

## China and India Strategic Theatre: Case Study Sri Lanka

**Raviprasad Narayanan**

Associate Professor, Centre for East Asian Studies, School of International  
Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

Working papers are in a draft form and are works in progress that will eventually be revised and published. This paper has been prepared to facilitate the exchange of knowledge and to stimulate discussion. ICS accepts no responsibility for errors.

## **ABSTRACT**

For long a marginal sphere in geopolitics, South Asia is now witnessing the beginnings of a rivalry that are altering the strategic landscape of the region. The growing rivalry between China and India in the region has a powerful underlying message for India - being marginalized within its own geographical sphere by China. This working paper argues that a strategic paradox exists in South Asia with India remaining the central pillar and regional superpower – owing more to geography - while China is fast making inroads into the region, hoping to off-balance India in the process and emerge as the new fulcrum. This working paper attempts to locate the China-India rivalry in South Asia from a critical perspective and will elaborate in detail the variable presented by Sri Lanka in shaping and emerging as the locus of this rivalry.

### **Keywords**

India, China, South Asia, Sri Lanka, geopolitical, security, critical frame, engagement, paradox, strategic

## **Introduction**

For scholars of international relations and security studies, South Asia is perhaps the most complex geographical and geopolitical reality after the Middle East. No other region, in contemporary security, encompasses such a multiplicity of extant issues reflecting almost every conceivable security conundrum, and worryingly, no other region remains as neglected from academic scrutiny and theoretical interrogation. Nuclear non-proliferation, state-sponsored and freelance terrorism, civil war, linguistic and ethnic nationalisms, religious ethnic separatism with fundamentalism, sectarianism, pan-regional mis-governance, stunted politics, impact of climate change etc. all make South Asia a fertile petri-dish where new problems emerge even before existing ones entirely unravel themselves. The lack of viable security frameworks knitting the region – in structural and discursive terms - and the absence of any multilateral initiatives from the region to address common economic and security issues are glaring. The Colombo Plan<sup>1</sup> in its early years and later, never strived to stitch a security framework for the region – a lacunae most glaring today. The China – India – Sri Lanka evolving dynamics are puzzling to observers with many angles making a hypothetical triangular relationship multi-spectral comprising several layers and angles, some obtuse.

(I)

## **Arguments & Methodological Approach**

China's entry into South Asia as a potential strategic arbiter poses the inveterate question - whether the region can accommodate another 'actor' or opportunistically engage the new 'actor' to settle existing differences within the region and relegate the hitherto centrifugal force of the region – India – to a lesser perch? Whatever the outcome of China's increasing stakes in South Asia, the geo-politics and geo-economics of this unpredictable and volatile region are undergoing tectonic change, the contours of which appear hazy and worryingly, inchoate for now.

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Colombo Plan*. 1951. 'The History of Colombo Plan', 1 July, <https://colombo-plan.org/history/> (accessed on 15 September)

The main thrust of this working paper attempts to track a shift in the center of gravity in South Asian geopolitics – the growing centrality of China to the region accompanied by a commensurate decline of India’s relative significance within regionally. The topic makes it imperative to situate ‘locales’ and explain hypotheses motivating this paper. To substantiate the arguments in the paper, I have chosen Sri Lanka where China’s influence has increased comprehensively in a limited time frame, that comes at the expense of India, becoming gradually sidelined.

A critical stance running through this working paper hinges upon the links that emerge from a reading of contemporary literature. This approach attempts to synthesize the empirical and the conceptual. The inherent complexities woven into any analyses on the intricacies and incidents in the region have a multi-textured and multi-layered perspective to it. This working paper makes an effort not to restrict itself to current discourses, rather, to be seen as an attempt at teasing out the inconsistencies that make New Delhi’s foreign policy lacking gravitas and held hostage by the democratic shifts taking place within and the erstwhile centrality of the Congress and its various expressions in power yielding to newer arrangements where the ‘domestic’ dominates over any other objectives.

There are three main (falsifiable) arguments around which this working paper revolves. They are:

#### *Argument 1*

To Beijing, it must appear that India presents the frame of being hostage to the very region it is located in with little room to maneuver.

#### *Argument 2*

China’s visible outflanking of India in South Asia has a strong geographical element to it, analogous to two latitudinal lines, with one being continental and the other, maritime.

#### *Argument 3*

Beijing’s imprimatur in South Asia reflects its growing interest in the region as a commercial highway and potential resource base that will benefit China’s “Go West” strategy.

## ***Methodology***

Adopting a critical tone, this working paper examines in a detailed manner China's expanding its influence in South Asia and the gradual strategic/geopolitical reverse India faces in the region. Staying the course of undertaking a critical academic evaluation of the topic, this paper strives to stimulate a debate on the subject by subscribing to critical discourse analysis.<sup>2</sup>

Some of the most prominent figures of the first generation of Critical Theorists were, Max Horkheimer (1895-1973), Theodor Adorno (1903-1969), Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979), Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), Friedrich Pollock (1894-1970), Leo Lowenthal (1900-1993), and Eric Fromm (1900-1980). Since the 1970s, the second generation has been led by Jürgen Habermas who has greatly contributed to fostering the dialogue between the so called “continental” and “analytical” tradition.

I introduce ‘consistent criticality’ as an inescapable part of IR with the “complex, dynamic and constantly changing” environment making IR a critical arena for interpretive analyses.<sup>3</sup> Intrinsic to the running theme of criticality in the paper is the adoption of ‘frame’ as a conceptual structure to facilitate the perceptions and analyses of a particular issue.

If South Asia were to be seen as a ‘frame’ the geographical axis and dependent variable is India. Yet, if the region were to be seen in an expanded context - geographically – the ‘frame’ alters to become a ‘meta frame’ and accommodates a newer reality in the form of China as an extraneous/control variable taking into account contemporary developments at the strategic realm.

In other words, the “framing effects” focus “attention on specific dimensions (explanations) for understanding issues”<sup>4</sup> and connections between issues begin to influence discourse. It is here that ‘norm entrepreneurs’ are able to ‘frame’ normative ideas that resonate with

---

<sup>2</sup>Critical Discourse Analysis in the words of Jürgen Habermas describes critical discourse theory as characterized by three types of validity-claims raised by communicative acts: it is only when the conditions of truth, rightness and sincerity are raised by speech-acts that social coordination is obtained. The attraction for Critical theory increases as contemporary international politics anchored in statist forms does not accurately capture the diverse social forces and political challenges confronting human polity.

<sup>3</sup>SR Mann. 1992. ‘The reaction to chaos’, 7 April, <http://www.dodccrp.org/html4/bibliography/comch06.html> (Accessed on 16 September)

<sup>4</sup> Alex Mintz and Steven B. Redd. 2003. ‘Framing effects in International Relations’, 2 May, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20117363> (Accessed on 18 September)

audiences, with ‘framing’ being an intrinsic part of successful persuasion.<sup>5</sup> A ‘frame’ captures the particularities of a development at a moment amplifying the characteristics embedded within. The strategic processes of action and structural reflexes to consequent developments enhance the ‘framing’ of the issue providing a layered narrative – an approach that best captures the inter-linkages of security issues in South Asia.

This working paper is divided into four sections beginning with a ‘framing’ of the geopolitical transition taking place in South Asia, followed by an analysis of Chinese and Indian interests in Sri Lanka. The working paper concludes by making critical inferences made on the theme.

## [II]

### **‘Framing’ a geopolitical transition**

By laying out the proposition that were the China-India bilateral to be seen as a frame accommodating varying scenarios, it is palpable that in the early part of their relationship, their respective foreign policies had overt characterizations shaded with ideological lens’.

For India, freed from the yoke of colonialism, the world order presented a challenge – existential, structural and discursive – with the presence of a Western bloc led by the United States and a military alliance exemplified by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO),<sup>6</sup> and an Eastern bloc led by the Soviet Union, comprising its satellite states from Eastern Europe in an alliance called the “Warsaw Pact.” Resisting the urge to join either bloc and calculating that its priorities of domestic development necessitated not participating in either, India opted for a policy of “non-alignment” which became a pulpit from which declamations could be made about the polarized world order in the post-world war setting.<sup>7</sup>

Undoubtedly, for any well-informed strategic analyst in Beijing, India looms large in South Asia dwarfing the region by its sheer geographical size, centrality in historical, political,

---

<sup>5</sup> *European Journal of International Relations*. 2001. ‘Persuasions, Frames and Norm Construction’, 1 May, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1354066101007001002> (Accessed on 17 September)

<sup>6</sup> NATO. 1949. ‘What is NATO’, 4 April, <https://www.nato.int> (Accessed on 15 September)

<sup>7</sup> *Foreign Affairs Magazine*. 1956. ‘India’s Foreign Policy’, April, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/india/1956-04-01/indias-foreign-policy> (Accessed on 20 September)

economic, sociological and cultural terms. At the policy level, however a dichotomy appears with Beijing reflexively inclined to dismiss and even degrade India as a ‘regional power’ – as it does often – and spare no effort in keeping India to the margins of forums like the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the East Asian Community (EAC) in Asia and other multilateral groupings bringing Asian countries together.<sup>8</sup>

Independent of China’s attempts to degrade India a notch by parsing it a regional power is the recognition that India is indeed a presence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). China’s outreach into the IOR *is not* (italics mine) going to be a smooth affair with the Indian navy rapidly taking counter measures to ensure that Beijing does not succeed to marginalize New Delhi in its maritime domain. Apart from its publicized aim of equipping itself with three fleets and attaining second strike capability, the Indian navy has the flexibility to partner and cooperate with other powerful actors’ navies from time to time – an option that China does not have as yet.<sup>9</sup> The quadrilateral comprising United States, Australia, Japan, and India reflects the beginnings of an agenda where ideologies and strategic competition are paramount. The four democracies in the quadrilateral are coalescing to checkmate and contain the ‘other’ – China.

With the strategic considerations described above playing an influential role in China-India relations, the narrative shifts to detailing the case study – Sri Lanka (also to be seen as a maritime latitudinal line) to compare and contrast, China’s growing influence with India’s relatively lessening, or marginalized one.

### [III]

#### **Sri Lanka – A ‘Rising’ China and a ‘Waning’ India?**

Sri Lanka offers a classic case in understanding the depth, intensity and long-term commitment of China towards a country in South Asia other than Pakistan. China’s recent success in becoming indispensable to Sri Lanka comes with a substantial price for India – its

---

<sup>8</sup> Mohan Malik. 2018. ‘India’s response to China’s rise’, 11 November, <http://www.worldfocus.in/ebook/public/pdf/November%20Issue%20English,%20PDF.pdf> (Accessed on 19 September)

<sup>9</sup> *The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS)*. 2008. ‘About IONS’, 14 February, <https://www.ions.global> (Accessed on 22 September)

marginalization as a strategic power in Sri Lanka's worldview and priorities. Worryingly for India, this development is regime neutral in Sri Lanka!

The victory over the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May 2009 by the Sri Lankan government was a turning point in the country's violent history of internal ethnic conflict and engagement with the outside world. The 'scorched earth' policy, Sri Lankan government adopted to eliminate the LTTE without fear of any recrimination from the global community was only possible due to the diplomatic and military assistance provided by countries like China and Pakistan. As a veto card holder at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), China was assiduously cultivated by the then Sri Lankan leadership during the final and extremely violent last phase of the ethnic conflict. India's assistance to Sri Lanka during the terminal phase of the ethnic conflict in 2009 was of a covert nature with Sri Lanka's navy benefiting from intelligence provided by India to identify, intercept and destroy boats smuggling weapons to the LTTE bases in the island's northeast.<sup>10</sup> India's policy on supplying arms and equipment to the Sri Lankan army was constrained by two mutually reinforcing factors – strong domestic pressure from the state of Tamilnadu where sympathies with the plight of the minority Tamils in Sri Lanka was strong; and, the global embargo on selling arms to Sri Lanka adopted by western countries owing to repeated human rights violations. Caught between these two powerful factors, New Delhi's policy towards Colombo in the last phase of the civil war (2007-2009) was one of drift and dither. China reaped the benefits of India's policy stalemate and emerged as Sri Lanka's largest investor and second largest trading partner in less than a decade. The Strategic Cooperative Partnership signed in May 2013 between the two countries is a pointer to a changed equation in the way the island conducts its relations with external powers. The Strategic partnership follows the 'China-Sri Lanka All-round Cooperation Partnership of Sincere Mutual Support and Ever-lasting Friendship' proclaimed in 2005.<sup>11</sup>

The increasing influence of China in Sri Lanka is evidenced by the bilateral trade between Sri Lanka and China in less than a decade. The figures below indicate the stagnancy in bilateral

---

<sup>10</sup> *The Economist*. 2013. 'Kill switches and safety catches', 28 November, <https://www.economist.com/technology-quarterly/2013/11/28/kill-switches-and-safety-catches> (Accessed on 21 September)

<sup>11</sup> *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the people's Republic of China*. 2007. 'Joint Press Communiqué of the People's Republic of China and the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka', 10 March, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/2649\\_665393/t303108.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/t303108.shtml) (Accessed on 15 September)



trade between Sri Lanka and India coinciding with a buoyancy in trade between Sri Lanka and China, with the latter emerging as a trader, conciliator and arbitrator reflecting, strangely, the lack of policy options in New Delhi *vis a vis* its neighbourhood.

<b>Trading with the giants</b>		
<i>In US\$ Millions</i>		
<b>Year</b>	<b>SL-India trade</b>	<b>SL-China trade</b>
2012	4,207	2,780
2013	3,715	3,084
2014	4,648	3,682
2015	4,911	4,020
2016	4,369	4,426

**Source:** Central Bank of Sri Lanka

Trade apart, the list of Chinese infrastructure investments in Sri Lanka are indeed of a scale that appear to defy logic, making New Delhi envious and incandescent. It has been estimated that from 2007 to 2011, China committed USD 2.13 billion in loans to Colombo.<sup>12</sup> Beyond, China becoming Sri Lanka's largest trading partner since 2016, Colombo owes Beijing more than USD 5 billion. China's investments in Sri Lanka have encouraged the squeezing out of India and Japan from developing a new harbor in Colombo.

During former Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa's visit to Beijing in May 2013 – his sixth – China is stated to have “offered a fresh \$2.2 billion loan for infrastructure projects, especially for the northern express highway connecting the central highlands city of Kandy with the northern town of Jaffna at the cost of \$1.5 billion.”<sup>13</sup> When current President Gotabaya Rajapaksa visited Beijing in April this year, China's President Xi Jinping not emphasizing outstanding debt repayment, laid more emphasis on ‘pragmatic cooperation in all sectors.’

Colombo's deep-water port is now host to an International Container Terminal, built under a 35-year build-operate-agreement and to be run by China Merchants Holdings (International) with a USD 350 million loan from the China Development Bank.<sup>14</sup> China is also funding the

<sup>12</sup>World Socialist Website. 2013. ‘Sri Lankan president signs “strategic cooperative partnership” with China’, 11 June, <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2013/06/11/sril-j11.html> (Accessed on 20 September)

<sup>13</sup>Panini Wijesiriwardane, Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Global Times. 2013. ‘China-built port terminal opens in Sri Lanka capital’, 8 June, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/801743.shtml> (Accessed on 21 June)

construction of a 350-meter-tall multi-functional telecommunication tower and entertainment center called *Nelum Kuluna* (Lotus Tower) on the banks of the Beira lake in Colombo. Much has also been written about the port of Hambantota (initially offered to India for development!) that has been constructed by companies China Harbour Engineering Company and Sinohydro Corporation.<sup>15</sup>

Astride the busy commercial shipping lanes of the Indian Ocean, China's readiness to involve itself in the Hambantota project is motivated by the much quoted "String of Pearls" strategy and in a practical sense ensures that it has access to vital shipping lanes, from a port in a country willing to display a 'client tendency.' The first phase of this ambitious project was completed in 2010 and cost USD 360 million – 85 percent of which was funded by China and the rest by the Sri Lanka Ports Authority. The second phase of the project is estimated to cost around USD 750 million, and when finally completed, will become South Asia's largest port. China Harbour Engineering Company (in a first) also constructed the Mattala Rajapaksa International Airport costing USD 200 million in Hambantota.

In a move designed to invite an Indian response, Mahinda Rajapaksa in his May 2013 visit to Beijing also initiated discussions regarding the launching of a telecommunication satellite in partnership with China's Great Wall Industry Corporation at a cost of USD 320 million. Colombo's cultivating Beijing is realpolitik that has come with a price. In 2006, Sri Lanka's external debt was only \$10.6 billion despite decades of civil strife. Post 2009, with a violent ending to the civil conflict, Sri Lanka's external debt has increased by nearly 140 percent. By the end of 2016, Sri Lanka's external debt was around \$25.3 billion, which is 34 percent of the country's GDP! About 13 percent — \$3.3 billion — is owed to China; most of which has been obtained over the last decade.<sup>16</sup> Latest figures detailing Sri Lanka's debt to China are awaited.

The amount ploughed in by China in Sri Lanka and the very scale of the endeavor has left New Delhi floundering for an answer or response. Post-conflict Sri Lanka-India relations have visibly cooled with the two capitals talking different languages on contentious issues. If India has been playing by the rule book and asking Colombo to devolve power and grant

---

<sup>15</sup> *Sage Journals*. 2014. 'China-Sri Lanka Economic Relations: An Overview', 5 May, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0009445514523646> (Accessed on 23 September)

<sup>16</sup> *The Diplomat*. 2017. 'Sri Lanka's Debt and China's Money', 16 August, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/08/sri-lankas-debt-and-chinas-money/> (Accessed on 22 September)

regional autonomy to the Northern Province dominated by Tamils, Sri Lanka's response has been to garrison the region and tighten control. New Delhi and Colombo have been at different wavelengths since the UN Human Rights Council adopted a resolution (which was eventually watered down) against Sri Lanka. India had voted against Sri Lanka in 2009, 2012 and 2013 when the issue of human rights abuses and civilian casualties during the final stages of the ethnic conflict came up for discussion, while China had supported Sri Lanka. A course correction of sorts by New Delhi was in evidence when it abstained from voting against Sri Lanka in March 2014 when a US backed resolution seeking a probe into Sri Lanka's war crimes was passed by the UN Human Rights Council. India's volte face could also be interpreted as a reflection of its domestic politics since the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) a Dravidian party with strong political roots in Tamilnadu had exited the Congress party led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) at the centre and New Delhi was signaling to Colombo its flexibility and not the coalition constraints it had exhibited earlier to retain an ally from the southern state of Tamilnadu that espoused the cause of minority Tamils in Sri Lanka.

Complicating matters for India was in March this year (2021), the UNHRC chief Michelle Bachelet, endorsing the mandate received to document human rights crimes during Sri Lanka's civil war, especially the last phase ending in 2009. This particular last phase was marked by gross violations by Sri Lanka Army (SLA) leading to the deaths of at least 40,000 to 60,000 civilian deaths. The Liberation Tigers for Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were wiped out. The resolution allows the UNHRC "to collect, consolidate, analyze and preserve information and evidence, and to develop possible strategies for future accountability processes for gross violations of human rights or serious violations of international humanitarian law in Sri Lanka, to advocate for victims and survivors, and to support relevant judicial and other proceedings."<sup>17</sup> The 47-member Human Rights Council (HRC) passing the resolution, had 22 countries voting in favour, with 11 against and 14 abstaining. Those against, not surprisingly, included China, Pakistan and Bangladesh. India's abstaining was a shock to Sri Lanka, despite lobbying, and recriminations are to be expected. Sri Lanka's response was that the

---

<sup>17</sup>*United Nations Human Rights Council*. 2021. 'Human Rights Council Renews Mandate of Special Rapporteur on the Environment, Adopts Resolutions on Sri Lanka, Nicaragua, Occupied Palestinian Territory, and on Unilateral Coercive Measures', 23 March, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=26938&LangID=E> (Accessed on 21 September)

resolution was brought by countries with western support inimical of Sri Lanka's combating terrorism!

The consequence of Colombo's strategic orientation towards China has reciprocity woven into it. China's support ensures that criticism of Colombo at the UNSC and other multilateral forums will always be watered down, while in return, Colombo will strongly argue for a more robust role for China in South Asia and especially in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). The SAARC, amongst regional multilateral forums, is not known to be a qualified success, and perhaps, Colombo hopes to play off China's infectious dynamism into a SAARC dominated by India.

India's policy on Sri Lanka post 2009 has been one of 'quiet diplomacy' in troubled times! It provided humanitarian assistance to the Internally Displaced People (IDP) in the conflict theatre and also supplied construction materiel and agricultural implements to IDPs. India has also undertaken to support a program to reconstruct 50,000 houses in northern Sri Lanka at a cost of USD 270 million. Information collated from the 'Bilateral Brief' on relations with Sri Lanka and brought out by the Ministry of External Affairs, says that "(A)ccording to Sri Lankan Customs, bilateral trade in 2016 amounted to US \$ 4.38 billion. Exports from India to Sri Lanka in 2016 were US\$ 3.83 billion, while exports from Sri Lanka to India were US\$ 551 million."<sup>18</sup> It does make for some grim reading that in 2011, bilateral trade between the two countries was to the tune of USD 4.86 billion.<sup>19</sup> The India-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement signed in March 2000 has been responsible for this commercial engagement between the two countries.

Unlike Chinese investments in Sri Lanka which are mostly by state entities, and have to do with infrastructure and grandiose architecture, India has cumulative investments of over USD 800 million in areas as diverse as retail petroleum, telecom, hospitality & tourism, health sector, real estate, IT and food processing. Most Indian investments in Sri Lanka are by private entities and companies like Tata's, Airtel, L&T, Ashok Leyland and Taj Hotels. The notable Indian SOE operating from Sri Lanka is the Indian Oil Corporation (IOC), which

---

<sup>18</sup>Ministry of External Affairs. 2017. 'India- Sri Lanka Relations', November, [http://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Sri\\_Lanka\\_November\\_2017\\_NEW.pdf](http://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Sri_Lanka_November_2017_NEW.pdf) (Accessed on 24 September)

<sup>19</sup> Ministry of External Affairs. 2013. 'India- Sri Lanka Relations', February, [http://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India\\_-\\_Sri\\_Lanka\\_Relations.pdf](http://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India_-_Sri_Lanka_Relations.pdf) (Accessed on 25 September)

operates partly an oil tank storage farm, interestingly called the China Bay Tank Farm in Trincomalee.

Beijing's involvement in Sri Lanka coincided with an upward swing in political authoritarianism camouflaged as being necessary for democratic expediencies and closely linked to Mahinda Rajapaksa's earlier tenure, which his brother Gotabaya Rajapaksa as President continues. Victory by Colombo in its long running ethnic conflict with the Tamils represented by the erstwhile LTTE, had led to the 'manufacturing of consensus' in favour of Mahinda Rajapaksa (and his brothers and extended family!) to subvert long institutionalized procedures of moderation to one where the persona of a 'leader' looms large over a nation that was known for the durability of its democratic institutions irrespective of ethnic and religious tensions. A triumphalism of the majority over the minority has manifested itself into Sri Lankan polity with a Derridian "auto-affection" taking over and political space overwhelmingly dominated by the echoes of the 'victorious' constantly reiterating the hard-won unity of the nation.<sup>20</sup>

By voting against, and abstaining recently, for Sri Lanka the UN Human Rights Council is evidence of an India wanting to show who lords over the island. The dithering in supplying arms to Colombo during the last stages of the conflict with the LTTE in 2009, convinced Sri Lanka's political leadership that sidelining India makes for a good strategic decision. Rewarding China which had no qualms in satisfying Colombo's military requirements at short notice also ensures that at the highest levels of the UNSC there is a patron who can dilute and stymie initiatives to censure Sri Lanka. Post-Rajapaksa, for a while, there appeared to be a course correction with Maithiripala Sirisena and Ranil Wickramasinghe at the helm of political affairs in Sri Lanka. Electoral results in 2020 returned a Rajapaksa (Gotabaya) and the politics he espouses - "family first"! It is moot whether New Delhi plays a central role or not in Sri Lanka's international orientation in a post-conflict scenario. When Colombo has more powerful sponsors (financial and strategic) than India, that is where Sri Lanka is looking to.

---

<sup>20</sup>Taylor & Francis Online. 2014. 'Bunkers of Sovereignty and Sound

What motivates Beijing's strategic interests and calculations in Sri Lanka? To quote Yan Xuetong, the *éminence grise* in China on strategic security:

But mutual trust is not the answer. Perhaps the best that fierce competitors like China and America should strive for is cooperation on shared interests and an open dialogue on conflicting interests. It is not even clear what mutual trust between nations means. There are countless examples throughout history of cooperation between major powers that lacked any of this so-called mutual trust. In fact, the lack of trust has been the norm in successful international relationships.<sup>21</sup>

### **Preliminary findings**

Since the time of independence, an incongruous feature of Indian foreign policy has been its oscillating temperament and lack of long-term vision regarding relations with its neighbors. India's 'China policy' if any, also suffers from this anomaly. Significantly, China's 'India policy' too, if any, suffers from a straitjacketing with multiple institutional interests speaking the same language and creating the impression that the principal contradiction – the unsettled boundary dispute as a leftover from history – is cause for discomfort in the bilateral. I argue that should the boundary dispute between China and India be settled – a highly unlikely event in the near term - it is not going to ease tensions nor address anomalies in the bilateral. Rather, the time lag in finding a solution has led to a situation where either side appears comfortable in not initiating a radical breakthrough to end the impasse. Recent incidents of border transgressions that whipped up a lot of emotions alternately alarm and warrant further introspection from scholars since there is no well-defined, demarcated and legally instituted boundary line between Asia's two largest countries! The 'border' thus is a matter of perception and custom on the ground with one side considering the erstwhile McMahon line as the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and the other disagreeing with large sections of the LAC as it is to be understood in the Eastern sector.

The political minefields of South Asia are closely linked to other interests - economic, ethnic and intricate local dynamics which need not always be in conformity to what the ruling elite think - and once the euphoric gains of a new alliance, or strategic choice, start to wilt, the

---

<sup>21</sup> Yan Xuetong. 2012. 'The Problem of 'Mutual Trust'', 15 November, [https://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/16/opinion/the-problem-of-china-and-u-s-mutual-trust.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/16/opinion/the-problem-of-china-and-u-s-mutual-trust.html?_r=0) (Accessed on 14 May 2021)

pressure on Beijing from entirely unexpected quarters on inherently domestic issues in respective countries will mount. Is Beijing prepared for this? In Sri Lanka, India waded into an ethnic conflict in the late 1980s, by thrusting itself as the sole arbiter and ran into a maelstrom dictated by local conditions that witnessed erstwhile enemies collaborating to throw out an invited external actor. The Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) got involved in arbitrating nationalisms of various sorts on the island – linguistic, religious, ethnic, political and economic, ending up in a coalescing of disparate local interests to get the IPKF out.

The flaw on India's part is to implement a foreign policy that resembles at most a standard operating procedure (SOP) – as exemplified by its foreign policy servitors irrespective of the government at the helm in New Delhi! There appears to be no vision, clarity of purpose or intent in New Delhi's policy of engagement with its neighbors. The vertical and horizontal ingress, New Delhi has with its neighbors cannot be replicated by any other actor, yet, it finds itself on the defensive in its own neighborhood. For a country that loses no opportunity to highlight its growing role in global affairs and its rightful place at the high table of most international forums, New Delhi, lacks the sophistication and flexibility to articulate what it wants.

The obduracy of the foreign policy establishment in New Delhi is not about holding onto a conservative view in the face of a fast-changing strategic landscape, but of administrative/institutional inertia coupled with lack of political decisiveness when needed most. Can the foreign policy of a nation be run on a time frame that extends only up to the next round of general elections! Lastly, should China succeed in achieving long-term strategic gains in South Asia at the expense of India, the choice with the latter will be to revisit its 'strategic autonomy' posture in favor of deeper and more comprehensive 'strategic engagement' with actors beyond region awaiting such a scenario. There is no dearth of opinion in New Delhi calling upon for such a strategic choice to be made and emboldened by the electoral mandate in New Delhi that brought in a single party majority for the BJP in 2014 and 2019. The choice for New Delhi is to look beyond democratic over-centralism at home not leading the country into a strategic cul de sac beginning in its own neighbourhood.

## **Conclusion**

The image of South Asian security has for long been dominated by the dyadic rivalry between India and Pakistan. Events in the sub-continent since the nuclear tests of 1998 have evolved in such a manner that India finds more flexibility in articulating a security framework

that resonates more beyond the region, while the region opens up to inducements – strategic and economic – from China.

A malaise afflicting political decision makers in India, is their exclusive focus on reordering and rearranging domestic political arrangements and accommodations without any vision regarding how the country positions itself in its neighbourhood allowing newer powers to encroach and reshuffle regional power dynamics. China is best positioned in influencing the region and OBOR is the beginning of this shift. New Delhi does not have the strategic heft to convince the region of its strategic centrality. What existed before was the reflection of a politics and process where New Delhi's centrality to the region did intimidate neighbours as also the wars with Pakistan giving an exaggerated self and centrality to New Delhi. This has receded in the last two decades and accompanies the unstoppable rise of China.

Internally, New Delhi is going through a political expression where looking inwards dominates and not an expression of identity that goes beyond. From 2014 onwards it is very visible that the political expressions of the ruling BJP cannot be compared to that of the Congress led UPA. I argue that the BJP is in the process of consolidating itself as the dominant pole in Indian politics and foreign policy is not a sphere of expression, as yet.

The BJP led NDA presents different style of foreign policy making. The tension in foreign policy making in India can be ascribed to a new coalition taking over the reins of an administration where a new compact sequesters itself from learning or even imbibing nuances of foreign policy from the earlier administration. I wish to argue that the overwhelming influence of the MEA has constricted other important ministries like the Ministry of Commerce from having a view on foreign policy where their expertise is circumvented and subverted from within. A pity indeed.

In a democracy like India, a new administration must imbibe the established parameters of foreign policy and its security linkages anew and be guided by institutional structures that practice foreign policy with its own in-built reflexes, theoretical prisms and praxis that goes beyond electoral calculations and terms. In New Delhi, decision making operates in bureaucratic silos. There appears to be no simulation of national foreign policy interests and objectives acting as cushion or trial balloon attracting opinion from wider audiences. The weakness of this decision making appears as there is a transition in political power and the emergence of a new compact – contested and not absolute, relatively elitist yet not exclusivist, fragmented and not united, statist by caveats and not decree.



The paucity of academic discourse on foreign policy and negligible mention of foreign policy in electoral forums esp. the election manifestos are indications of a political system looking inward for democratic solace, consolidation, and expression. Foreign policy cannot be a point of reference when the political system is entirely geared towards domestic issues. Before concluding I wish to point out the failure of the SAARC in economic and security terms. There is a palpable disconnect between the people of this region when it comes to simple issues of visas and education.

BJP is a party that has to be seen as a post Congress centrifugal force. The BJP innovatively claims it is a party with a difference – it is – and not a family business – it isn't so far! The distinction made by the BJP is that it does not claim to be a majoritarian political construct and invokes pantheons from Hinduism to strike a chord with the majority and preying on fears the majority has regarding the minority. Sri Lanka, does a similar quasi politico and Theravada Buddhism influenced socio-historical narrative where the Mahavamsa historical chronicle of yore, binds Sinhala Buddhists as retainers of traditions – cultural and political - with 'others' not in the frame. In other words, a political rewriting of history has been initiated, with foreign policy as an opportunistic variable, not determinant, for Sri Lanka and India, with China becoming the intervening variable morphing into an absolute determinant.

## About the Author

**Raviprasad Narayanan** is Associate Research Fellow with the Institute of International Relations (IIR) and concurrently, Assistant Professor, International Doctoral Program in Asia-Pacific Studies, College of Social Sciences, National Chengchi University, Taipei. The main thrust of his writings is to tease out interstices within the rubric of China-India relations and to explore nuances of a growing bilateral that despite palpable differences on contested issues like the unresolved boundary between the two countries has elements of cooperation – evidenced by the congruence the two sides display when it comes to non-traditional security issues like climate change.

**Contact:** [raviprasad.narayanan@gmail.com](mailto:raviprasad.narayanan@gmail.com)

© Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi

The ICS is an interdisciplinary research institution which has a leadership role in promoting Chinese and East Asian Studies in India.

## ICS Working Paper: Back Issues

Oct   2020	The Future of Deterrence along the LAC
May 2020	Institutional Framework for Disaster Management in China: Natural to Pandemic
Jan  2020	China, India and the United States: Wary trio?
Feb 2018	Challenges for Elderly Care in China: A Review of Literature
Mar 2017	Comparative Analysis of India's and China's Engagement with their Respective Diaspora
Feb  2017	China A 'Strong Internet Power' (网络强国) And Its Evolving Relationship with Asean
Sept  2016	Moving Forward on the Parallel Tracks? A New Perspectives on the BCIM Initiatives

## PRINCIPAL SUPPORTERS TO ICS RESEARCH FUND

### TATA TRUSTS



MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS  
GOVERNMENT OF INDIA



INDIAN COUNCIL OF  
SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

GARGI AND VIDYA  
PRAKASH DUTT FOUNDATION



JAMNALAL BAJAJ  
FOUNDATION

PIROJSHA GODREJ FOUNDATION

## ICS PUBLICATIONS



**ANALYSIS**

A short brief on a topic of contemporary interest with policy-related inputs



**OCCASIONAL PAPER**

Platform for ongoing research of the ICS faculty and associates



**MONOGRAPH**

Authored by the faculty, also emerging from research projects and international conferences



**WORKING PAPER**

Draft paper of ongoing research

## ICS JOURNAL



In its 56th year, *China Report* is a refereed journal in the field of social sciences and international relations. It welcomes and offers a platform for original research from a multi-disciplinary perspective, in new and emerging areas, by scholars and research students. It seeks to promote analysis and vigorous debate on all aspects of Sino-Indian relations, India-China comparative studies and multilateral and bilateral initiatives and collaborations across Asia.

*China Report* is brought out by Sage Publications Ltd, New Delhi.

Editor  
Associate Editor  
Assistant Editor  
Book Review Editor

Sreemati Chakrabarti  
G. Balachandirane  
Rityusha Mani Tiwari  
Vijay K Nambiar



### INSTITUTE OF CHINESE STUDIES

8/17, Sri Ram Road, Civil Lines,  
Delhi 110054, INDIA  
T: +91 (0) 11 2393 8202  
F: +91 (0) 11 2383 0728

<http://www.icsin.org/>  
[info@icsin.org](mailto:info@icsin.org)



[twitter.com/ics\\_delhi](https://twitter.com/ics_delhi)



[facebook.com/icsin.delhi](https://facebook.com/icsin.delhi)



[in.linkedin.com/icsdelhi](https://in.linkedin.com/icsdelhi)



[soundcloud.com/ICSIN](https://soundcloud.com/ICSIN)



[youtube.com/ICSWEB](https://youtube.com/ICSWEB)



[instagram.com/icsdelhi](https://instagram.com/icsdelhi)