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China factor in India- Sri Lanka relations: Recent challenges

Abstract : After economic crisis left leaning political party National People's Power (NPP)'s candidate Disanayaka's winning in recently concluded presidential election in Sri Lanka creates a new challenge for India. As China is always there to curb India's influence on its Southern neighbour. Sri Lanka is the closest southern neighbour of India is divided by the Palk Strait, situated just 55 km away from India. It is a small country consists of total area 65, 610 sq. km with population nearly 22 million. The island gained independence in 1948 and was known to the world as Ceylon up to 1972. India and Sri Lanka enjoys religious, cultural, economic and political links since ancient time. Sri Lanka's geographical location is very important to both China and India as it is very close to primary shipping routes of Indo- Pacific. Recently China is trying to increase its commercial and strategic engagement with Sri Lanka. It has been making substantial investments in Sri Lanka and offering significant economic, military and other forms of support to counter the influence of India. Therefore, this article strives to grasp the Indo- Sri Lanka relationship from ancient to present time and how China is creating obstacles to the seamless relations between the two nations in recent times.

Keywords: India, Sri Lanka, China, ethnic problem,

fishermen issue, Hambantota port, economic crisis

Introduction:

Indo and Sri Lanka have sustained a bilateral relationship that spans over more than two thousand and five hundred years. Since then both the country has close and friendly relations based on shared culture and social history. China is surrounding India by building Sea ports in the neighbouring region, a strategy known as “Chinese String of Pearls” in recent times. **(Marantidou, 2014)**. This strategy involves the establishment and expansion of sea ports at Chittagong in Bangladesh, Gwadar in Pakistan and Hambantota in Sri Lanka etc. **(Brewster, 2016)**. To come out the situation as a true friend India has tried to strengthening close communication at all levels. This could involve infrastructural development, sharing expertise, resources and best practices in tackling the Covid 19 pandemic, and increased trade and investment and resolving the fishermen’s issue with Sri Lanka.

The primary aim of the study

- I. To identify historical bond between India and Sri Lanka.
- II. To analyse uncertainties in post independent period.
- III. To examine China’s larger participation and strategy in Sri Lanka to curb smooth relations with India.
- IV. To discuss India’s accommodative role.

Methodology

This study is relying on both primary and secondary data, with the primary data gathered from Ministry reports of the Government of India. The study utilizes a combination of research articles, journals, books, online resources, newspapers, and other materials to gather information and insights, employing both analytical and descriptive approaches.

India’s relations with Sri Lanka: Historical overview

According to Buddhist Chronicle Dipavamsa the Sinhalese are descendants of the seller who came to the island in 543 B.C. from Singhapura in Kalinga led by the prince Bijay and the Sinhala people constitute the majority community in Sri Lanka. The second ethnic group were Tamils. During 19th century, Indian Tamils migrated from Tamil Nadu to Sri Lanka as indentured labourers to work on tea plantations. Although they hold Sri Lankan citizenship, the Indian Tamils predominantly reside in rural areas and form a distinct community **(Biswal, 2018)**. Since gaining independence, India’s policy to its neighbours changes from treaty based relation to reciprocity. Sri Lanka’s post-independence relationship with India mirrors this shift. As a vital strategic partner in the region. the key

pillar of India's foreign policy is to maintain cultural, Religious and people-to people contact with its southern neighbour.

In early years of independence, foreign policies of both countries were influenced by the West. But from 1953-54 divergence of interests in India- Sri Lanka ties surfaced when Nehru became disenchanted with Western influences in international relations, and cold war political calculations. Going against India's interest Kotalawala government wanted to join America led security pact South East Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO). The relations became under substantial strain **(Muni, 1993, pp 32-36)**. The relations became slowly normal when Bandarnaike's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) came to power in 1956. The Bandaranaike government wanted to aloof from the superpower rivalry of cold war, and unlike his predecessor, considered India as a friendly neighbour and nurtured warm personal relations with Nehru. After his assassination, his wife Sirimavo Bandarnaike continued the foreign policy of his husband. She developed good personal chemistry with Nehru and later with Indira Gandhi, which paved ways for strong bilateral relations. Throughout 1962 Sino- Indian conflict, she performed as a mediator to resolve the border disputes between China and India. **(Nissanka, 1984, pp 146-53)**. There were no major changes in relationship with India during UNP government headed by Dudley Senayake.

But in 1980s, there had always been dormant tension in Sri Lankan society over this as India was viewed with suspicion by the majority Sinhalese. Both India and Sri Lanka have always considered each other strategically important, and their governments have consistently sought to avoid any significant deterioration in their relationship. Despite that, the relationship had undergone considerable crises and setbacks due to the ethnic issue **(Chatterjee, 2017)**. India, as a close ally, extended support to Sri Lanka during the escalating ethnic conflict and the subsequent civil war, which lasted for three decades, amid various political, economic, cultural, and international challenges **(Vigneswaran, 2022)**. Both India and Sri Lanka actively participate in various regional and international organizations to address national, regional, and global crisis.

India's official position on the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka has been steady and unwavering over the past three decades. While condemning the LTTE's military and terrorist actions aimed at creating an independent Tamil Eelam, India has consistently supported the expansion of rights for Tamils and other minority communities. Additionally, India stepped in by deploying the Indian Peace Keeping Force and signed Indo- Lanka accord to restore peace and normalcy **(Bose, 1994)**. But after 1980s situation was changing rapidly. Sri Lanka showed their displeasure over India's interference in internal matters. In this phase they indicate that India is turning to hegemonistic **(Shelton, 1990, p 91)**. China was there to use the situation against India.

As a reliable partner, India signed the Free Trade Agreement in 1998, which was implemented in December 2001. India is committed to offering immediate duty-free concessions on 1,012 items (**Pant, 2019**). India extended significant humanitarian aid, including loans for infrastructure development and various projects. Since 2014, the situation has evolved quickly, particularly with Prime Minister Modi's emphasis on the "Neighbourhood First" policy.

A new phase in India-Sri Lanka relations started with Maithripala Sirisena's election as president in 2015 and Ranil Wickremesinghe's appointment as Prime Minister in January 2015. Unlike Rajapaksa, who had strengthened ties with Beijing and side-lined India's interests, both Sirisena and Wickremesinghe were seen as having a stronger rapport with New Delhi. (**Chandran, 2019**). In 2015, Indian Prime Minister Modi visited Sri Lanka and states that, 'India's vision to Indian ocean is open and inclusive, and it is not against any countries interest. 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. During this period India used Buddhism as soft diplomacy to strengthen bilateral relations. Prime Minister Narendra Modi during the virtual Bilateral summit held between India and Sri Lanka on September 2020, announced a USD 15 million grant assistance for protection and promotion of Buddhist ties between both the countries (**Vigneswaran, 2022**). 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 were held in November 2021.

China's policy towards Sri Lanka to diminish India

Sri Lanka- China historical relations are characterized by economic and military cooperation as well as cultural exchanges. We can discuss the relationship dividing into three phases. Such as Sri Lanka- Chinese relations during the periods of pre- independence, post-independence and present relations (**Ravindra, 2016**). It is strategically well located in the centre of a modern international shipping passageway between the oil- rich Middle East, Southeast Asia and Africa, which is considered the world's energy and resource centre (**Kumar, 2017**). Shared cultural values of oriental civilization, common religious linkages based on Buddhism and silk road trade relations were important elements of historical China- Sri Lanka relations (**Bastiampillai, 1990**). On 7th February, 1957 China officially established with Sri Lanka. China from the beginning tried to established relations with Sri Lanka and reduce the influence of India on its southern neighbour. China backs the Sri Lankan government in safeguarding national independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, and China believes in the Sri Lankan people's wisdom and capacity to handle

their own affairs.... China opposes some country's interference in the internal affairs of Sri Lanka under the pretext of human rights issues (**Xinhua, 2014**). Sri Lanka is strategically well located in one of the main points in China's recently initiated Maritime Silk Road with three international shipping ports such as Colombo port, Trincomalee port and Hambantota international port. Under this initiative, China aims to reclaim the past glossiness of the ancient Silk Road, while increasing connectivity between China, Asia, Europe and Africa. Thus, China wants to use Sri Lanka as an economic and trade hub for its exports and imports under the MSR initiative (**Kumar, 2017**).

Sri Lanka (pearl of Indian ocean), due to its islandic position and natural beauty which, together with the warm hospitality of its people, attract a significant number of tourists from all over the world (**Deyshappriya, 2019**). Tourism became one of the landmarks of Sino- Sri Lanka relations. Tourist arrivals depend on factors which are as political stability, environment, infrastructure and peaceful relations. Recently Chinese tourist arrivals grew by 3.5 percent in September with the arrival of 19600 tourists (**Daily Mirror, 2018**). China became third largest tourism market with 167,863 arrivals in 2019. Chinese tourist arrivals were recorded in the month of January, February and March respectively 28,039, 23,759 and 23,759 by 2019 (**Mustafa, 2019**).

According to the existing trend, there is a high possibility for China to become the top tourist partner of Sri Lanka in near future (**Deyshappriya, 2019**). Therefore, to attract more Chinese tourists, the Sri Lankan government increased the number of direct flights between Colombo and Beijing. It has also simplified the visa policy for Chinese citizens in this phase.

Sri Lanka has opened the door for China to make a significant economic and strategic involvement in Sri Lanka. It became critical when the Sri Lanka government formally sold out the Hambantota port to Chinese company called the China Merchants Port Holdings Company (CMP) in December 2017. India evaluated this situation as a huge challenge for her to remain as a regional power in South Asia over the years with economic power and a regional military power with a nuclear weapons and missile capability (**Uluwaduge and Changfeng, 2021**). But China responded saying that, 'one mountain cannot accommodate two tigers' and tried to prevent the rise of India, which is emerging as a competitor in Asia and beyond (**Kumar, 2017**).

Chinese Military assistance to Sri Lanka and India's concern

China from the beginning tried to establish relation in military and other fields. Its intention was to woo Sri Lanka and alienate her from India's influence. China provided military assistance during the last stages of the Sri Lankan civil war (**Jaiswal & Bhatt, 2021**). Over the years, military cooperation between the two countries has been enhanced, and China

provided military support for Sri Lanka when needed. Wang Yiwei argued that, “smaller countries in the South Asian region are willing to military cooperation with China because they are fearful about Indian military strength” (**Sutirtho, 21 March 2017**). China swiftly became Sri Lanka's primary development partner, stepping in to fill the gap left by the absence of Western investments in the country (**Wheeler, 2012**). Frequent high-level military visits significantly contributed to strengthening security ties. In 2012, Chinese Defence Minister Liang Guanglie visited Sri Lanka and offered a US\$ 100 million grant for the construction of army camps in the northern and eastern provinces. In September 2014, Xu Qiliang, Vice Chairman of China's Central Military Commission and Air Chief Marshal, visited Sri Lanka, where he met with Defence Secretary and Urban Development Minister Gotabaya Rajapaksa. During the meeting, both sides underscored the importance of improving military-to-military relations (**Singh, 2018**).

Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) submarines visited Sri Lanka in September and November 2013, after the Rajapaksa government expressed support for China's Maritime Silk Road (MSR) initiative (**Jacon, 2014**). In August 2017, the Chinese naval hospital ship *Peace Ark* made its first visit to Colombo Port (Singh, 2018). Additionally, China collaborates with Sri Lanka by providing military training and assisting in the expansion of the country's defence forces (**Kumar, 2017**). China's main intention was to encircle India through its BRI project. Through economic and military aid to Sri Lanka it has tried to unfriend her from India's influence.

China's mysterious silence over human rights issues

China used the opportunity of ethnic conflict to strengthen its relationship with Sri Lanka. They intentionally backed her in international forums when western countries sanctioned them on human rights issue (**Vandergert, 2002**). China favoured Sri Lanka against the Human Rights Council Resolutions (HRCR) in 2012 and 2021. (**Cameron, 2002**). Criticising UNHCR resolution Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi opined that, “China opposes some countries interference in the internal affairs of Sri Lanka under the pretext of human rights issues.... we believe in the Sri Lankan people's wisdom and capacity to handle their own affairs” (**Cameron, 2002**). China helped her to enter different regional organization like ASEAN and Shanghai Cooperation Organization. (**Kelegama, 2014**) To counter Chinese expansionist endeavour India always remain friendly towards Sri Lanka's interest in different regional and bilateral issues.

India's cooperation in Fishermen issues

Another significant cause of the Indo-Sri Lanka fishing dispute is the challenge of sharing common resources. Sovereignty over Kachchatheevu also remains a contentious issue for both nations concerning fishing rights. According to the Indian government, nearly 500

Indian fishermen were arrested by the Sri Lankan Navy between 2019 and 2021, with 73 Indian boats confiscated by Sri Lankan authorities. The Sri Lankan Navy reported that, by September 2022, it had seized 25 trawlers and detained 189 Indian fishermen in Sri Lankan waters. Since 2019, six fishermen have lost their lives in separate incidents, allegedly due to collisions between their boats and Sri Lankan naval vessels. In response to these challenges, the Indian government took steps to address fishermen's concerns, including the launch of a deep-sea fishing initiative called 'Blue Revolution' by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in July 2017.

During the September 2020 Virtual Bilateral Summit, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Mahinda Rajapaksa highlighted the significance of enhancing people-to-people connections, rooted in their shared civilizational and cultural heritage. **(MEA, 2020)**. At the founding conference of the International Solar Alliance on March 11, 2018, India unveiled a new USD 100 million Line of Credit to assist solar projects in Sri Lanka. **(MEA 2019)**. In light of Sri Lanka's increasing demand for renewable energy and the limited foreign investment in this sector, the India-Sri Lanka joint statement from the virtual Bilateral Summit highlighted the importance of "strengthening cooperation in renewable energy, particularly focusing on solar projects funded by the US\$ 100 million Line of Credit from India." **(MEA 2020)**. The Sri Lankan Ministry of Power and Renewable Energy has expressed its intention to strengthen ties with India's energy giant, National Thermal Power Corporation Limited, to address the power shortage. Unfortunately, this initiative will have to wait until the worst of the pandemic has passed before construction can commence.

Recent economic crisis, China's imperialistic attitude and India's assistance

This section further focus on the reason of economic clash and its impact on relations with India. Our main focus will be to discover the Chinese opportunistic debt driven influence to use the situation and India's assistance to solve the problem in recent time. Recently some national and international incidents impacted on Sri Lankan society and economy adversely. Due to Covid 19 Sri Lanka faces a great economic disaster. Along with this, in this phase government took some wrong economic policies which creates complexity in the daily life of people. Chinese debt trap actually accelerate the crisis.

Firstly, Abnormal Budget deficits increased when Rajapaksa government implemented tax cuts recently. **(Bala, 2022)**. These reductions included cutting VAT and corporate tax, leading to a decrease in tax revenue and causing the country to fall deeper into debt.

Secondly, Chinese debt diplomacy causes a serious concern for the developing nations like Sri Lanka. Many observers have highlighted the loans from the Exim Bank of China for the construction of the Mattala Rajapaksa International Airport and the Hambantota International Port as instances of debt-trap diplomacy and exploitative lending, as these

projects turned out to be financially unviable (**Moramudali, 2020**).

Thirdly, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa declared that Sri Lanka would shift to organic farming by banning the use of inorganic fertilizers and those containing agrochemicals. The fertiliser ban alone led to a \$425 million loss in tea production and a 20% decline in rice output within the first six months (**Shah, 2021**). Tea industry face similar problem. People those are related to chemical fertiliser and pesticides industry experience economic crisis.

Fourthly, Tourism had previously contributed over 10 percent to Sri Lanka's GDP. However, the 2019 Easter bombings dealt a severe blow to the industry, and the COVID-19 pandemic hindered any chances of recovery. In 2018, tourism generated \$4.4 billion and accounted for 5.6% of the country's GDP, but by 2020, this figure had dropped significantly to just 0.8 percent (**Kataria, 2022**).

In reaction to the economic crisis, thousands of protesters seized President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's official residence. After demonstrators stormed military used cohesive power but the situation goes beyond control. Following months of widespread protests over the country's economic challenges, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa fled the nation, and a state of emergency was declared (**Perera, 2022**). Inflation had surged past 50 percent, and officials reported a severe shortage of gasoline, creates a complex situation with serious health and communication problem (**Kumar, 2022**). China, known for acting with clear intent, ignored Sri Lanka's efforts to limit foreign debt obligations. The main goal of Beijing's current aid proposal is to assist Sri Lanka in repaying its existing debts to China. While China initially funded infrastructure development, subsequent contributions were focused on stabilizing the budget and addressing the balance of payments crisis. This change in the nature of financial assistance led Sri Lanka deeper into China's 'debt trap.' To counter New Delhi's influence in the Indian Ocean Region, China has consistently monitored projects in Sri Lanka's northern islands. A 2018 article in the New York Times described the Hambantota Sea Port, constructed with Chinese loans under the Belt and Road Initiative, as a "white elephant" project with limited economic feasibility. Despite its proximity to one of the world's busiest international shipping routes, the port only saw thirty-four ships from China. Consequently, the Sri Lankan government had to lease the port to China Ports Holding, a state-owned Chinese company, for 99 years. This debt-to-equity swap granted China control over a strategically located area just a few hundred miles from India, providing a vital base near an important maritime route. (**Abi-Habib, 2018**) India is not necessarily worried about China's presence, but it is concerned about the geopolitical ramifications. Its main concern lies in the potential for China to utilize infrastructure in ways that could threaten India's strategic interests (**Manoharan, 2013**). To help Sri Lanka overcome its severe economic crisis, India has stepped forward as a true

friend. In India disbursed 376.9 million USD in foreign loans and grants, significantly higher than China's contribution of only 67.9 million USD (**Kaura, 2020**). The Indian government sent humanitarian assistance to Sri Lanka swiftly in 2022. However, the presence of Chinese ships has recently become a source of tension in India-Sri Lanka relations. The arrival of Chinese research vessels, Shi Yan 6 and Yuan Wang 5, has raised security concerns for India. (**Moorthy, 2023**). To change the situation Sri Lankan president Ranil Wickremesinghe visited India to promote connectivity (**Moorthy, 2023**).

CONCLUSION

The Indo- Sri Lanka relations have been maintained with different levels in different times. It was cordial and cooperative in nature but due to China's growing influence after post-independent period it's become critical and distrustful (**Butler, 2024**). Recently left leaning politician of National Peoples Power (NPP) Anura Kumara Dissanayake elected as a new president of Sri Lanka. He was active member of Janatha Vimukti Peramuna a Marxist party which was against India's policy towards ethnic problem of Sri Lanka. But the light of hope is that in his first official visits to India He assured India that Sri Lanka would not allow its territory to be used in ways that could threaten India's security or regional stability. Congratulating Mr. Dissanayake, Modi expressed hope to work closely with Sri Lanka. He reminds him that Sri Lanka holds a special position in India's Neighbourhood First policy and vision SAGAR. India is hopeful to vehement multifaceted cooperation with Sri Lanka for the benefit of people and the entire region. Both the government might prioritize strengthen bilateral ties which include joint naval exercise, disaster relief, coordination and intelligence sharing and security threats. Larger participation through SAARC, BIMSTEC only can minimise the area of distrust and alienate China from this region as well. After the dethroned of Sheikh Hasina from Bangladesh, the Pakistan and China trying to creates a situation which is against India's interest in South Asia. Therefore, India should take every possible steps to enhanced relation with Sri Lanka.

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