

India-Sri Lanka relations in the context of Indian Ocean politics

Dr Aruni Sharma,

Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, Jai Narayan PG college, Lucknow.

ARTICLE DETAILS

Article History

Published Online: 19 June 2018

Keywords

Indian Ocean, culture, language, maritime boundary.

ABSTRACT

India and Sri Lanka have a long history of close ties in terms of culture, language and religion. There is ample evidence of this relationship in the narrative of Ramayana. During the period of the Mauryan Empire, Ashoka sent his son Mahendra to Sri Lanka to propagate Buddhism in the island country. Thus, cultural ties between India and Sri Lanka stand on a solid footing.

While there is no major maritime boundary dispute between the two countries, fishermen from both sides inadvertently enter each other's territory, resulting in sporadic confrontations between the navies of the two countries. During the LTTE era, relations between the two countries deteriorated greatly and the Tamil problem became a major point of confrontation between the governments of the two countries.

India-Sri Lanka relations suffered a lot due to several problems related to the organisation's terrorist activities during the LTTE era. As a result of the tireless efforts of the Sri Lankan army, the LTTE could be eliminated in the end which ushered in a new peaceful era on the island. This is also good news for India as it no longer needs to deal with refugee problems on its shores. The domestic politics of the state of Tamil Nadu has also often dominated political thinking in New Delhi, and this tension was the highest during the era of coalition politics.

Another thorny aspect in India-Sri Lanka relations is China. To maximize its economic advantage by using its important location in the Indian Ocean region, Sri Lanka has entered into an economic and strategic partnership with China. India has a turbulent past with China and China's interference in its natural sphere of dominance and influence has upset India.

The paper will study various dimensions of India-Sri Lanka relations in general and the maritime dimension in the 21st century in particular.

Introduction

The oceans have long been associated with human survival. People have attempted to cross the oceans to discover other lands since ancient times. As a result of these explorations, diplomatic and economic contacts were established between the countries.

India and Sri Lanka have a long history of close ties in terms of culture, language and religion. There is ample evidence of this relationship in the narrative of Ramayana. During the period of the Mauryan Empire, Ashoka sent his son Mahendra to Sri Lanka to propagate Buddhism in the island country. Thus, cultural ties between India and Sri Lanka stand on a solid footing.

Over the course of Sri Lanka's 2500-year known history, India emerged as a powerful regional neighbour. As a result, the two countries' governments, economies, societies, and cultures have become highly intertwined. Sri Lanka's foreign policy has, historically and currently, placed an unparalleled emphasis on India. India is our relation, and all others are our friends," said Sri Lanka's former president, Mahinda Rajapaksa.

The LTTE era was difficult for relations between India and Sri Lanka because of various issues stemming from the

organization's terrorist actions. A new age of peace has begun in Sri Lanka after the island's government made concerted attempts to eradicate the LTTE. It's great news for India since it means the country will no longer have to deal with any refugee issues. A source of contention during the coalition era was the prominence of Tamil Nadu's internal politics in New Delhi's political discourse.

While there is no major maritime boundary dispute between the two countries, fishermen from both sides inadvertently enter each other's territory, resulting in sporadic confrontations between the navies of the two countries.

Another thorny aspect in India-Sri Lanka relations is the China factor. To maximize its economic gains by using its important location in the Indian Ocean region, Sri Lanka has been forging economic and strategic partnerships with China. India has had a turbulent past with China and China's interference in its natural sphere of dominance and influence has upset India.

Contentious issues in India-Sri Lanka relations

The maritime tensions between India and Sri Lanka are not as severe as those between India and Pakistan. The marine border between the two nations has been established. It is a dispute over the fishing rights of fishermen from the two

nations that has strained relations between India and Sri Lanka.

Due to tensions between India and Sri Lanka and Sri Lanka's expanding economic and military ties with China, there are additional challenges in the two nations' relations. The impact of this circumstance was seen most acutely under the previous president Mahinda Rajapaksa's administration.

Conflict regarding fishing rights of fishermen of both countries

The agreements that took place in 1974 and 1976 determined where the maritime boundary between the two nations should be. As a result of the agreement that took place in 1974, Sri Lanka assumed possession of the island of Katchatheevu, and India acknowledged Sri Lanka's authority over the territory.

A maritime boundary agreement between India and Sri Lanka came into effect on July 8, 1974. Following the 1974 agreement, Kewal Singh, the then-foreign secretary of India, and W.T. Jayasinghe, the then-foreign secretary of Sri Lanka, exchanged correspondence. In 1976, a supplementing agreement was reached. The maritime border between the two nations was drawn from the westernmost point of the Bay of Bengal at the Gulf of Mannar to the location where the boundaries of India, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives intersected in the Indian Ocean on the southwest axis. Both nations have sovereign rights over the sea, islands, continental shelf, and subsoil area in their respective territories within a specified boundary, according to these international agreements. On the Sri Lankan side of the maritime border, Katchatheevu island is accessible to Indian fisherman and pilgrims as well. The 1974 and 1976 agreements do not impose a clear ban on fishing by Indian fishermen beyond Indian waters, although Sri Lanka's sovereign rights in its part of the territory remain undisputed.¹

Indian fishing boats are superior to their Sri Lankan counterparts in every way, especially in terms of strength. While most of these fishermen stay inside Indian seas when fishing in Palk Bay, a small number occasionally cross into Sri Lankan territory, which often leads to violent clashes with the Sri Lankan Navy and local fishermen. During the height of the LTTE threat, when Indian boats were suspected of transporting weapons and supplies to the rebel group, the issue became acute. During this time period, the Sri Lankan Navy raided, kidnapped, and killed several Indian fishermen.

The Sri Lankan Navy placed security limitations, particularly on night fishing, on Sri Lankan Tamil fishermen from the country's northern area during the latter three years of the Fourth Eelam War (2006-09). During this time, Indian fishermen's activities are said to have expanded. The increased capacity of Indian trawlers, usage of synthetic nets, and enlarged area of operation have harmed the livelihoods of

around 30000 fisherman families in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka's Mannar, Kilinochchi, Mullaitivu, and Jaffna districts.

Similarly, Sri Lankan fisherman wander into Indian seas and suffer the same fate as their Indian counterparts, despite the fact that the Indian Navy has been less stringent in its employment of aggressive measures against Sri Lankans.

In such a case, this matter requires prompt care. The impoverished coastal people of India and Sri Lanka will gain enormously from a solution that is agreeable to both nations' fishermen. The two nations have had strong links for over 2500 years. In this backdrop, former Indian President Shri APJ Abdul Kalam previously proposed that Indian and Sri Lankan fisherman be permitted to fish in Palk Bay on alternating days to reduce the likelihood of a war.²

Sri Lanka and India have a 400-kilometer maritime boundary. In the Palk Bay area, which includes Katchatheevu island and is located between the coastal districts of Nagapattinam, Thanjavur, Pudukkottai, and Ramanathapuram. Fishermen have been shot, killed, detained, and imprisoned on a daily basis.

Sri Lanka's growing closeness with China and its impact on India-Sri Lanka relations

Sri Lanka's strategic location in the Indian Ocean makes it a pivotal nation. Its strategic position in the middle of the Indian Ocean and the accessibility of its harbours make it an attractive investment opportunity. Located as it does on a major transportation corridor, Sri Lanka plays a pivotal role in international trade. Sri Lanka has developed extensive commercial, geopolitical, and military contacts and collaboration with numerous nations, notably China, to make the most of the advantages its location affords. When it comes to relations with China, India has a tumultuous history. Finding a happy medium between its relationships with India on the one hand and China on the other has proven to be a formidable challenge for Sri Lanka.

Among the first to recognise China, Sri Lanka and China quickly forged tight connections across the board, from the economy to the military to strategic cooperation. The Chinese Foreign Minister said, "We adore this nation," during a 1971 state visit to Sri Lanka. To hasten Ceylon's socialist revolution, China has pledged its complete support (former name of Sri Lanka). China-Sri Lanka ties have been a unifying force and rising tide since the first Rubber-Rice Agreement was inked in 1952. Sri Lanka's relationship with India and China, the two largest countries in Asia, have sometimes left it between a rock and a hard place.

India and China have tense relations. The relationship between China and India has been tense since Tibet's accession in 1950, when China became India's closest neighbour. Even though Nehru and other Indian leaders did their utmost to preserve friendly and good neighbourly ties with China, India was one of the few nations to recognise the

¹ Sen Gautam, 'India Sri Lanka fishermen problem: some solutions' IDSA Comment, http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/IndiaSriLankaFishermenProblem_gsen_180614.html

² 'In risky waters', Frontline Volume 16 – Issue 19, September 11 – 24, 1999.

People's Republic of China early. However, despite India's pro-peace position, the two nations engaged in a brief but ferocious war in 1962, which saw the Indian forces suffer a crushing loss. India has been extremely worried about China's intentions toward it due to the most recent trend of China's assertive foreign policy and the recurrent conflicts in Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh.

China's policy has been to corner India by establishing military facilities in her neighbourhood by trapping the neighbouring states of India into a debt web. This strategy is well-known as the '*String of Pearls*' policy and this strategy clearly seems to extend to the maritime sphere.

China has utilised investment as a tactic to bolster its national interests throughout the world and extend its influence as its economic might has increased. The two pillars of China's financial foreign policy, according to Ken Miller, US Economic Advisor on Foreign Affairs, are building up foreign exchange reserves and transferring money abroad in the form of FDI, aid, and debt. The final phase of this method is best shown by Sri Lanka. Economic data also point to a remarkable increase in China's financial contribution to Sri Lanka's economy. The free trade agreement between China and Sri Lanka was completed in 2014 and signed in June 2015.³

Bilateral trade between China and Sri Lanka was over USD 3 billion in 2013 and China was Sri Lanka's second-largest source of imports after India.⁴

Former Sri Lankan president Mahinda Rajapaksa said during the free trade agreement talks, "Our cooperation covers many sectors including industry, energy, technology, infrastructure and tourism."⁵

During President Rajapaksa's state visit to China in May 2013, the two leaders had agreed to enhance bilateral ties and upgrade their relationship to the level of "strategic cooperation and partnership".

In September 2014, the island was visited by Chinese President Xi Jinping. It had been 28 years since a Chinese head of state had visited the island. It enhanced collaboration and improved economic and trade connections between the two nations.⁶

China is the country that has invested the most money abroad in Sri Lanka (FDI), and it has also given the country development loans for various projects, including the \$500 million Colombo Port Terminal, Hambantota Port, the country's first four-lane expressway, and a new National Theater, among others. Sri Lanka's relationship with China has greatly benefited from these alluring economic advantages.

Sri Lanka's recent decision to join the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) demonstrates the closeness of the two nations' strategic goals and their shared national interests. The Indian Ocean Rim Association asserts that Chinese investment has benefitted the Indian Ocean ports of Gwadar in Pakistan, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, and Chittagong in Bangladesh, which together handle 30% of world traffic.

China's dominance throughout South Asian trade lanes will be bolstered by the Maritime Silk Road, a major strategic initiative in the Indian Ocean. Hambantota, the island's new port, was built with Chinese funds and now accounts for 85 percent of the island's total GDP. This is not a typical passageway for ships. Still, it's an excellent location from which to accomplish MSR's long-term goals.

The capital of Sri Lanka's southern province's Hambantota district is Hambantota. It is the focal point of several significant development initiatives right now, including the building of a port and an international airport. The Sri Lankan government intends to use these initiatives, along with others like building the Hambantota Cricket Stadium, to transform Hambantota into a second important metropolitan centre apart from Colombo.⁷

China's vast dollar reserves allowed it to assist Sri Lanka in completing its objective. However, the whole thing wouldn't have been damaging to Indian interests if it had only been in civil sphere. The media has, however, reported on the potential establishment of a Chinese naval facility in Hambantota. A report from November 19, 2014 claims that over the course of the next ten years, China's PLA Navy intends to construct 18 bases in various locations, including the Sri Lankan Hambantota.

Over the course of two months in 2014, the Chinese Navy moored submarines twice at the port of Colombo without warning. When Shri Pranab Mukherjee, a former president of India, visited Vietnam in September 2014, it occurred for the first time. According to the Times of India, on November 3, 2014, China's nuclear-powered submarine Changzheng 2 and destroyer Chang Xing Dao landed at Colombo harbour once more despite India's warning to Sri Lanka that it would find the presence of Chinese submarines in Sri Lanka intolerable.⁸

When another Chinese submarine was permitted to dock in Colombo on September 15, India was furious since it had previously expressed its strong unhappiness to Gotabaya

³ Miller Kane, 'China's Financial Power with Countering Beijing's Financial Foreign Policy', Foreign Affairs, July–August 2010.

<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/66466/ken-miller/coping-with-chinas-financial-power>

⁴ Sri Lanka trade balance, exports, imports by country 2014, WITS Data
<https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/LKA/Year/2014/TradeFlow/EXPIMP/Partner/by-country>

⁵ 'New Silk Road crucial for Sri Lanka's development: president'
https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2014xisco/2014-09/13/content_18593912.htm

⁶ 'Xi Jinping Arrives in Colombo Starting His State Visit to Sri Lanka':
<https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/cebe/eng/zgwj/t1192334.htm>

⁷ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hambantota>

⁸ 'Chinese submarine docking in Lanka 'inimical' to India's interests: Govt', The Times of India, Nov 4, 2014.
<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Chinese-submarine-docking-in-Lanka-inimical-to-Indias-interests-Govt/articleshow/45025487.cms>

Rajapaksa, the brother of former president Mahinda Rajapaksa and former secretary of defence. The submarine made a stop in Colombo in September during the visit of Indian President Pranab Mukherjee to Vietnam. At the same time, clashes were taking place between Indian and Chinese forces at Chumar in southeast Ladakh. Later, China claimed to have made a stop at Colombo on its way to the Gulf of Aden.

Critical issues are raised over Sri Lanka's sincere intentions towards India's strategic concerns in the Indian Ocean area as a result. Strategic expert Brahma Chellaney asserts that Sri Lanka's hostile move to allow Chinese submarines access has been strengthened by India's diminished regional dominance. But that is a serious error of judgement.⁹

India's economic interests are threatened by China's actions in Sri Lanka. India feels that notwithstanding the dubious commercial and economic feasibility of Chinese projects, China has been given preferential treatment by the Sri Lankan government. According to reports, traffic at the Chinese-built Hambantota Port and Matara International Airport is much below projections.

Conclusion

With the Chinese economy slowing down, China is increasingly adopting a tough nationalist posture and trying to aggressively expand its territorial claims in various international territories. In such a situation, China's presence in the Indian Ocean region is bound to increase in the coming years. Economic and military cooperation with other South Asian countries, including Sri Lanka, will greatly help China in its plan to expand its naval presence in the region.

After the change of leadership in Sri Lanka, the new administration headed by President Maithripala Sirisena has made an effort to strengthen ties with India. A significant milestone in this direction was the signing of the Nuclear Cooperation Agreement between India and Sri Lanka during Sri Lankan President's visit to India in January 2015. India has effectively used its soft power to oust Sri Lanka from the Chinese camp. However, it would be prudent for Sri Lanka to be mindful of India's security concerns in the area and avoid jeopardising its relations with its closest neighbour India. Sri Lanka cannot be expected to significantly alter its long-standing foreign policy.

As a matter of fact, The Indian government should also avoid letting internal political pressures get in the way of its foreign policy goals. On March 22, 2012, India voted in favour of the US-sponsored resolution at the UN HRC condemning Sri Lanka for shortcomings in investigations by the Government of Sri Lanka for possible violations of international law and human rights during the final phase of the war with the LTTE and for the lack of credible post-conflict reconciliation initiatives due to coalition obligations of the then Government of India,

dependent on the support of the DMK of Tamil Nadu. The Sri Lankan government was particularly concerned about the resolution and wanted it to be rejected, therefore China showed its friendship by voting against it.¹⁰

Such circumstances do not augur well for India-Sri Lanka relations. In order to meet the objectives of its economic and security interests in the Indian Ocean region, it would be prudent for India to do everything possible to prevent neighbouring countries, including Sri Lanka, from going into the arms of China. Our centuries-old cultural ties in the Indian Ocean region may have a special role to play in this endeavour.

⁹ Brahma Chellaney on Twitter: "India's weakened regional clout has emboldened Sri Lanka's hostile action to grant access to Chinese subs. But it is a grave miscalculation." <https://twitter.com/Chellaney/status/528932679954071552>

¹⁰ 'India votes against Sri Lanka, UN Human Rights Council': <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/india-votes-against-sri-lanka-un-human-rights-council-resolution-adopted-472872>