figure 3) is a proof for the thriving ship building industry the island enjoyed some centuries back<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> Evolution of Technological Innovations in Ancient Sri Lanka, M. Asoka T. De Silva

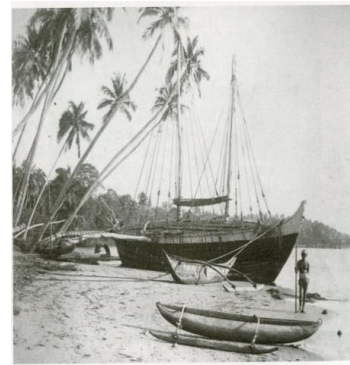


Figure 9.16 A Yathra Dhoni Hauled up on the Beach

Fig 3. The Yathra Dhoni

The 7<sup>th</sup> enabler and the one that the country is so blessed and is doing extremely well is the availability of major and minor ports. Sri Lanka with its unique geography is blessed with deep water anchorages (which were the ports in historical literature) and we have ports all around our country. Even during pre-colonial era the country had been visited by many seafarers and some of them had plotted suitable places for anchorages around the island. (See Figure 4)

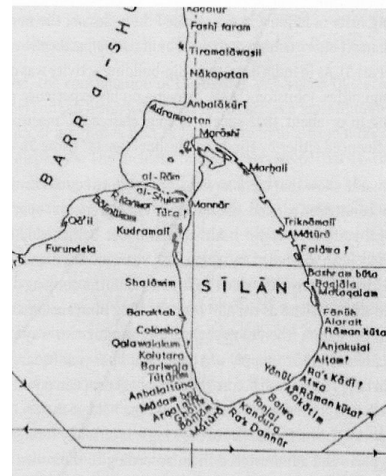


Figure 9.24 Map Showing Positions Recorded by Arab Sailors

Fig 4. Anchorages Identified by Arab traders, (Source: Evolution of Technological Innovations in Ancient Sri Lanka, M Asoka T De Silva)

Today, the Port of Colombo has established itself as a commercial hub & a container hub. The Galle harbour has been earmarked as a tourist hub, and the Hambantota harbour is designed to be a service and industrial hub. The Oluvil harbour is expected to play a key role in the economic revival of the Eastern Province. The Kankasanthurai harbour has been planned for the economic empowerment of the Northern Province. The Trincomalee harbour, what was reported to be the third largest natural harbour in the world, is bigger than the Port of Colombo with the average depth of 23 meters. Admiral Lord Nelson once said Trincomalee is the finest harbour in the world and it stands today to be exploited to its full potential. The whole new Colombo

South expansion project is another milestone event in our annals. The existing Colombo harbour is reported to have taken 37 years to build 2.2kms of break water whereas the new expansion has taken only 4 years to build 6.8kms of break water. This expansion is very important as this would become the only harbour in South Asia that could cater for mega container ships truly making the Colombo as a hub port.

The 8<sup>th</sup> enabler is the merchant fleet. It is in this sphere that certain problems prevail as, despite Sri Lanka being an island nation, there's a dearth of vessels registered in Sri Lankan name or under Sri Lankan flag. To the contrary, Mongolia despite being a land locked country enjoys 57 ships under their registry even without a harbour<sup>7</sup>. In developing the stance as a maritime hub, it is imperative that national policies and plans focus not only on transshipment opportunities but also on thriving with own fleet for shipment.

The 9<sup>th</sup> enabler would be the hydrographical & oceanographical capacities. As oceanic data today is having multi-faceted use, it is very important to develop own hydrographic and scientific capabilities as an island nation, and dependency on foreign entities for such data is considered breach of national security.

The 10<sup>th</sup> enabler would be the geopolitics, as everyone is concentrating on the Indian Ocean because of the flow of energy and goods. The facts that the Indian Ocean is a warm water ocean with abundant resources and the emerging economic giants are either in or very near to the Indian Ocean, do have an effect on our being a maritime hub. In his widely acclaimed book "The Monsoon", Robert Kaplan talks about the importance of the Indian Ocean. He has written this book from the American point of view. He says the American foreign policy must concentrate on the Indian Ocean if the United State is to remain relevant in world affairs.

In concluding, it should be mentioned that since independence this is the first time the country has a visionary outlook toward the Oceans. There are many advantages on offer for achieving healthy GDP rates and healthy climate for foreign direct investments through oceans & through international sea ports. The large work force the country is blessed with, the rapid infrastructure

development programmes under way and progressive global standing are all making a very conducive environment for development. And also the country boasts of one of the best social indexes in the South Asia in many aspects, besides being a non-aligned country. The peace and stability achieved has given new impetus to our future. We are strengthened by a visionary leadership and democracy for us to be hopeful for a brighter tomorrow. With these clear visions and clear enablers achieving maritime hub status in the region, in Asia, is opined to be very realistic.

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The author, Vice Admiral Jayanath Colombage is the 18<sup>th</sup> Commander of the Sri Lanka Navy. In his illustrious career spanning over three decades, he has actively taken part in academic endeavours by writing and delivering lectures at various forums. He has been conferred with two Masters Degrees; Master of Science in Defence Studies and Master of Arts in International Studies. Presently, he is reading for his PhD. He has published a book titled 'Naval Terms and Expressions' and several academic papers. He has also conducted National Level Seminars on Maritime Security. He is a Fellow of the Nautical Institute of London and presently chairs the Sri Lankan Chapter. Vice Admiral Colombage is also the Chairman of the Ceylon Shipping Corporation Limited.

<sup>7</sup> [www.flagsofconvenience.com/pdf\\_files/Mongolia.pdf](http://www.flagsofconvenience.com/pdf_files/Mongolia.pdf)