Research Article

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Melian dialogue syndrome in the Indian Ocean: A critical appraisal of Sri Lanka's "small state dilemma" in the context of Indo-Sino rivalry

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Abstract: Sri Lanka's foreign secretary's statement indicating that Colombo would adopt "*India First*" foreign policy appears to be a much-consoling phrase for the Indian diplomats. It is a fact beyond any dispute that New Delhi felt anxious about Sri Lanka's extensive hobnobbing with China for years that has finally seen massive Chinese presence in the island nation. Given Sri Lanka's strategic location in the Indian ocean as a crucial hub in the Indian ocean governance, Colombo's relations with Beijing have always created a tense situation in India. However, the newly elected president of Sri Lanka Gotabaya Rajapaksa and his government's novel approach to profess their foreign policy as India cantered doctrine raises some perplexity with the realpolitik caught by Sri Lanka. This paper seeks to examine the asymmetrical relationship that existed between Indian and Sri Lanka after the independence of both nations, wherein New Delhi used different means to carve Sri Lanka's external relations for the best interests of India. Furthermore, this paper analyses the unequal position Sri Lanka has been facing as a small nation located near a rising global power and how Sri Lanka struggles to balance both India and China in their rivalry in the Indian Ocean. The results emerge from this paper will reveal the impossibility of upholding neutrality for a small state before complex geopolitical power struggles.

Keywords: Indian Ocean, realpolitik, India, Sri Lanka, Foreign Policy, China

1 Introduction

Thucydides seminal work "*The History of the Peloponnesian War*" is undeniably the most palpable narrative in ascertaining the political destinies of small states from the realist's perspective. The words of Thucydides in Melian dialog "The stronger must do what they can and weaker must suffer what they have" embodies Sri Lanka's relations with India in the aftermath of independence. Even though Sri Lanka was not doomed by India as how Athenians reacted to Melians' political neutrality, the array of events occurred in Sri Lanka in its post-colonial context denotes the strong influence that India continues to play.

Sri Lanka has been often portrayed as being in the crossroads of geopolitical encounters with powerful nations throughout its history and its unique geographic location in Indian ocean closer to the Indian mainland yet distinct from it has made the island's destiny extremely intertwined with India.² Sri Lanka's

¹ Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War* (trans: Richard Crowley), Charleston : Bibliobazaar (2006), p. 121.

² Alan Strathern, *The digestion of the foreign in Lankan history, Sri Lanka at the crossroads of history*, ed. Zoltan Biedermann and Alan Strathern, London: UCL Press, 2017, p. 345.

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own historical identity is the best testimony proving how crucially India has played its influence in island nation's destiny. From one side it has been an inexplicable factor that how the Sinhalese community who represent the majority ethnic group in Sri Lanka perceive India as their stances on India embody a love-hate story. While they worship India as the country that brought Buddhism as a spiritual gift, the antagonism towards India among the Sinhalese is deeply rooted in the psyche of the people with the intense nationalist rhetoric which has always portrayed India as an invading force throughout Sri Lankan history.³ It is an interesting factor to observe that the geographical proximity of Sri Lanka to India did not transform the island into an Indian satellite state. Instead it remained rather resolute before the political influence came from India, but the island's early history has shown how Sri Lanka grappled with South Indian kingdoms for the cause of survival. Ludowyk states "More often than not... found itself drawn into the wars of the South Indian kingdoms, either in self-defense or in alliance with one or other of the warring princes."⁴ The idea of otherness has always prevailed as a part of Sri Lankan identity throughout its history, yet it could not completely liberate itself from the orbit of India which created an ambivalence in the relations between the two countries. Sri Lankan historian K.M de Silva writes

"The narrow stretch of sea which separates it from the subcontinent ensured that the civilization which evolved in Sri Lanka was not a mere variant of the Indian prototype but something distinctive or autonomous though the Indian element was never obliterated".⁵

When India became an independent nation-state at the end of the British raj, a strong proposition arose from India's scholar diplomat K.M Panikkar regarding the need of immediate cooperation among India, Burma and Sri Lanka as a pre-requisite for a "realistic policy of Indian defence". In Panikkar's fascination on making Indian Ocean "*Mare Nostrum*" to uphold India's position, he further stated

"The first and primary consideration is that both Burma and Ceylon must form with India the basic federation for mutual defence whether they will it or not. It is necessary for their own security"⁶

Even Nehru himself had pointed to the ethnic, linguistic and cultural unity of India and Sri Lanka to support the view that the latter would inevitably be drawn into a closer union with India.⁷ Nehru's approach to Ceylon (Sri Lanka) was not an euphoric claim emerging in the eve of India's independence mixed with mere chauvinist effusions, because many of Indian policymakers and strategists believed that the departure of British power from the Indian Ocean region has enthroned newly independent India as the natural successor to Britain as the guardian of the Indian Ocean. For instance, in 1949 one year after Sri Lanka gained independence from Britain, the president of the Indian National Congress vociferously stated in a speech in Bombay "Indian, must sooner or later enter into a treaty with the Ceylonese people so that Ceylon may become the organic part of the body politic".⁸

In the advent of independence Sri Lanka's first premier Don Stephan Senanayake was eager to sign a defence pact with the United Kingdom to ensure the newly independent island's security. The echo roared among Indian politicians and intellectuals regarding the annexation of Sri Lanka, especially its Trinco harbor igniting the fear of Sri Lanka's first premier to accelerate the defense pact with former colonial master the United Kingdom. In justifying his pact with the UK before the coarse criticism came from his political opponents, Senanyake stated

"the defence of the country is one of the primary obligations of an independent state and this is not the sort of world in which small nations can be secure without large and expensive armed forces...Frankly I cannot accept the responsibility of being Minister unless I am provided with means of defence".⁹

³ Lakhan Mehrotra, *My Days in Sri Lanka*, (Delhi: Har Anand Publications) 2011, p. 34.

⁴ EF Ludowyk, *The Modern History of Ceylon*, (Colombo: Lake House) 1966, p.51.

⁵ KM de Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka*, (Chennai: Oxford University Press) 1999, p.25.

⁶ Kavalam M. Panikkar, *India and the Indian Ocean: An Essay on the Influence of Sea Power on Indian History* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1945), p.34.

⁷ W.H. Wriggins, *Ceylon: Dilemmas of A New Nation*, (Princeton University Press, 1960), p.399.

⁸ Ceylon Daily News, 23 April 1949.

⁹ W.M Karunadasa, A Re-appraisal of Sri Lanka's Non-Alignment :1948-1968, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka*, Vol.37, (1993), pp. 78.

The above-mentioned statement of Sri Lanka's first prime minister reminds of what Herbert Fisher argued on the behavior of small states. Fisher wrote "small states seek to offset their weakness by association of alliance with other powers great and small".¹⁰ Notwithstanding the affinity maintained by Sri Lanka with the United Kingdom, in broadcast over the BBC in 1951 premier D.S affirmed that "Neutrality" as the cardinal principle of Sri Lanka's foreign policy.¹¹ Yet Trinco harbor in the East coast was occupied by British troops showing how fervently premier Senanayake relied upon the support of Britain for protecting the island and this policy was continued till 1956.

Even after the first decade of independence, India upheld its concern on Sri Lanka's foreign relations. Sri Lanka's foreign policy slogan of "Neutrality" was not adequate to appease Delhi's fear as Indian foreign policy makers considered Sri Lanka to be a crucial strategic location for India. Ravi Kaul, a former commander of Indian Navy wrote in 1974

"Sri Lanka is as important strategically to India as Eire is to the United Kingdom or Taiwan to China... As long as Sri Lanka is friendly or neutral, India has nothing to worry about but if there be any danger of this island falling under the domination of a power hostile to India, India cannot tolerate such a situation endangering her territorial integrity" ¹²

In particular, the events developed during the administration of Sri Lanka's premier Sirimavo Bandaranaike regarding island's participation in the regional affairs created a slight suspicion in Delhi. Unlike her predecessors who had a policy of containment toward China, Sirimavo Bandaranaike found no reason why Sri Lanka should shun Communist countries. On the contrary, in 1963 Sri Lanka and China entered into a Maritime Agreement giving most favored nation status to the contracting parties in respect of commercial vessels engaged in cargo and passenger services.¹³ The nature of the agreement caused an obvious agitation in India as Delhi suspected this agreement would provide facilities to Chinese warships. It should be noted that Sri Lanka's neutrality during the Indo-China war and the attempt to bring both China and India to the negotiation process in Colombo Conference in 1962 December was rather a significant move made by Sirimavo Bandaranayke regardless of its twilight outcome. In writing a policy paper in 1963 titled "Ceylon and Sino-Indian Boarder Conflict" Indian scholar Urmila Phadnis states

"Whether the Colombo conference, which was convened for the "limited purpose" of bringing the antagonists round the table so that they could solve their border problems themselves, has been successful is not too clear as yet. What can be said, however, is that Ceylon, in its role of a peace-maker, may not have won the admiration either of India or China, but at least it has not antagonized them".¹⁴

India's attitude of being vigilant towards Sri Lanka and its foreign relations continued to grow in the 70s. Especially, Sri Lanka's assistance to Pakistan in 1971 Indo- Pak war by allowing Pakistani aircrafts to refuel in the *Rathmalana* airbase displeased Indian heavily.¹⁵ Moreover, it was regarded as an act of ingratitude by Delhi as India happened to be the closest ally of Sri Lanka when Sirimavo Bandaranaike's government was at bay in 1971 due to an insurgency organized by a local leftist militant group called "*Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna*".¹⁶ Sri Lankan president JR Jayewardene's US-centric foreign policy after he came to power in 1977 was another crucial juncture in India's twisted relations with Sri Lanka. In 1977 president Jayewardene allowed the US ships to enter Trinco harbour causing Indian mistrust toward Colombo and it was accelerated when the "Voice of America" started to broadcast from the Northern province of Sri Lanka. The reaction arose from India to Jayewardene's closer ties with the USA was further propelled by the ethnic unrest in Sri Lanka between Sinhalese and Tamil communities.

¹⁰ Herbert Fisher, "*The Value of Small States*", Oxford Pamphlets, N.17, Oxford University Press, 1914, p. 23.

¹¹ Sivananda Patnaik, Foreign Policy Making in Sri Lanka, *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, (Vol.72, No.3) 2011, pp. 861.

¹² Ravi Kaul, *The Indian Ocean: A Strategic Posture for India*, in Indian Ocean Power Rivalry, T.T Poulouse (ed), (New Delhi, 1974), p.66.

¹³ Shelton Kodikaara, *Foreign Policy of Sri Lanka: A Third World Perspective*, (New Delhi, Chanakya Publications, 1982), p.46.

¹⁴ Urmila Phadnis, Ceylon and the Sino-Indian Boarder Conflict. *Asian Survey*, Vol.4, No.4, (1963), pp. 189-196.

¹⁵ Christiane Tirimagni Hurtig, The Indo Pakistani war and ending of a power balance in South Asia, *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, (Vol.35, No.3) 1974, pp. 201-219.

¹⁶ James Manor, Gerald Segal, Causes of Conflict: Sri Lanka and Indian Ocean Strategy, *Asian Survey*, Vol 25, No.12, (1985), pp.1173.

1.1 The Ethnic Discontent of Sri Lanka and India's involvement

The racial discrimination faced by the Sri Lankan Tamils as a result of the Sinhala Only language policy which was adopted in 1956 under SWRD Bandaranaike's chauvinistic government created a profound effect in the Tamil psyche of Sri Lanka which was followed by a series of events such as 1958 and 1977 ethnic riots that fueled the Tamil separatist movement on the island. Nonetheless, India's concern over the Tamil issue in Sri Lanka was driven by much deeper geopolitical issues than the ostensible factors Indian portrayed, like its concern for the rights of the Tamils who are strongly connected with the Indian mainland. It should be noted that the rapid western-oriented foreign policy implemented by JR Jayewardene after 1977 dismayed New Delhi. Jayewardene anticipated that the rapid economic development by the open economic policy he adopted would reduce the youth unemployment, which happened to be one of the major reasons of the Tamil ethnic unrest in Northern Sri Lanka.¹⁷ Simultaneously, Jayewardene government's affinity with the USA, Pakistan and Israel created an alarming situation for India in the cold war context where Indira Gandhi supported the USSR as a strategic ally in the Indian Ocean. In his memoir D.N Dixith had admitted that Indian intervention in Sri Lanka was not entirely prompted by how Tamils were discriminated under Sinhalese majoritarian governments. He states "It would be relevant to analyze India's motivations and actions vis-à-vis Sri Lanka in the larger perspective of the international and regional strategic environment obtaining between 1980 and 1984".¹⁸

An indocentric attitude persisted in Indira Gandhi toward the regional affairs and he was obsessed with upholding the national interests of India. Given the fact that Jayawardena maintained closer stances with the USA and Pakistan, Indira Gandhi opted for the policy of destabilizing Sri Lanka by training the Tamil militants. Rohan Gunaratne has pointed out that under the Indira Gandhi administration a supra covert section called the "Third Agency" was created by taking the operatives from RAW (Research and Analysis Wing) and IB (Intelligent Bureau) to train and arm the Tamil militants.¹⁹ The military training given by RAW to Sri Lankan Tamil militants between 1983 and 1986 was based on Delhi's interest in destabilizing JR Jayewardene's government in Sri Lanka and weakening Sri Lanka's closer ties with the West. The Minister of National Security during J.R Jayawardena's government in Sri Lanka Lalith Athulathmudali lampooned India by saying

"RAW wanted a stick to beat Sri Lanka. India wanted to control her surroundings. They had an obsession that Trincomalee was being given as a base to the US".²⁰

The Indo Lanka accords that came into force in 1987 were an offshoot of the pressure put by India on Sri Lankan government to prevent Sri Lankan forces from taking military actions against the Tamil militant groups. For instance, by 1987 Sri Lankan government forces made a successful military move against the Tamil separatist militants which was reversed by Indian intervention. Furthermore, prior to the Indo Lanka pact was signed in Colombo 1987, an annexed letter from Rajiv Gandhi to Sri Lankan president J.R Jayewardene insisted that Sri Lanka should abstain from providing its ports to any foreign power that may hinder India's security. The letter from Rajiv Gandhi to Jayewardene stated the following

Conscious of the friendship between our two countries stretching over two millennia and more, and recognizing the importance of nurturing this traditional friendship, it is imperative that both Sri Lanka and India reaffirm the decision not to allow our respective territories to be used for activities prejudicial to each other's unity, territorial integrity and security. In this spirit, you had, during the course of our discussions, agreed to meet some of India's concerns as follows:

- (i) Your Excellency and myself will reach an early understanding about the relevance and employment of foreign military and intelligence personnel with a view to ensuring that such presences will not prejudice Indo-Sri Lankan relations.

¹⁷ James Manor, A New Political Order for Sri Lanka, *The World Today*, (Vol.35, No.9), 1980, pp. 377-386.

¹⁸ M.N Dixith, Indian Foreign Policies and its Neighbours, (New Delhi: Gyan Books), 2001 (p.89).

¹⁹ Rohan Gunaratna, Indian Intervention in Sri Lanka: The Role of India's Intelligence Agencies, (Colombo: VYP), 1993, pp.34.

²⁰ Rita Manchanda, Reviewed Work: Indian Intervention in Sri Lanka: The Role of India's Intelligence Agencies by Rohan Gunaratna, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol 28:No 19, (1993), pp.921

- (ii) Trincomalee or any other ports in Sri Lanka will not be made available for military use by any country in a manner prejudicial to India's interests.
- (iii) The work of restoring and operating the Trincomalee oil tank farm will be undertaken as a joint venture between India and Sri Lanka.
- (iv) Sri Lanka's agreements with foreign broadcasting organizations will be reviewed to ensure that any facilities set up by them in Sri Lanka are used solely as public broadcasting facilities and not for any military or intelligence purposes.²¹

Reexamining the Indian intervention in Sri Lanka's civil war reveals that the main ambition stemming from New Delhi was driven by reducing the other foreign actors in Sri Lanka as major players over the strategic interests of the island nation. Overall, the plethora of events that encompassed the Sri Lankan government convinced JR Jayewardene administration to walk away from his rapport with other foreign powers to secure Indian interests in the island and accept the dominance of Indian influence. Analyzing from a defensive realist position in IR, one can comprehend the move made by Sri Lanka in 1987 was focused on its own survival before a big power. The whole trajectory of Sri Lanka's relation with India since independence constitutes the elements of uncertainty as India was very cautious about the island nation's external affairs.

1.2 Dragon's Entry to the Indian Ocean: The Growth of Chinese influence in Sri Lanka in the post war period

Sri Lanka's thirty years-long civil war reached its end in 2009 after Sri Lankan forces defeated Tamil militants which resulted in the inception of a new political epoch under president Mahinda Rajapaksa. Colombo's relations with Beijing were in full swing during the civil war by virtue of various circumstances. Most importantly, Chinese military assistance to Sri Lanka played a pivotal role in increasing Sri Lanka's trust in Beijing, because Western countries and India impeded themselves from selling weapons to Sri Lankan forces on the count of human rights violations.²² In the aftermath of the civil war in Sri Lanka, the Chinese concern on the island nation intensified by the rapid growth of Chinese investment in Sri Lanka in various sectors. Especially, the confirmation of a free trade agreement between the People's Republic of China and Sri Lanka in 2014 was a symbolic act of the tight-knit relations between Colombo and Beijing which resulted in exceeding \$ 3 Billion trade in 2013 by making China the second-largest source of imports behind India.²³ Apart from the gigantic investments that China started in Sri Lanka, the strong support shown by Beijing toward the Sri Lankan regime in confronting the human rights allegations raised by the West further bolstered Chinese presence in Sri Lanka. In 2012 China took one more step by supporting Sri Lanka at the UNHRC where India voted in favour of the resolution against Sri Lanka which resulted in a severe diplomatic spilt between Delhi and Colombo.²⁴

The emergence of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013 created a new narrative in China's tryst with the global governance. Xi Jin Ping's vision embodied in BRI was committed to restore Chinese national rejuvenation (*guojia fuxing*) after the humiliation suffered under European powers for a century. Under this context, it was no wonder that China shifted its gaze to Sri Lanka due to its strategic importance in the Indian ocean. In assessing the indispensable significance of the Indian ocean in the new geo political game in the post-cold war era, American strategist Robert D Kaplan argued in 2009 "Like a microcosm of the world at large, the greater Indian Ocean region is developing into an area of both ferociously guarded sovereignty (with fast growing economies and militaries) and astonishing interdependence (with its pipe lines and land sea routes)."²⁵ Kaplan has further analyzed that steeping growth of Chinese interest in Indian

²¹ M.N Dixith, *Assignment Colombo*, (Delhi: Konark Publishers), 1998, pp.369.

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²³ Saman Kelegama, China -Sri Lanka Economic Relations: An Overview, *China Report*, (Vol 50, Issue 2), 2014, pp. 567-581.

²⁴ Meera Srinivasan, India votes for resolution against Sri Lanka, *The Hindu*, 2012, 03.22, p. 15.

²⁵ Robert D Kaplan, Center Stage for the 21st Century: Power plays in the Indian Ocean, *Foreign Affairs*, (Vol.88, No.2), 2009, pp. 23.

Ocean would lead to an inevitable rivalry with India as Western power will shrink in the region for the first time since the onslaught made by Portuguese in the 16th century.²⁶

It is by no means an exaggeration to claim that the Indian Ocean is an idea which exceeds a mere geographic feature. It has been the ocean which symbolized the ancient maritime silk route, then the realm for the Chinese historical sea voyages under the Ming dynasty in the 15th century and finally the Indian ocean played a central role in Islamist expansion too. In considering the strategic importance of Indian ocean in the modern day, one should admit that energy security concerns which have been pervaded in the rivalry between Indian and China appear to be a paramount factor. After the USA China remains the second largest energy consumer and the ships carrying the oil have the routes throughout the Indian Ocean, giving its importance to China. Nevertheless, Chinese energy imports have heavily relied on the Strait of Malacca; as such any blockage in Malacca will cause a serious threat to China's energy security. While addressing the Chinese Communist Party's economic committee, former Chinese president Hu Jintao had bemoaned China's "*Malacca's Dilemma*" as it was regarded by China as its biggest obstacle to the energy security.²⁷

From its very outset, the implications of BRI was mercurial as it was highly ambiguous on what China anticipated in the Indian Ocean, but the strategy adopted by Beijing was denoting how China would penetrate the depth of the Indian Ocean through its solid diplomacy with the neighboring states of India. Also, China was well aware of the influencing position of India as a major sea power in the Indian Ocean and the strategic thoughts of Chinese policy makers on this problem date back to the early nineties. Zhao Nanqui, former director of the General Logistics Department of the People's Liberation Army stated in 1993, "We can no longer accept the Indian Ocean as an ocean only for the Indians".²⁸ At the same time the Chinese have admitted the certainty of India's role in the Indian Ocean as a major sea power which could sabotage Chinese ambitions. Zhang Ming, a Chinese naval analyst has warned that approximately 244 islands from Indian Nicobar and the Andaman archipelago could be used by India as a metal chain to hinder Chinese ships entering the Strait of Malacca.²⁹

The Chinese strategy of developing its ties closely with Sri Lanka after the civil war was very much akin to its strategic objectives of strengthening her position in the Indian ocean. In order to counter India's indomitable maritime supremacy in South Asia, the strategy adopted by China took a soft attitude by assisting India's weak neighbours. The vast economic partnership initiated by China in Colombo and solid political comity with Mahinda Rajapaksa administration were accelerating factors that stood in favour of fulfilling Chinese success in Sri Lanka. The Chinese involvement in developing Hambantota port in the Southern Province of Sri Lanka created an alarming situation in India when the pact was signed between Mahinda Rajapaksa's government and Chinese state-owned companies China Harbor Engineering Company. But, the Sri Lankan leader refused to acknowledge the Chinese strategic presence in Hambantota and he further claimed that it was India who did not provide a positive answer when he requested to invest in a development project at Hambantota.³⁰

The strategic importance of Hambantota was the main concern that sparked Delhi's fear on the growing influence of China in its backyard. In an article written by Alok Kumar and Ishwaraya Balakrishnan to the Indian Journal of Political Science in 2010, the authors stated

"The port also happens to be very close to India, which is a cause for the security concern of the nation. The construction of this port will bring China within breathing distance of India's southern coast where sensitive installation including power plants are present. It could also help China in keeping a track of India's nuclear, space and naval establishments in South India and also serving as a listening post".³¹

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27 Heather Gilmartin, The Malacca Straights as Catalyst for Multilateral Security Cooperation, *Security and Peace*, (Vol26: No.4), 2008, pp. 220-226.

28 Harsh V Pant, India in the Indian Ocean: Growing mismatch between ambitions and capabilities, *Pacific Affairs*, (Vol 82, No.2) 2009, pp.280.

29 Andrew Erickson, Lyle Goldstein, Gunboats for China's New Grand Canals? Probing the intersections of Beijing's Navel and Oil Security Policies, *Naval War College Review*, (Vol 62, No.2) 2009, p. 41.

30 Aarti betigeri, Hambantota: The Chinese Port, The Interpreter: Lowey Institute (Working Paper No 12), 2015

31 Alok Kumar Gupta, Ishwarya Balakrishnan, Sino-Sri Lankan Convergence: Threat Perception to India, *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, (Vol.71, No.1) 2010, pp. 211.

The security concern that arose from India regarding the Chinese presence of Sri Lanka continued to grow with the rapid Chinese investments carried out in the island. The attempts made by Delhi to thwart Sri Lanka's tilt toward China was rooted in increasing the investment in projects under Indian aid in Sri Lanka such as building house projects for the Tamil civilians in the Northern province whose houses were devastated by the civil war. Also, in 2010 India opened a consulate in Hambantota as Chinese presence grew fast in the deep South of the island.³² One can argue that the diplomacy of Mahinda Rajapaksa by moving toward China was a strategic act to balance the pressure stemming from India and the West over the Tamil issue, but he was well aware of the possible repercussions of hobnobbing with China. In answering the Indian fear over Chinese military presence in Hambantota port, president Rajapaksa commented: "I know that China is not interested in putting a naval base here. I will not allow using this country to be used against any other country".³³ Nevertheless, the robust development projects carried out by China in Sri Lanka were not dismissed even though they dismayed the interests of Delhi. On the contrary, China went on to escalate its presence in Sri Lanka by initiating many development projects around the island. In particular, the construction of Mattala International Airport was another issue that raised the suspicion of India and the US on China's role in Sri Lanka and it culminated when China entered into an agreement with Sri Lankan government to start a Colombo Port City project which would alter the geo political theatre in the Indian Ocean as the city will become a quasi- extra territorial zone that is likely to have its own legislative enactments regarding trade and investment.

As a matter of fact, the Colombo port city project loomed as a serious issue for Delhi during Rajapaksa's administration. The agreement signed between Sri Lankan Ministry of Port and Shipping and China Communications Construction Company which is a company linked to the Chinese state in 2014 embodied another mammoth Chinese project in Colombo in pursuit of the rapid development of the island nation.

Delhi's relations with the Mahinda Rajapaksa administration reached its nadir in the second half of the year 2014 with the intensity of Chinese projects carried out in Sri Lanka which sparked India's grave concern over the security of Indian Ocean Region. This tense situation was further deteriorated by the arrival of the Chinese Submarine in Colombo port on the 31st of October in 2014. Sri Lanka allowed the Chinese submarine "Great Wall" for refuelling and crew refreshment which resulted in creating conspicuous unrest in India.³⁴ India reacted to this by using its diplomatic ties with the Sri Lankan officials and military. For instance, the meeting between then defence secretary of Sri Lanka Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Indian defence minister Arun Jetley was a symbolic moment where the Indian counterpart emphasized Delhi's concern over Chinese presence in Sri Lanka, which was followed by Sri Lanka's naval chief Vice Admiral Jayantha Perera's visit to Delhi to meet Indian naval Chief Admiral RK Dhowan in the same month, where the Chinese submarine visit was taken into the highest consideration.³⁵ By denying all the Indian media reports Perera simply downplayed the Submarine visit as a visit based on mere commercial interests. Both the defence secretary and the Sri Lankan naval chief ensured India's security concern in Indian Ocean Region (IOR), but after all these formalities between Delhi and Colombo, the Rajapaksa administration allowed another Chinese nuclear submarine called "*Changzheng 2*" and an escorting warship "*Chang Zing*" to enter Colombo port on 6th of November in 2014 by creating a paradoxical situation. The incident sparked huge concern in India as it was widely portrayed by mainstream Indian media that went on to carve an opinion against Mahinda Rajapaksa. While reporting the Chinese Submarines arrival in Colombo port, Indian media and strategic experts raised whether the provisions of Indo Lanka agreement which was signed in 1987 can be applied against Colombo's new-found affinity with China. The paragraph 2 (ii) of the letters exchanged between then Sri Lankan president JR Jayewardene and Indian premier Rajiv Gandhi on the 29th of July in 1987 had stipulated that "Trinco Port or any other port in Sri Lanka cannot be available for the military

32 B. Muralidhar Reddy, India to open consulate general offices in Jafna and Hambantota, *The Hindu*, (2010.08.21), p.27.

33 Apratim Mukarji, The Sri Lankan Polity : A Case of Constitutional Autocracy, *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues*, (Vol.19, No.2) 2014, pp. 105.

34 Atul Aneja, China says it's Submarines docked in Sri Lanka for replenishment, *The Hindu*, 2014.11.28, p.10.

35 Col. Hariharan, Sri Lanka and Maritime Security, 2014. 11.30, Hariharan's Intelligence Blog, <https://col.hariharan.info/2013/09/sri-lanka-and-maritime-security.html> (Accessed date 2020.10.12)

use of any country in a manner prejudicial to Indian interests". This stipulation denoted India's suspicion of Colombo's closer ties with the USA in the early '80s under president JR Jayewardene, but the argument stemmed from the Indian media and policy experts in applying the same provision for Chinese submarine in Colombo port after 27 years of Indo Lanka pact did not constitute any legality other than anti-Chinese sentiments pervasive in India.

In the same month, the presidential election was announced in Sri Lanka, with Mahinda Rajapaksa widely expected to win a third term and his electoral bank was predominantly rooted in the Sinhalese Buddhist majority in the island where he was depicted as the palladium who would continue to secure the Buddhism and the supremacy of the Sinhalese race. It is worth noting, despite the allegations against him on corruption and nepotism his fame remained static in the aftermath of the civil war in Sri Lanka. In the backdrop of such a cogent voting base in favour of Rajapaksa, the formation of a joint force was likely to be a futile endeavour. However, the emergence of Maitripala Sirisena as the common candidate of the joint opposition completely altered the aura of Rajapaksa's campaign as Sirisena made vehement criticisms on the nepotism and the corruption of Rajapaksa administration. In the election rallies, Sirisena vociferated that Sri Lanka would envisage a huge territorial loss under Rajapaksa rule. He stated, "The land that white man took by the means of military strength is now being obtained by foreigners by paying a ransom to a handful of persons".³⁶ This was a reference to how Rajapaksa kept a rapport with China in making larger investments in the island and Sirisena promised in his election manifesto that Sri Lanka would not offer preferential economic or security access to any one country, but equally develop its strategic relations with all major Indian states. In the election, Sirisena surpassed Rajapaksa 51 per cent to 48 per cent creating political disorientation in Sri Lanka as many believed that Rajapaksa would gain a massive victory with his rooted vote base in the Sinhalese rural areas.

The background that paved the path for Sirisena's political triumph as a candidate that arose out of the blue seemed to have its Indian elements. As discussed above Delhi's fear of Rajapaksa's tilt toward China and its possible outcomes in the security of the Indian Ocean Region became pivotal issues in the dawn of the election. A report published by the Sunday Times in Sri Lanka on the 28th of December in 2014, just a week before the presidential election revealed that India's RAW chief in Colombo K Ilango was called back to Delhi as India was asked by Sri Lanka to recall him, because Rajapaksa's government believed he was involved in gathering information to support the joint opposition candidate. The RAW chief in Colombo was accused of facilitating meetings to encourage parliamentarians of Rajapaksa government to defect from the party to support Sirisena and it also further mentioned that K Ilango had convinced the then Sri Lankan opposition leader Ranil Wickramasinghe not to contest against Rajapaksa in order to secure the joint candidate's victory against the formidable vote base of president Rajapaksa.³⁷ Neither Delhi nor Colombo acknowledged the expulsion of RAW chief in Colombo as an event coinciding with Sri Lanka's presidential election. In particular, India dismissed any kind of involvement in Sri Lanka's election and affirmed that K Ilango was called back after completed his three years tenure in Colombo.³⁸ But, the factors mentioned above cannot be considered in isolation as events which have not coincided with Sri Lanka's presidential election. Especially, India's national security advisor Ajith Doval's meeting with joint opposition candidate Maitripala Sirisena and Tamil political party leaders in December 2014 was a clear indication of Delhi's strong concern in changing Rajapaksa regime in Sri Lanka.³⁹

After Rajapaksa's defeat, the newly elected President Sirisena was given a warm greeting by the Indian High Commissioner in Colombo within few hours after results were issued, whereas Chinese the ambassador waited six days to meet the new President, which showed the magnitude of the new changes that took place in Sri Lankan politics. Given the dubious past that RAW left in Sri Lanka's modern history by carrying out clandestine activities such as supporting Tamil militant groups in the early 80s, Indian intelligence

³⁶ Taylor Dibbert, After the shake up : Rhetoric Vs Reform in Sri Lanka , *World Affairs*, (Vol.178, No.4), 2016, p. 78.

³⁷ RAW agent back home, *Sunday Times*, 28th of December 2014, p.19.

³⁸ India Denies expulsion of RAW official from Colombo, *The Hindu*, 18 January 2015, p.21.

³⁹ Especial Correspondence from Colombo, NSA Ajith Doval meets Rajapaksa, Opposition Leader in Sri Lanka, *The Economic Times* 2014.12.02.

involvement in creating a political upheaval in Sri Lanka in 2015 is an entirely plausible speculation that one can make.

1.3 Emergence of “India First Policy” under current Sri Lankan president Gotabaya Rajapaksa

Former President Mahinda Rajapaksa’s brother Gotabaya Rajapaksa entered the presidential election in 2019 in Sri Lanka by polarizing the people’s disgust about president Sirisena and prime minister Ranil Wickremesinghe’s government for their inability to not to take enough actions to prevent Easter attacks carried out by the Islamic extremists in Sri Lanka last year.⁴⁰ New Delhi’s stance on Gotabaya Rajapaksa as a presidential candidate was a mixed one as Delhi still lingered in the old grudge on Gotabaya’s elder brother Mahinda Rajapaksa for his pro Chinese policies. But the five years administration of India’s backed president Maitripala Sirisena in Sri Lanka brought no strategic success to Delhi either. Sirisena promised to terminate the Colombo port city project and other Chinese investments in the island before the election. On the contrary, the Chinese presence in Sri Lanka saw a brisk development, especially as Hambantota port was leased to China for 99 years debt in 2017 as Sri Lanka was at bay under Chinese debt trap.

In this context, India upheld a neutral position in Gotabaya Rajapaksa and after securing his victory at the presidential election in 2019 November, Rajapaksa made his maiden foreign visit to meet Indian premier Modi.⁴¹ The new political transformation that took place in the aftermath of last year’s presidential election in Sri Lanka significantly increased India’s confidence in Gotabaya Rajapaksa. Also, it should be taken into account that Gotabaya’s notoriety in the West with his involvement in alleged human rights violation during his career as defence secretary under his elder brother Mahinda Rajapaksa was a strong factor that India leveraged as an indispensable factor which would help Delhi in influencing him.

In 2020 August, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa’s Sri Lanka Freedom’s People’s Alliance secured an overwhelming victory at the parliament elections bolstering Rajapaksa’s political grip further. Two weeks after the election, the newly-appointed foreign secretary of Sri Lanka Rear Admiral Jayanath expressed Sri Lanka’s “India First” policy in foreign affairs. Colabage professed that Sri Lanka would not make many detrimental moves against the strategic interests of India. While reiterating president Goatabaya’s promise to Indian premier Modi during his visit to Delhi, the Sri Lankan foreign secretary further stated

“We will not, we cannot be, we should not be a strategic security concern to India. We have to understand the importance of India in the region and we have to understand that Sri Lanka is very much in the maritime and the air security umbrellas of India. We need to benefit from that”.⁴²

The remarks made by Sri Lanka’s foreign secretary regarding his country’s position toward India personified the conspicuousness of its greater paradigm shift which was propelled by the political trajectories that Sri Lanka witnessed in its encounters with India since independence. The analysis I provided in the first half of this paper unveiled the consequences Sri Lanka encountered in every turn it attempted to stand against India’s strategic interests. The stances maintained by India since the days of Nehru to Modi toward Sri Lanka have not undergone major changes as India has always perceived Sri Lanka as a strategically important neighbour who should act like a vassal state. Regarding the peculiarity of small state’s nature in international affairs, Hedley Bull states “whether however viable the small state might be in international relations, it certainly presents a viable subject of study”.⁴³ The recent development of Sri Lanka by embracing an “India First” approach in foreign policy certainly legitimizes Bulls’ statement on the nature of small states. In particular, after having experienced the repercussions of keeping India at bay, the Rajapaksa brothers seem to prove their unilateral commitment to appease Indian interests. The history of

⁴⁰ Amresh Gunasingham, Sri Lankan attacks: An analysis of the aftermath, *Counter Terrorist trends and analysis*, (Vol 11, No 6) 2019, pp. 8-13.

⁴¹ Suhashini Haidar, Will Goatabaya Rajapaksa make peace with India?, *The Hindu*, (2019.11.17), p.12.

⁴² Interviewed by Kelum Bandara, Time ripe for deviation from the Western Oriented Foreign Policy, *Daily Mirror*, (2020.08.26).

⁴³ Hedley Bull, Force in Contemporary International Relations, *Survival* x, Vol.2, No.3, (1968), pp.302.

RAW activities that undermined the internal security in Sri Lanka and India's capability in involving in the Tamil issues as a significant actor has deterred Gotabaya Rajapaksa administration. Nevertheless, a greater question arises on the plausibility of Sri Lanka's so called "India First" foreign policy in practical level as Sri Lanka has reached a point of no return in maintaining its relations with China. Notwithstanding, the rhetoric of Sri Lanka's "India First" policy as a consoling phase, the inevitability of strong Chinese presence in Sri Lanka still remains alive and it is likely to continue to grow as China fortified its position as the largest foreign investor in Sri Lanka.⁴⁴ According to the annual report issued by the Central Bank of Sri Lanka in 2018 country's total foreign debt was about 52 Billion US dollars, 6 billion of which was from China, making 11 % percent from the total debt.⁴⁵ Moreover, the Chinese assistance in coping with Covid 19 pandemic situation in Sri Lanka by providing medical and technical assistance played an indispensable role.

In 2006 Iver Neumann and Gstohl noted that small states are often being regarded as objects, not as subjects in international relations. The situation looming in Sri Lanka regarding balancing both China and India is an ideal demonstration of Neumann and Gstohl's statement made in 2006.⁴⁶ The sanguine hopes built up by the Sri Lankan government regarding attaining a huge income from tourism industry and apparels in 2020 have been decimated by the COVID 19 pandemic. In addition, the recent report issued by the Department of Census and Statistics in Sri Lanka clearly shows the worst economic slump in Sri Lanka's history which has shown an unprecedented fall in the GDP by 16.3 percent and it has made an inevitable concern among the international community regarding island nation's capacity to repay its foreign debt. In the backdrop of such grim conditions pervaded in the shrinking Sri Lankan economy, Gotabaya Rajapaksa's new government faces a dilemma of balancing both India and China. In that context, favouring phrases like "*India First*" in foreign policy declared by Sri Lanka this year would dither as the government needs to look for all the alternatives in order to avoid a financial catastrophe and becoming a bankrupt state in 2021. Even though Gotabaya Rajapaksa's government has acknowledged the significance of giving prominence to Indian interests in principle, the debt crisis that Sri Lanka experiences currently compels Sri Lanka to approach China as the last resort. On the other hand, the 400 million US dollar loan provided by India this year to Sri Lanka through the reserve bank to boost Sri Lanka's reserves has not been able to be on par with the massive financial aid package provided by China as an "all weather friend" to Sri Lanka which consisted of \$500 million aid along with the \$1.2 billion loan as it has pledged thorough the Chinese development bank.⁴⁷

2 Conclusion

The mechanism that Sri Lanka is likely to adopt in handling both Beijing and New Delhi is quite similar to the notion of "strategic hedging" in modern international relations which provides an apt explanation on the competitive behaviour of a secondary state strategy in pursuing contradictory policy choices and ambiguous security alignments with major powers. In the article titled "*Hedging in South Asia: Balancing Economic and Security Interests amid Sino Indian Competition*" Darren J Lim and Rohan Mukherjee have shown the plausibility of hedging theory in the case of Sri Lanka and the Maldives in their encounters with both Beijing and New Delhi.⁴⁸ However, given the fact that Sri Lanka has been swallowed by a debt crisis which cannot be resolved without the massive financial aid comes from China, Colombo's capacity to hedge wisely becomes a mere conjuncture. In contrast, the influencing position of India over the domestic issues of Sri Lanka being its closest neighbour with a rooted social-cultural history is another factor that can deter

⁴⁴ Rajiv Bhatia, Lina Lee, Chinese Investments in Sri Lanka, Gateway House: Indian Council on Global Relations, 2016.12.01, <https://www.gatewayhouse.in/chinese-investments-sri-lanka-2/>, (Accessed Date : 2020.11.03).

⁴⁵ Annual Report 2018, Sri Lanka Central Bank, <https://www.cbsl.gov.lk/en/publications/economic-and-financial-reports/annual-reports/annual-report-2018>, (Accessed Date : 2020.11.03).

⁴⁶ Iver Neumann, Gstohl, *Small States in International Relations*, (Washington: Washington University Press), 2006, pp.32.

⁴⁷ Meera Srinivasan, It's China that happens to have the cash now, says Sri Lankan minister, *The Hindu*, 2020.10.19, p.11.

⁴⁸ Darren J Lim, Rohan Mukherjee, Hedging in South Asia: Balancing economic and security interest amid Sino Indian competition, *International Relations of the Asia Pacific* (Vol.19, Issue.3), pp.493-522.

the policymakers and the statesmen in Colombo from making much closer ties with China. In particular, the security concern of India has been reciprocated by Sri Lanka as the Sri Lankan government continues to insist that the port built in Hambantota under Chinese investment will never be allowed to be utilized for any military purpose regardless of the high levels of debts and economic underperformance. With the pandemic that continues to worsen the situation in Sri Lanka leading to severe economic crises, the looming debt crunch has given the government the jitters. The agreement signed between Colombo and Beijing in March 2020 to gain another \$500 million loan after an “urgent request” came from Colombo shows that Sri Lankan government cannot make a deviation from the level of its cooperation with China even if it provokes India.⁴⁹ But on the other side, the dubious history of Indian involvement in Sri Lankan internal political apparatus such as nourishing Tamil separatism and changing governments are the factors that would continue to deter Gotabaya Rajapaksa administration in Sri Lanka from making more pro Chinese acts. It has become a salient factor that Sri Lanka cannot either keep a neutral position or hedge from both China and India altogether with the fragile status it is undergoing and the financial jeopardy it faces.

The example I elucidated at the beginning of this paper from the all-time classical realist text of Thucydides’ “*History of Peloponnesian War*” can be reiterated in summing up the current geopolitical chaos that Sri Lanka has been witnessing currently in its injudicious ways of encountering India and China.

Since there is less scope for maintaining neutrality or a pure sense of strategic hedging, Sri Lanka will be sooner or later moved to one big power from either India or China. As Kaplan predicted in 2010, Sri Lanka’s future will be decisively affected by the great game that India and China are determined to play for the hegemony of the Indian ocean.⁵⁰

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⁴⁹ Meera Srinivasan, Sri Lanka in talks to secure \$500 millions in Chinese loans, *The Hindu*, 2020.10.03, pp.12.

⁵⁰ Robert D Kaplan, *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the future of American power*, (New York: Random House)2011, p.300.

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