



CHINA, INDIA AND THE US POLICY TOWARDS THE INDIAN OCEAN AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR SRI LANKA'S INDIAN OCEAN POLICY

K.K. Pradeep Ranaweera

ABSTRACT

Power struggles are a common occurrence in world politics and their impact depends on the nature of the parties to the struggle. As the 21st century being dubbed the century of Asia, the growing competition between China and India as two aspiring Asian nations to become global superpowers has shifted the gravity of world politics to the Indian Ocean region. The United States of America, as an existing superpower, seeks to maintain its position to retain its status despite the evolving world order. Accordingly, the direct and indirect actions of these three countries make the Indian Ocean region a contested domain for dominance. Sri Lanka, as a small country in the region, located centrally in the Indian Ocean, is strategically facing challenges due to the rivalry of the US, India, and China. With inherent dependency over these three countries, Sri Lanka's policy towards the Indian Ocean is important for its security and development. Although Sri Lanka has fundamental principles towards the Indian Ocean, current power relations relating to the Indian Ocean has created much uncertainty towards the peaceful existence of the IO. Therefore, Sri Lanka was compelled to re-strategize its policy in the Indian Ocean while broadening the scope of security. This paper provides a detailed study of the nature of current power rivalry in the Indian Ocean with specific policy expectations of major triangle of power of the Indian Ocean. Accordingly, it analyses the factors that influence Sri Lanka to formulate its policy towards the Indian Ocean region. It concludes that instead of acting on a stand-alone policy, Sri Lanka should strongly follow a policy of multilateralism to minimize the tension in the region and achieve its national interest through cooperation without taking a side of any power block which are trying to compete in the Indian Ocean to assure its hegemony.

Keywords: Indian Ocean Region, power block, Security Dilemma, SLOC, Triangle

INTRODUCTION

Recent decades have seen the concept of national security been redefined and broadening in its scope. The conventional interpretation of the concept of national security denotes the safeguarding of territorial sovereignty and securing the identity of a state from invasion, occupation, and acquisition by a foreign power. However, currently the definition of the term is not limited to protecting the sovereign location of the country (Mendis, 1992, p.43). With



technological advancements and the rise of the internet, the above-mentioned elements of national security have been challenged and the paradigm of national security is being subjected to transformation in many different ways.

The centre of gravity of global power politics is moving towards Indian Ocean. Sri Lanka, as one of the strategically located country in the Indian Ocean, the growing power relations in the Indian Ocean have created two scenarios for Sri Lanka. These scenarios posed either to ignore the strategic changes taking place in the Indian Ocean or actively engage those changes while serving its national interest. From the perspective of realism in international relations, it is more viable to consider the second aspect. This article focusses on the emerging strategic trends in the Indian Ocean and their implications for Sri Lanka's national interest as a small island state located in the contested space of Indian Ocean.

INDIAN OCEAN REGION

The main complexity of the Indian Ocean region starts with the absence of a clear definition of the countries considered as the member states in the Indian Ocean region. Various organizations, initiatives and definitions, carry different countries as members of the Indian Ocean region. Due to physical connectivity, Indian Ocean Region constitutes 1/3 of the world population and comprises almost 51 coastal and landlocked countries in the world. Among them, 26 countries come under IOR, 5 Red Sea states, 4 Persian Gulf states, Saudi Arabia, France – Crozet Islands, Kerguelen Islands, Saint Paul and Amsterdam Islands, and the Scattered Islands, Britain – the Chagos Archipelago and 13 landlocked states (Javaid, 2020).

The geographical boundaries of the IO region are demarcated by Asia, Africa, Antarctica, and Australia. The Indian Ocean receives international attention due to global trades, maritime security issues, resources, sea lines of communication (SLOC), and especially the power rivalry over the domination of the oceanic sphere etc. The IOR started gaining more attention of the world in the wake of the power competition of powerful states for strategic dominance in the region. The US, China and India are the main countries that shape the Indian ocean strategic setting. This competition has somewhat undermined the other critical issues in the Indian ocean. Sri Lanka, as one of the countries in this region, is struggling to charter its foreign policy which includes engaging the emerging strategic issues in the Indian ocean due to strategic competition among the above mentioned three big actors. This prevailing reality in the region has posed many strategic issues for Sri Lanka to re-think a fresh approach towards the Indian Ocean region. In this respect, this paper tries to identify policies of the India, China and USA strategic triangle occurring in the Indian ocean and to discuss possible policy options for Sri Lanka to achieve its national interests. The paper will employ the Omni-Balancing theory to examine Sri Lanka's approach towards the Indian Ocean region. The theory mainly describes how the small states behave when dealing with more prominent powers.



OMNI-BALANCING THEORY FOR SRI LANKA IN THE INDIAN OCEAN

“Omni-Balancing Theory” from Steven David is considered a popular theory in International Relations to explain the behaviour of the third world countries and their policies due to internal and external challenges they face. The theory mainly encompasses promoting alliances to minimize the threats and challenges encountered by small states. According to this theory, the small states are compelled to mobilize all their abilities and resources against their opponents or enemies to reduce internal and external risk. If a state is facing the issue of survival, it encourages to go for alliances to face both internal and external threats instead of taking a side of the rivalry (David, 1991). It is one of the essential pillars to preserve the security of the state. The growing tendencies in the Indian Ocean region have posed challenges to the internal affairs of countries. Applying this basic theoretical perspective to the Indian Ocean in the present, three actors of China, India and the US seem to play a critical role.

First, the US’s strategic interest in the Indian Ocean and Asia in the era of Asia’s century has maximized its presence in the region is evident. China, on the other hand, is compelled to preserve its interest in the region. Without grand justifications, India as the next global superpower, its geographical proximity and interest in the Indian Ocean, as well as China’s presence in the Indian Ocean have determined India’s attempt to dominate the Indian Ocean region. In this circumstance, Sri Lanka has several options to choose from. Among them, all working together, two against one, all against all, or one is mediating the conflict between other the options that are available with different impacts (Fernando, 2015, p.87). In terms of the Omni-balancing theory, the most appropriate option would be collaborating with all actors based on its national security priorities.

The current government of Sri Lanka appears to be converting to that slowly. However, Sri Lanka is still trying to use and see the Indian Ocean from an Indian perspective due to its geostrategic reality and the experiences that come across over the past decades dealing with India. It is also a paramount need to identify the major triangle’s interest or the policy towards the Indian ocean, to realise and assess the capability of Sri Lanka to cooperate and adopt multilateralism as an approach to balance the region. On the other hand, in a regional perspective, Sri Lanka can employ the fourth option to minimize the tension in the region, especially under the US, India and China. Sri Lanka has already evaluated this when it proposed that the Indian Ocean be a Zone of Peace whereby building supra-ordinary value to compel all actors in the Indian Ocean to accept the declaration. However, neutrality or isolation would not help for Sri Lanka to achieve its national interest under the existing situation. It cannot also be ignored that the growing development of the region has enabled the emergence of a new layer mainly dominated by Australia, Japan, South Korea, the UK, France, Russia, Germany, and the EU while catering to the top triangle’s interests.



As a small country with these strategic dynamics, Sri Lanka poses several challenges to following a policy related to the Indian Ocean. Following the Omni-balancing theory, Sri Lanka is connected to the world as a hub in the Indian Ocean region. In terms of geostrategic locations, all harbours in the country generate strategic objectives. Hambantota, as it is in the major navigation routes, Colombo harbour as one of the major options for unloading and refuelling, Trincomalee as the best natural harbour in Asia are created more challenges than the opportunities for Sri Lanka. As a result of that, US and India are approaching to make their presence in the country where China already made after buying Hambantota port under the 99 years lease and perpetuity method.

Climate change, non-traditional threats, maritime issues are the other significant challenges posed by the Indian Ocean. Because of the contemporary changes and the dynamics, the Indian Ocean formed new alliances for shaping the competition among US, India, and China to dominate the region.

MAJOR TRIANGLES' POLICY TOWARDS THE INDIAN OCEAN

INDIA'S POLICY TOWARDS THE INDIAN OCEAN

India's policy on the Indian Ocean is shaped by emerging dynamics in the Indian Ocean. From the Indian perspective, India believes the Indian ocean is the terrain and other countries follow it. These perceptions further emphasized the presence of China in the Indian ocean. India is also trying to see and measure the role of China in the South China sea, and to adopt the same policy to the Indian ocean. Therefore, the competition between China and India is mainly designing the hegemonic domination in the Indian ocean.

India also focusses on the more non-traditional issues-oriented approach to the Indian ocean except in the case of China's presence in the Indian ocean. Till contemporary alliances were created, India's approach was mainly to address non-traditional issues and bilateral conventional security issues. However, with recent development and new axis formation, India is trying to transform military and security backed approaches to the Indian ocean covering global development. As a result of that, India already declared the fully modernization of the blue-water navy by 2030 (*Indian Naval Indigenisation Plan (INIP), 2015-2030*). With this development, India plans to cater for self-reliance, self-sufficiency in military technology, power projection and sea control.

Another major development of India's policy towards the Indian ocean came up with the Modi's neighbourhood first policy (TRT World, 2021), As entire south Asian countries are one way, the other shares boundaries with India. However, India has failed to maintain good relations with its neighbouring countries since its independence. This aspect is mostly discussed and much debated by both neighbours and India due to its compelling issues. The



neighbourhood first policy was proposed as the ultimate strategy of India to revamp its relations with other Indian ocean countries, especially in South Asian countries. While following the act east policy, look east policy, India is now trying to adapt and change its neighbourhood policy as giving the neighbour's priority. However, India has yet to show progress on the confident building among its neighbours, keeping a side of its hegemonic approach to dominate the region.

Protection from sea-based threats to India's territorial integrity is another policy of India's Indian ocean policy. Moving from the traditional terrorist influence or threat, India is also projecting to reduce China's presence in the region. India accused China of spying on India nearby Andaman and Nicobar Islands. It also found that Chinese nuclear submarine visits to Indian ocean at many times (Gupta, 2021).

The preservation, promotion, pursuit and protection of offshore infrastructure and maritime resources within and beyond the Maritime Zones of India (MZI) is another objective that is trying to archive through its Indian ocean policy. As per the trade and commerce battle with China, India sees more protentional space to exploit marine resources for its development purposes.

The promotion, protection, and safety of India's overseas and coastal seaborne trade and her Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) also another concern of India through the Indian Ocean. As this paper highlighted, the modern capabilities of the states or the security directly reflect its capacity to protect Sea lines of communication. In the wake of the growing technological dependence of India, the importance of preserving and securing the Sea Lines of Communication without any interruptions remains as the major concern of the modern-day. With all, India has defied its maritime policy as a holistic maritime security policy that combined both freedoms from threats from 'in' and 'from' the sea. These are the major objectives that India is trying to deploy as its policy towards the Indian Ocean. (Indian Naval Indigenisation Plan (INIP), 2015-2030).

India also concerned about the growing tendencies in the Indian Ocean region specially after the sign of AUKUS deal among US, UK and Australia to provide nuclear-powered submarines after the withdrawal of the original agreement with France to get submarines. Even though, India works with other extra-regional powers to preserve its national interest in the Indian Ocean, the recent nuclear deal seems to challenge India's pre-eminence in the region. Under the agreement, there is high tendency for Australia to deploy nuclear submarines in the East-Indian Ocean before India. Admiral Arun Prakash, former naval chief, already raised the point, saying that the exclusive nature of the AUKUS as an issue of other Quad members of India and Japan (Prakash, 2021).



CHINA'S POLICY TOWARDS THE INDIAN OCEAN

China's policy towards the Indian Ocean is determined by three major factors.

1. Belt and Road Initiative
2. Assuring the accessibility to Indian Ocean Harbours for both economic and military purposes
3. Malacca Dilemma

As discussed in earlier, China is trying to use its maximum capacities to bring Belt and Road Initiative with Indian Ocean region countries. On one hand, it tries to influence Indian Ocean region countries with infrastructure projects under the BRI. To pursue the said interest, they want to assure free and unrestricted access to all Indian ocean countries harbours. With this mind, it has already started developing and investing in most of the ports in the Indian Ocean region, sometimes referred by others as a string of pearls in the Indian Ocean. Hambantota Harbour is one of the focal points of this project. The third factor of the Malacca dilemma is yet another major concern of China to establish its presence in the Indian Ocean region. The Malacca dilemma is mainly triggered by China's heavy dependency of its economy and energy supply over other countries. In the year of 2003, it was Hu Jintao, President of China, described the situation where potential threat that hinder the china's economic development through choking the oil imports (Paszak, 2021). In terms of its energy consumption, 80% of china's energy comes from the outside, specially through the sea lines. The strategic location of Malacca lies between Sumatra Islands and Malay Peninsula narrow stretch of water can be blocked by any rival nations against China. Furthermore, 80% of Its exports go through the Malacca strait. Due to China's approach towards the South China Sea related issues, it has already in the dilemma of this threat might hinder its development activities. Based on these three factors, China's policy towards the Indian Ocean region needs to be explored (Mudunuri, 2020).

Based on the above three factors, China tries to formulate its policy towards the Indian Ocean region. Among them; The main policy is to assure its trades and energy resources transit in this route without any interruptions from any powers in the region, specially India or the US.

Another policy of China is to protect SLOC undersea cables as a national security priority. There is no argument that data and the protection of data without allowing falling under unwanted people or group is remain as a major important strategy in the 21st century. This has led many countries to include data protection as major security means for their existence in the international system.

It took almost 18 hours to send a message across the Atlantic Ocean in 1858 after the installation of the first submarine cables. But today, these cables are positioned to transfer more than 25 terabytes per second across the oceans. Most of the trades and commerce and



transactions are heavily dependent of these cables keeping countries’ economies at stake. According to data, \$10 trillion financial transactions are taking daily. As an emerging power in the world power, China sees the protection of these communication lines as a major policy in the Indian Ocean as well (Chadlow and Helwig, 2020). Chinese officials view control of undersea infrastructure as part of a broader strategic competition for data. Chinese Communist political party officials explained that “although undersea cable laying is a business, it is also a battlefield where information can be obtained” (Starks, 2020). In this regard, the protection of SLOC especially undersea cables, are another policy of China in the Indian Ocean region (Chadlow and Helwig, 2020). Based on the available economic and development reports, it shows that China is emerging as the major power in the world. As AT Mahan defined: whoever holds the Indian Ocean may have the power to run the world. Asserting to the above, China is trying to become a maritime power in both the Pacific and the Indian Ocean (Northrop, 1955, p.261). For that it’s trying to further use of soft power influence over the members in the Indian Ocean. The below-mentioned table shows China upper hand in the naval capabilities with India. However, the competition to enhance the blue navy capacities of both countries are at stake.

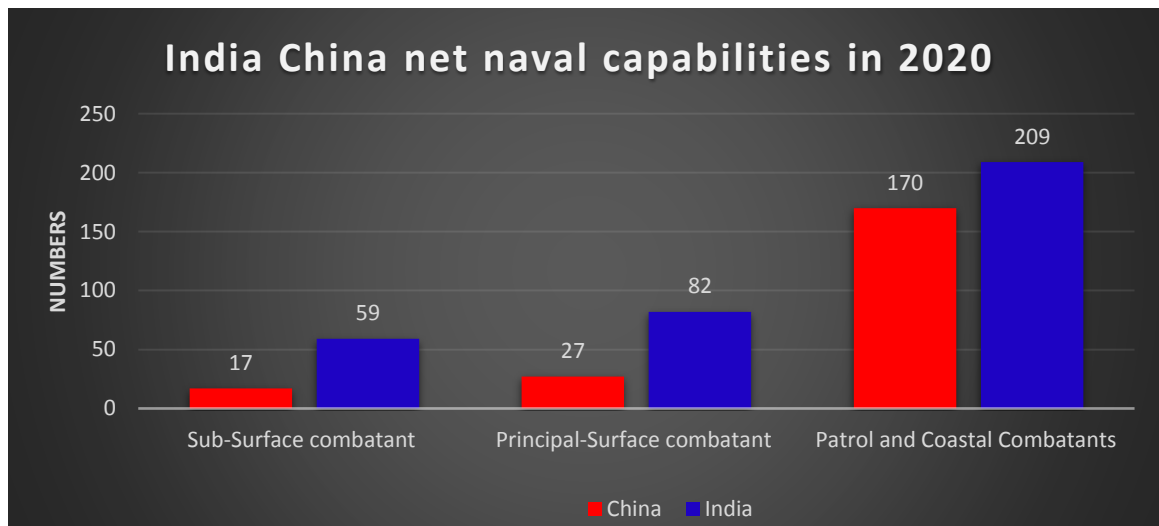


Figure 01: comparison of India vs China net naval capabilities in 2020

Source: (GFP, 2021)

Counter-terrorism activities are yet another policy concern of China’s to justify its presence in the Indian Ocean. With the considerable increase of vessels navigation in the region, acceleration of non-state actors’ activities in the member countries in the Indian Ocean region posed the vulnerability of terrorism in the ocean. Since all countries depend on their development and security aspirations in the Indian Ocean, China wants to secure that their connectivity, trades, and commerce are assured in the region. Based on the above policies, China is trying to deploy its policy towards the Indian Ocean. Unlikely China’s policy to the South China Sea, Indian Ocean policy seems to be the composition of both economic and security-oriented but peaceful navigation. However, the competition of the USA to maintain



its greater status in the Indian Ocean, India's apprehension on China's presence in the Indian Ocean have created a challenge for China to justify its actions in the region. As Harvard political scientist Graham Allison, posits that "when a rising power threatens to displace a ruling one, the most likely outcome is war" (Peng, 2021). According to Allison, this has been true in 12 out of 16 such instances in the last 500 years. This has been the case against China's presence in the Indian Ocean.

THE US POLICY TOWARDS THE INDIAN OCEAN

The United States of America's policy towards the Indian Ocean goes beyond the physical borders of the Indian Ocean. Since it had been in the Pacific region, contemporary US policy towards the Indian Ocean is becoming the extension of its pacific policy to cover the region. However, the US policy on the Indian Ocean is mainly influenced by a few factors which are changing under the geo-strategic dynamics. The main policy of the US is to protect chokepoints in the Indian Ocean. Such as the strait of Hormuz and the strait of Malacca.

These are the two crucial places where the US energy supply and trades are navigated. With the growing populations and the further market expansion in Asia's region, the US is keen to protect and assure its market exploitation in the Indian Ocean region. Combining both protection of Chokepoints and the trades in the Indian Ocean linked to assure the Sea Line of Communication. Among the key straits, several times, Iran has warned the US about the blocking of the Strait of Hormuz. Piracy of the western Indian Ocean region is another concern of the U.S. determination to mark its presence in the region. Apart from the issues that are being highlighted, the emerging trends of China and India in the Indian Ocean region has created the necessity of its active participation in the Indian Ocean region. (Cordesman and Toukan, 2014, p311). It is much clear that the US never had a strong strategy priority to the Indian Ocean until China's approach to the Indian Ocean. This was justified by the previous Presidents of Obama, Trump, and the event with the existing incumbency to re-balance the Indian Ocean. (Basu and Parpiani, 2021). The emergence of China and India as regional and global powers, competition of both countries to win its regional members are the major reasons that the US justify its role as a balancer in the Indian Ocean. Historical records of both China and India has put the future of the Indian ocean at stake. Since both did not accept the things are in the Indian Ocean, as a major superpower in the World US tries to maintain the tension with the intention to preserve its national security interest in the region.

Paying attention to the existing geopolitical realities, the United States of America's policy towards the Indian ocean can be recognized as;

- Prevent the Indian Ocean region from being subjected to any hegemonic domination either China or India or anyone and to actively present while pursuing the policy of pre-eminence



- Strategically working with every country in the region, irrespective of large or small, to protect the interests of the United States.
- Strongly promoted the rule-based order to pursue the regional stability
- Ensuring the energy and communications safety of the United States are not threatened or disrupted in any circumstance
- Protecting choke points that are strategically important for the US global status
- Prevent the region from being used by terrorists as the basis of operations
- Prevent the proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction from the region to state and non-state actors
- Continue to work with like-minded partners to support open societies and promote shared values, including the rule of law, human rights, democracy and religious freedom in order to preserve its interest across the region.
- Follow the lead role in all types of operations related to non-traditional security activities.

SRI LANKA'S POLICY TOWARDS THE INDIAN OCEAN

Under the existing competitive rivalry among the triangle of power blocks such as China, India and the US, Sri Lanka's policy towards the Indian ocean is paramount for regional stability and balancing. Sri Lanka's policy on the Indian Ocean can be traced to two different quotes. One is from His Excellency the President speech at the United National General Assembly. The other event is from the Minister of Foreign Affairs. The President, in his speech, clearly articulated that Sri Lanka is against any country domination in the Indian Ocean (IANS, 2020). Furthermore, Sri Lanka will stand and work to stay neutral without catering for any power block campaign over the Indian Ocean dominations. In his word, Sri Lanka, "As a strategically placed country in the Indian Ocean, it is our priority to ensure that the Indian Ocean is maintained as a zone of peace where no country could gain advantage over any other" (Statement by H.E. Gotabaya Rajapaksa, President of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka at the General Debate of the 75th Session of the UNGA, 22 September 2020). This clearly showcases Sri Lanka's interest in the Indian Ocean to see as a shared resource which needs to use as a shared resource. Also, GoSL wants to follow and adhere to a long-standing policy of Non-aligned foreign policy referring to the Indian Ocean region. In this regard, Sri Lanka will not entertain any of the alliances which are trying to further escalation of tensions in the Indian Ocean region. However, taking strategic and geological proximity, Jayanath Colombage¹ has reiterated Sri Lanka's policy on the Indian Ocean mainly determined by India's First approach. (Interview of the Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs). In his interview, he has summarised Sri Lanka's Indian Ocean policy as:

1. Sri Lanka wants to remain Indian ocean neutral.

¹ Admiral (Prof) Jayanath Colombage is the Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sri Lanka.



2. Sri Lanka does not want to create its actions as a strategic concern to India.
3. Sri Lanka expects and prefers rule-based maritime relations for the Indian Ocean.
4. Development and,
5. Maintain friendly relations with all countries in the world.

Considering the Omni-balancing theory, Sri Lanka's stance clearly articulates as a small state, it tries to develop and promote more cooperation and cordial relations with other countries rather than taking a side of the competitions existing in the Indian Ocean. Despite the existing scenarios in the Indian Ocean, which are beyond the expectations of Sri Lanka, we still believe that the Indian ocean should not be a playground or theatre for the great and the emerging powers in the world. Despite the enormous western propagated conclusion on Sri Lanka's pro-China policy, Sri Lanka tries to preserve and protect its national interest as a small island which located in the middle of the region. From the national interest, China's economic assistance and cooperation and India's support are necessary for Sri Lanka's future development. Therefore, Sri Lanka may not take a side of Sino-Indian or US-China power rivalry in the Indian Ocean. Instead of taking a side, Sri Lanka expects to promote and pursue a more multilateral approach to managing Indian Ocean region issues. The intention to follow such policy has been witnessed with the appointment of a separate state minister for regional cooperation focusing on the economic and other non-traditional issues neglecting the existing power rivalry of China, US and India triangle in the Indian Ocean (Kawakita, 2021).

Analysing the above, Sri Lanka's policy towards the Indian Ocean must be carefully assessed from both domestic and external factors. In these respective, the following factors are the compelling factors for Sri Lanka to take a stand on the region.

1. Economic recession and debt crisis
2. India as the closest neighbour
3. China from the friend in need
4. The US as the biggest export market for Sri Lanka
5. Utilizing its geopolitical location for securing its national interest
6. Concerning the security and the power politics in the region
7. Managing three harbours without antagonizing any of the rivals

The exciting economic situation in the country is not moving in any favourable way for Sri Lanka at any scale. Foreign reserve issues, monetary policy gaps, import restrictions, unemployment, Scarcity of Foreign Direct Investment, Loan repayment obligations, declining of GDP, the downfall of declared economic policies, national and international debt and covid19 posed economic rescissions are the bitter experiences that Sri Lanka suffers today. In any approach to the Indian Ocean will have an impact on mentioned issues directly or indirectly. As mentioned above, living with a regional giant as the closest neighbour, Sri Lanka cannot work isolated manner or independently without concerning India's security concerns

in the region. It is also linked with China’s presence in the Indian Ocean, where India believes that China’s presence in the Indian Ocean as a threat to their dominance or their existence in the region (Rajagoplan, 2021).

Analysing the data, Sri Lanka has two alternative directions in its economy. The first five imports countries of Sri Lanka are India, China, UAE, Singapore, and Japan. Whereby Exports are depended on US, UK, India, Germany and Italy. This also influenced Sri Lanka to keep India a priority in its decision-making process related to the Indian Ocean region.

Imports	Trade (US\$ Mil)	Partner share(%)	Exporter	Trade (US\$ Mil)	Partner share(%)
United States	2,920	24.87	India	4,494	21.08
United Kingdom	1,043	8.88	China	4,189	19.65
India	790	6.72	United Arab Emirates	1,564	7.34
Germany	547	4.66	Singapore	1,292	6.06
Italy	532	4.53	Japan	1,038	4.87

Table 01: Top Five Exports and Imports partners of Sri Lanka

Source: <https://wits.worldbank.org/countrysnapshot/en/LKA>

Sri Lanka’s international debt is also another critical issue that influences its policy towards the Indian Ocean region. Below chart shows the composition of the foreign debt of Sri Lanka in 2019.

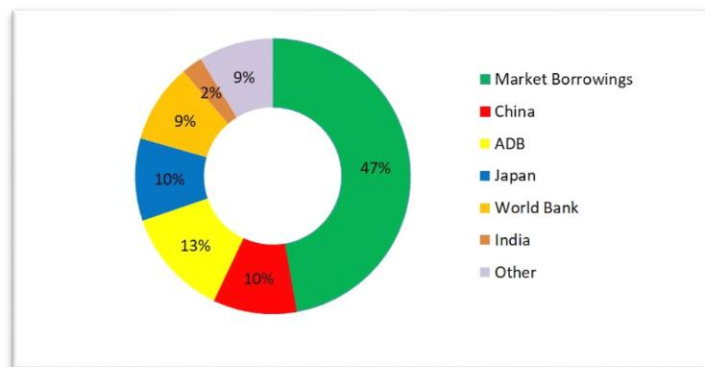


Figure 02: Foreign Debt of Sri Lanka in 2019

Source: http://www.erd.gov.lk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=102&Itemid=308&lang=en

Even though China stands as 10% holder of Sri Lanka’s debt, with recent borrowing of US\$ 500 million syndicated loan from China has increased portion up to more than 25% of total Chinese debt in Sri Lanka. In this circumstance, any aggressive or action against or unfavourable for China would create a negative impact for Sri Lanka. A very recent example

is China’s response towards the rejection of organic fertilizer by Sri Lanka, quoting its bacterial infections (Colombo Gazette, 2021). This dependence is also playing a vital role in policymaking in the Indian Ocean for Sri Lanka.

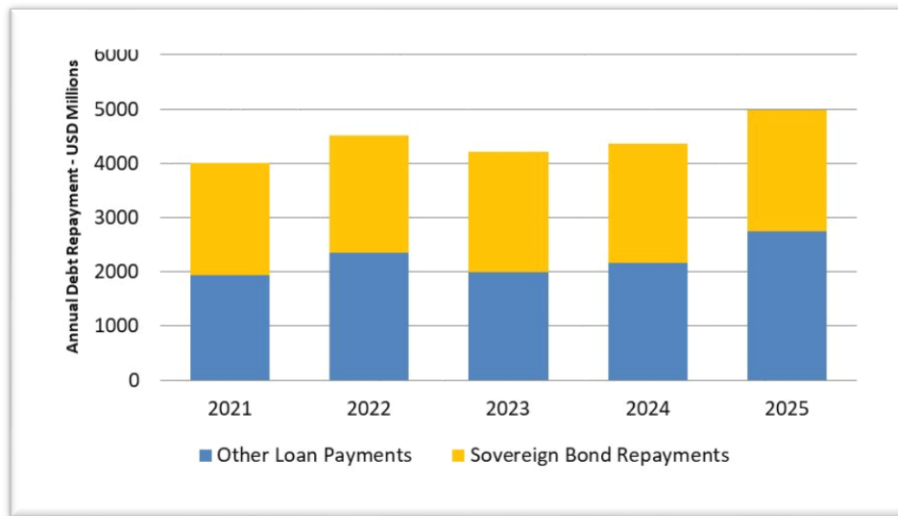


Figure 04: Foreign Debt repayments of Sri Lanka

Source: http://www.erd.gov.lk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=102&Itemid=308&lang=en

Despite the covid19 impacted wounded economy, Sri Lanka also must work hard for its foreign debt repayment annually. Based on the available data, Sri Lanka is accountable to repay more than US\$ 4000 in 2022, 2023, 2024 and 2025, almost US\$ 5000 million respectively. If Sri Lanka loses any of the competitors such as India, US or China will trouble the debt repayment since Sri Lanka’s exports, and imports relate to these three countries.

With all changing scenarios in the Indian Ocean, realise the impossibility of the Indian Ocean to remain as a zone of peace due to conflicts of Interest between India, the US and China. Analysing the rival’s strategies and adopted policies to the Indian Ocean region, existing issues in the Indian Ocean and emerging trends have identified nine major factors to justify their cause of action.

Number	Factor
F1	Interrelations of – and Possible Rivalry between – the Region’s Three Major Powers are inevitable (India, china, US)
F2	Trade route that connects the international markets with Africa will be one of the competitions among powerful countries and drag them into the Indian Ocean
F3	Competition for Influence and Resources for the purpose of exploitation and exploration (fishing, minerals, oil & gas)
F4	Failed and Failing States may pose regional instability



F5	Population Growth and People's Movements (Push and Pull Factors of Migrations)
F6	Increasing Militarization in the region
F7	Proliferation of Militant Islamist Movements
F8	SLOC: Potential threats for Flashpoints which identified as (Choke points in Indian Ocean)
F9	Non-conventional security threats (subversive)(piracy), (illegal migration, money laundering, financial crimes)

Table 02: Concerning Factors of Sri Lanka

Source: Author's analysis

The mentioned factors could determine all countries to adopt and implement its policies in the Indian Ocean. Taking all issues highlighted will impact Sri Lanka to the broad range of security and the survival in the Indian Ocean region. The chart below will analyse the impact range of those factors for Sri Lanka.

	Factor	Impact	Possible outcomes
F1.	Interrelations of – and Possible Rivalry between – the Region's Three Major Powers (India, China, US)	Sovereignty issue	Possibility of becoming a proxy state
F2.	Trade route that connects the international markets with Africa will be one of the competitions factors among the powerful countries to drag them into the Indian Ocean	SL Harbours & ports issue	Increased influence of big three over strategically harbours
F3.	Competition for Influence and Resources for the purpose of exploitation and exploration (fishing, minerals, oil & gas)	Rights of Exclusive Economic zone and continental shelf	Increased competition by resource hungry nations
F4.	Failed and Failing States may pose regional instability	Internal security threat	Regional anarchy and war lords
F5.	Population Growth and People's Movements	demographic challenges	Highly concentrated alien communities
F6.	Increasing Militarization in the region	Neutrality in international relations	Compromise of navigation protocols
F7.	Proliferation of Militant Islamist Movements	Security-safe havens	Propagation of extremism and fundamentalism



F8.	SLOC: Potential threats for Flashpoints which identified as (Choke points in Indian Ocean)	Security & safety of the sea routes	Disturbance of SLOC
F9.	Non-conventional security threats (subversive)(piracy),(illegal migration, money laundering, financial crimes)	Non-conventional security threats	Risk of becoming regional hub for non-conventional security threats

Figure 03: Impact analysis of Factors

Source: Author's analysis

Analysing the factors highlighted in the above, it is evident that these impacts posed direct and indirect implications for Sri Lanka's national interests and regional existence as a sovereign country in the Indian Ocean region. One way the other these outcomes challenge the security aspects of Sri Lanka. With a range of implications, Sri Lanka must work for avoiding becoming a proxy state of any of mentioned competitors in the region and to assure its safety and security through engagement as denoted from the Omni balancing theory.

CONCLUSION

Any sovereign state is obliged to preserve its security without the influence of other states. It is not unusual that the security measures that states adopt are not always publicly declared or exposed to any states. However, states design their security policy with the careful consideration of both domestic and external factors regionally and internationally. It is a common feature in the Indian Ocean region that insecurity of one state is created by another in its defence. As a result, states in the Indian Ocean region have created insecurity in their neighbours due to the actions taken by states based on temporary or short-term security arrangements. Although the size of states and their ability to exert influence in the international system facilitate the elimination or management of such risks or problems, small states can be seen to have a significant impact there. Sri Lanka is a small country with a high geographical location and geopolitical importance in the Indian Ocean region, that has attracted the interest of regional and extra-regional powers. Therefore, Sri Lanka's security and threats related reactions obviously impact vis-à-vis other regional countries. For this reason, it will be strategically important for Sri Lanka not to take the side of any party in the growing power struggle but to actively intervene in matters that are important and influential in general on a multilateral basis.

The careful assessment of both fundamental security issues and contemporary security dynamics in the Indian Ocean is especially important for Sri Lanka's future. According to the Omni Balance Theory, it is essential to look at the changes taking place in the outside world, especially in the region, in finding answers to the security issues facing Sri Lanka internally. To



deal with this situation, Sri Lanka needs to adopt an issue-based pragmatic approach with other countries in the region to address its national security concerns.

The contemporary rivalry of India with China to be a major power in the world sharpened India's presence in the Indian Ocean. With Sri Lanka's tie with China has given negative interpretations for Sri Lanka as challenging India's security concerns by many experts. However, it was noticed that Sri Lanka is trying to navigate its policy on the Indian Ocean as a small country and preserve national interest rather than taking either side of the rivals.

According to the military rank index in 2021, The United States, China and India ranked number one, third and fourth, respectively, Where Sri Lanka remained in 79th with increasing status (GFP, 2021). Sri Lanka has no interest to join any ongoing rivalry among the key players in this triangle of power, that are trying to hegemonize the region. However, India's entry into the Indian Ocean region was initially based on non-traditional security concerns. Contemporary developments limited China's presence in the region as a prioritized concern. China's different approach to the Indian Ocean region compared to its South China Sea approach shows the importance of energy, market, and communications as major concerns of China's presence in the region. With the growing trends in the Indian Ocean, China seems to tighten its presence to ensure its expectations in the Indian Ocean region. Acceleration and the expansion of the scope of the QUAD initiative, the AUKUS deal has further increased the tension in the region. China seems to be aware of the importance of Africa in the journey to be a global superpower and navigation route for the continuity of its development.

The United States operates in the Indian Ocean region with two different objectives. First to play the role of existing global superpower and, secondly, to preserve its future power in the Asian region. Based on the above interest, the US operates its activities in the Indian Ocean region. However, the emergence of China and activities of the Indian Ocean created more security concerns for the US to initiate a new strategy to the Indo-Pacific region beyond non-traditional security concerns.

Sri Lanka's policy towards the Indian Ocean follows a multifaceted approach. Mainly, it tries to discourage militarization in the Indian Ocean region while promoting the rule-based ocean governance as a solution for any rivals to use IO for their security and development. As a policy, Sri Lanka is more concerned about the interest of India in the IO. However, a multilateral and cooperative approach to developing ties among India, China, and the US is paramount important for the future development of Sri Lanka. As it declared, Sri Lanka would remain the policy of de-nuclearization in the Indian Ocean and promote a multilateralism approach to address non-conventional security threats of piracy & armed robbery, illicit trafficking, energy resources, and the physical security of ports & ships. Appealing for non-use of force and peaceful settlement of disputes are the major interest of Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean, where many countries are struggling with maritime boundaries



and disputes in the IO. Because of any conflict among a triangle of US, India, and China may create an unstable environment in the region.

Against this backdrop, the peace and stability of the region will be determined by the way the US, India deals with China as they seek to establish their dominance in the Indian Ocean region. The existing reality shows that all rivals blame others for their heavy presence in the region. Whereby China says they enhanced their presence because of the India and US presence over the region and India, US follow the same argument against China. Given the rapid changes taking place in world politics, it is already clear that the power struggle of these countries will have a profound impact on the Indian Ocean region. Under these circumstances, dealing with these powers with equal weight is an essential factor for the future of Sri Lanka while promoting multilateralism in the Indian Ocean. The existing reality shows the further polarisation of the Indian Ocean region. Instead of becoming a confronter, major countries in Asia need to adopt a cooperative and pragmatic approach to make free and open Indo-Pacific to create Asia as a central region in global affairs. It will be the responsibility of emerging powers to think broadly by keeping the region first policy and facilitating small countries to overcome challenges without falling apart with power rivalries which may lead to having an impact on free, open Indo-Pacific. If the confrontation continues, the Geographic identity of Asia may exist without the geopolitical identity of Asia in future. The Asia's century is a promising slogan and a rallying point for states in the region. However, no single country in the region is likely to emerge solely as a superpower, unless they adopt a more collaborative approach, to complement each other's capabilities and capacities. The freedom in the Indian ocean depends not merely in the capacity of a few countries trying to outmanoeuvre others to dominate the Indian Ocean, but on the rule-based, distributed collaboration to ensure peace and safety in the Indian Ocean. Sri Lanka's policy direction underlies this need to collaboration on regional and international powers to use the Indian Ocean as the path to prosperity, as most countries in the region aspire.

REFERENCES

- Asian Development Bank. (2015) ASIA 2050: Realizing the Asian Century viewed. *Asian Development Bank* [online]. Available at: <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/28608/asia2050-executive-summary.pdf> [accessed on 23 October 2021].
- Blount, C. (2013) Staying In Step: The US "Pivot" and UK Strategic Choices. *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, 7(2), 137–150. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26270769> [accessed on 26 October 2021].
- Colombo Gazette. (October 09, 2021) *China tells Sri Lanka to respect science and facts*. *Colombo Gazette* [online]. Available at: <https://colombogazette.com/2021/10/09/china-tells-sri-lanka-to-respect-science-and-facts/> [Accessed on 16 October 2021].
- Cordesman et al., (2014) The Indian Ocean Region: A Strategic Net Assessment. *Center for Strategic & International Studies* [online]. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/indian-ocean-region> [accessed on 21 October 2021].



David, S. R. (1991) "Explaining Third World Alignment," *World Politics*. Cambridge University Press, 43(2), pp. 233–256. Available at: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/world-politics/article/abs/explaining-third-world-alignment/A9E3AE8B25633EA8D862DA20752FFF99> [accessed on 23 October 2021]

Fernando, S. (Ed.) (2015) *United States-China-India Strategic Triangle in the Indian Ocean Region*. New Delhi: KW Publishers.

GFP. (2021) *2021 Military Strength Ranking*. Available at: <https://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-listing.php> [accessed on 01 November 2021]

Gupta, Shishir. (March 10, 2021) *Eye on China, India's plan for 6 nuclear-powered attack submarines back on track*. Available at: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/eye-on-china-india-s-plan-for-6-nuclear-powered-attack-submarines-back-on-track-101615327826084.html> [accessed on 25 October 2021].

IANS. (September 23, 2020) *Sri Lanka to ensure no nation dominates Indian Ocean: Gotabaya Rajapaksa*. Available at: https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/sri-lanka-to-ensure-no-nation-dominates-indian-ocean-gotabaya-rajapaksa-120092300166_1.html [accessed on 25 October 2021].

India. Ministry of Defence. (2016) *15 Years Indigenous Plan*. Available at: [https://ddpmod.gov.in/sites/default/files/INIP%20\(2015-2030\).pdf](https://ddpmod.gov.in/sites/default/files/INIP%20(2015-2030).pdf) [Accessed on 02 November 2021].

Javaid, Arfa. (2020) List of important groups associated with the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Available at: <https://www.jagranjosh.com/general-knowledge/indian-ocean-region-ior-1604499932-1> [accessed on 21 October 2021].

Katoch, Prakash. (May 12, 2020) *Sri Lanka's rise in strategic importance in Chinese geopolitical calculus*. Available at: <https://www.southasianmonitor.org/spotlight/sri-lankas-rise-strategic-importance-chinese-geopolitical-calculus> [accessed on 26 October 2021].

Kawakita, Keita. (July 04, 2021) *Are We Entering an "Asian Century?": The Possibility of a New International Order*. Available at: <https://www.e-ir.info/2020/07/04/are-we-entering-an-asian-century-the-possibility-of-a-new-international-order/> [accessed on 25 October 2021].

Kharas, H. and Kohli, H. (2011) *Asia in the Global Economy in 2050: The Asian Century*. In: Harinder S. Kohli, Ashok Sharma and Anil Sood Editors, 2011. *Asia 2050: Realizing the Asian Century*, New Delhi: SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd. pp. 43-50 Available at: <http://www.doi.org/10.4135/9781446270349.n5> [accessed on 26 October 2021].

Mendis, L.B. Vernon. (1992) *National Security concepts of States. The United Nations institute for disarmament research*. New York. United Nations Press.

Mishra, Sylvia. (April 26, 2017) *Nuclear weapons and capabilities in the Indian Ocean: An Indian perspective*. Observer Research Foundation. Available at: <https://www.orfonline.org/research/nuclear-weapons-and-capabilities-in-the-indian-ocean-an-indian-perspective/> [accessed on 29 October 2021].



Mudunuri, Navya. (July 07, 2020) *The Malacca Dilemma and Chinese Ambitions: Two Sides of a Coin*. Available at: <https://diplomatist.com/2020/07/07/the-malacca-dilemma-and-chinese-ambitions-two-sides-of-a-coin/> [accessed on 23 October 2021].

Northrop, F. S. C. (1955) [Review of *Asia and Western Dominance.*, by K. M. Panikkar]. *The Far Eastern Quarterly*, 14(2), 261–266. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2941737?origin=crossref> [accessed on 27 October 2021].

Parpiani, K., Basu, Pratinashree. (January 10, 2021) *Biden and the Indo-Pacific – Will regional powers shape America’s approach?*. Available at: <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/biden-and-the-indo-pacific-will-regional-powers-shape-americas-approach/> [accessed on 02 November 2021].

Paszak, Pawel. (February 28, 2021) *China and the “Malacca Dilemma”*. Available at: <https://warsawinstitute.org/china-malacca-dilemma/> [accessed on 26 October 2021].

Peng, Bo. (2021) *China and Global Governance: A New Leader?*. *International Political Economy Series*. Switzerland. Palgrave Macmillan.

Prakash, Arun. (September 22, 2021) *The new AUKUS alliance holds some lessons for India*. Available at: <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/aukus-alliance-new-partnerships-realpolitik-7523384/> [accessed on 05 November 2021].

Rais, R. Bux. (1987) *The Indian Ocean and the Superpowers: Economic, Political, and Strategic Perspectives*. New Jersey. Barnes and Nobal Books.

Rajagopalan, R. P. (September 23, 2021) *Does AUKUS Augment or Diminish the Quad?*. Available at: <https://www.orfonline.org/research/does-aukus-augment-or-diminish-the-quad/> [accessed on 01 November 2021].

Schadlow. Nadia., Helwig, Brayden. (July 02, 2020) Protecting undersea cables must be made a national security priority. Available at: <https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2020/07/01/protecting-undersea-cables-must-be-made-a-national-security-priority/> [accessed on 27 October 2021].

Silver, L., Devlin, Kat., Huang, C. (October 06, 2020) Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries. Available at: https://www.pewresearch.org/global/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/10/PG_2020.10.06_Global-Views-China_FINAL.pdf [accessed on 19 October 2021].

Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sri Lanka. (September 24, 2020) *Statement by H.E. Gotabaya Rajapaksa, President of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka at the General Debate of the 75th Session of the UNGA, 22 September 2020*. Available at: <https://mfa.gov.lk/statement-by-h-e-gotabaya-rajapaksa-president-of-the-democratic-socialist-republic-of-sri-lanka-at-the-general-debate-of-the-75th-session-of-the-unga-22-september-2020/> [accessed on 12 October 2021].

Starks, G., (2020) “Statement of Commissioner Geoffrey Starks.” Federal Communications Commission. Available at: <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/DOC-367238A6.pdf>. [accessed on 23 October 2021].

Thanti TV. (September 19, 2020) *'India First Approach'- Interview with Sri Lankan Foreign Secretary Admiral Jayanath Colombage*. Thanti TV [online]. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N8w6DfoLMmE> [Accessed on 12 October 2021].



TRT World. (October 05, 2021) *Is India's 'neighbourhood first policy' unable to win regional allies?*. Available at: <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/is-india-s-neighbourhood-first-policy-unable-to-win-regional-allies-50492> [Accessed on 21 October 2021].