



E-ISSN: 2664-603X
P-ISSN: 2664-6021
Impact Factor (RJIF): 5.92
IJPSG 2025; 7(12): 47-52
www.journalofpoliticalscience.com
Received: 12-09-2025
Accepted: 15-10-2025

Anup Kumar Giri
Research Scholar, Department
of Political Science, C.M.P.
Degree College, University of
Allahabad, Prayagraj, Uttar
Pradesh, India

Dr. Govind Gaurav
Assistant Professor,
Department of Political
Science, C.M.P. Degree
College, University of
Allahabad, Prayagraj, Uttar
Pradesh, India

Corresponding Author:
Anup Kumar Giri
Research Scholar, Department
of Political Science, C.M.P.
Degree College, University of
Allahabad, Prayagraj, Uttar
Pradesh, India

Sri Lanka Between the Dragon and the Elephant: An Analysis of Sino-India Rivalry in Sri Lanka

Anup Kumar Giri and Govind Gaurav

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33545/26646021.2025.v7.i12a.773>

Abstract

This paper examines how China's strategic engagements in Sri Lanka—manifested through infrastructure investments, maritime access, and diplomatic leverage—are reshaping the regional security architecture and posing significant challenges to India's traditional sphere of influence. By analysing the evolution of China-Sri Lanka relations in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and comparing it with India's reactive and proactive strategies in the region, the paper assesses the shifting balance of power in South Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific. The paper argues that China's presence in Sri Lanka is not merely economic but deeply strategic, carrying implications for India's maritime security, southern command vulnerabilities, and its larger Indo-Pacific aspirations. Further, the paper underscores the urgency for India to recalibrate its approach toward Sri Lanka through strategic diplomacy, regional multilateralism, and maritime domain awareness to safeguard its national interests in an increasingly contested Indian Ocean Region.

Keywords: Sino-India Rivalry, Strategic Hedging, China, Sri Lanka, Indian Ocean Region

Introduction

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has emerged as a central theatre of 21st-century geopolitical contestation, where the strategic interests of regional and extra-regional powers increasingly intersect. The region has also gained pre-eminence because of shifting balance of power and a major 'geopolitical churning' in the Indo-Pacific region ^[1]. Within this evolving maritime landscape, Sri Lanka occupies a disproportionately significant position due to its geographic location along the major sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) and its proximity to the Indian subcontinent ^[2]. In recent decades, the growing strategic rivalry between China and India has found concrete expression in their respective engagements with Sri Lanka, making the island nation a focal point of their broader competition for influence in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific. China's expanding engagement with Sri Lanka—particularly through infrastructure financing and port development under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—has signalled a recalibration of power dynamics in the region ^[3]. The development of the Hambantota Port, Colombo Port City, and associated infrastructure has not only deepened China-Sri Lanka economic relations but also raised concerns over the potential strategic and military utility of these assets ^[4]. Such dual use infrastructure projects, backed by opaque lending terms and long lease agreements, could facilitate China's strategic foothold in the IOR, enabling its naval presence and surveillance capabilities ^[5].

From India's perspective, this growing Chinese footprint directly challenges its traditional sphere of influence in South Asia and undermines its maritime security calculus. The Indian strategic community has expressed concern over what is often termed the "string of pearls" strategy—an alleged Chinese effort to encircle India through a network of commercial-cum-military facilities across the Indian Ocean ^[6]. New Delhi's anxieties are further compounded by the limitations in its own capacity to match China's economic and infrastructural outreach, especially in the context of political volatility and strategic ambiguity within Sri Lanka ^[7]. The docking of Chinese surveillance vessels such as *Yuan Wang 5* in Sri Lankan ports despite Indian objections illustrates the evolving regional tension and erosion of India's diplomatic leverage ^[8].

The main objective of this paper is to critically examine the strategic implications of China's expanding presence in Sri Lanka for India's national security. It situates the India-China

competition within the broader Indo-Pacific geostrategic matrix while paying close attention to Sri Lanka's agency as a small state navigating between two major powers. By analysing the emerging 'triangular relationship' ^[9] among China, India, and Sri Lanka, this paper contributes to the discourse on regional security and power transition in the IOR. It argues that the trajectory of this rivalry in Sri Lanka will significantly influence the nature of the emerging maritime order, necessitating a nuanced Indian strategy that blends hard and soft power instruments within a long-term strategic vision.

2. Strategic Importance of Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's strategic salience in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) stems primarily from its geographical centrality and maritime proximity to major sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) that connect the East with the West. Located just north of the equator and adjacent to the crucial Malacca Strait–Bab-el-Mandeb trade corridor, Sri Lanka lies along the primary route through which nearly 80 per cent of China's energy imports and over 60,000 merchant vessels pass annually ^[10]. This locational advantage makes Sri Lanka a maritime pivot for strategic competition among regional and extra-regional actors, especially China and India.

For India, Sri Lanka is not merely a neighbouring island state but part of its extended maritime periphery. The island's proximity to the southern Indian coastline—just 30 nautical miles from Tamil Nadu across the Palk Strait—renders any external strategic influence in Sri Lanka a matter of immediate security concern. India's Southern Naval Command, headquartered in Kochi, and the Andaman and Nicobar Command, tasked with securing eastern sea lanes, both underscore India's imperative to retain a dominant influence in Sri Lanka to ensure maritime domain awareness and defence preparedness ^[11].

From China's perspective, Sri Lanka represents an ideal node for maritime access and influence projection in the Indian Ocean. As part of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, Chinese investments in ports, industrial zones, and transport corridors in Sri Lanka are not only economic but strategic in design, offering potential logistics support for the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) and surveillance platforms in the future ^[12]. The Hambantota Port, leased to China Merchants Port Holdings for 99 years, is emblematic of this shift, sparking concerns regarding its potential dual-use capabilities ^[13]. Likewise, the Colombo Port City project is viewed as an attempt to carve out a semi-autonomous Chinese enclave within the capital's maritime and financial architecture ^[14].

Beyond its geography and infrastructural assets, Sri Lanka holds strategic relevance due to its diplomatic flexibility and multi-aligned foreign policy posture. Despite deep-rooted historical, cultural, and ethnic ties with India, successive Sri Lankan governments have adopted a pragmatic approach in engaging China, often leveraging Beijing's economic largesse to diversify partnerships and reduce overdependence on India or Western donors ^[15]. This hedging behaviour positions Sri Lanka as an autonomous actor capable of reshaping the contours of regional alignment patterns in South Asia. Sri Lanka's role as a hub of regional maritime cooperation also amplifies its strategic value. The country has hosted forums such as the Galle Dialogue, participated in Indian Ocean Rim Association

(IORA) mechanisms, and played an active role in maritime security initiatives like the Colombo Security Conclave, co-hosted with India and Maldives. These engagements not only enhance its multilateral profile but also reinforce its centrality in shaping the normative framework of the Indian Ocean's security governance ^[16].

Hence, Sri Lanka's strategic significance is both intrinsic and relational—it derives from its geographic location and infrastructure potential, as well as from its ability to navigate the complexities of great power rivalry. As a strategic balancer in the Indian Ocean chessboard, Sri Lanka is no longer a passive recipient of external influence but an active player whose decisions can tip regional alignments and influence the trajectory of Indo-China relations in the maritime domain.

3. China's Strategic Engagement with Sri Lanka

China's deepening engagement with Sri Lanka reflects a calculated long-term strategy to secure strategic footholds in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) as part of its broader global ambition under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). While often framed in terms of economic development and infrastructure connectivity, China's activities in Sri Lanka reveal a layered approach involving economic statecraft, political influence, and latent strategic-military interests. These engagements are central to understanding how Beijing projects power beyond its immediate periphery and reshapes the regional maritime order in South Asia.

At the core of China's strategic presence in Sri Lanka lies the development of dual-use infrastructure, particularly the Hambantota Port and Colombo Port City. Hambantota, developed with over \$1.3 billion in Chinese loans, was handed over on a 99-year lease to China Merchants Port Holdings in 2017 after Sri Lanka's inability to service its debt ^[17]. While Chinese and Sri Lankan officials maintain the port is commercial in nature, scholars have warned of its strategic potential as a logistics hub for the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) and a node for surveillance operations in the IOR ^[18]. Similarly, the Colombo Port City, developed as a financial and business zone, has raised concerns over extraterritorial governance and strategic encroachment into the capital's urban and maritime space ^[19].

China's engagement goes beyond infrastructure. It includes significant financial diplomacy, with Chinese loans, grants, and swap arrangements helping to stabilize Sri Lanka's balance of payments and fund high-visibility development projects. Between 2005 and 2020, China emerged as Sri Lanka's largest bilateral lender, accounting for over 20 per cent of its external debt stock ^[20]. This debt-driven development model has created structural economic dependence and leverage for China, allowing it to influence political decisions in Colombo, especially during times of crisis—as seen during the Rajapaksa administrations ^[21].

Moreover, China has enhanced its military and security cooperation with Sri Lanka. It has supplied military hardware, provided training to Sri Lankan forces, and donated patrol vessels and radar systems under the guise of maritime domain capacity-building. While this is often downplayed in official narratives, these moves point to China's interest in establishing a security footprint in South Asia's maritime space ^[22]. The repeated visits of Chinese submarines and research vessels—most notably the *Yuan Wang 5* in 2022—have raised serious alarms in India and

underscored the strategic signalling embedded in Beijing's maritime diplomacy ^[23].

China also exercises influence through soft power channels and elite capture, including Confucius Institutes, scholarships for Sri Lankan students, high-level visits, and donations to political elites and think tanks. These engagements cultivate long-term goodwill and elite dependency that can influence foreign policy choices favourable to Beijing ^[24]. Importantly, China's Sri Lanka strategy is not isolated but fits within a broader geopolitical architecture. The island nation is conceptualized as a key node in the Maritime Silk Road that complements Chinese interests in Gwadar (Pakistan), Kyaukphyu (Myanmar), and Djibouti. Together, these ports form a network of access points—many with latent dual-use potential—that underpin Beijing's "far seas" doctrine and its aspiration for a blue-water navy ^[25].

Thus, China's engagement with Sri Lanka is multidimensional and strategic. It combines infrastructure diplomacy, financial leverage, naval access, and political influence in ways that enable Beijing to challenge India's traditional primacy and rewrite the rules of regional order in the IOR. For New Delhi, this presents a significant strategic challenge, not only in material terms but also in the symbolic erosion of its status as the principal power in its maritime periphery and a net security provider in the IOR.

4. Consequences of China–Sri Lanka Relations for India–Sri Lanka Ties

The intensification of China–Sri Lanka relations has significantly altered the landscape of India–Sri Lanka bilateral dynamics, which were historically anchored in cultural affinity, geographic proximity, and shared democratic traditions. While India remains an indispensable partner for Sri Lanka in many domains, the strategic inroads made by China have introduced new complexities, diluting India's traditional influence and recalibrating Colombo's foreign policy orientation. The shift is not merely symbolic but structural, manifesting in changing economic alignments, diplomatic recalibrations, and altered security perceptions in South Asia.

One of the most visible consequences of China's deepening presence is Sri Lanka's strategic diversification, often interpreted as hedging behaviour by a small state situated between two competing powers ^[26]. While India remains an important actor, particularly in humanitarian aid, cultural diplomacy, and security training, Sri Lanka's increasing dependence on Chinese loans and infrastructure projects has provided Beijing with a growing economic and political lever in Colombo's decision-making. This asymmetry has often translated into Sri Lanka adopting foreign policy stances that are less sensitive to Indian strategic concerns, such as granting port access to Chinese naval and surveillance vessels despite India's objections ^[27].

A crucial shift lies in India's declining economic leverage vis-à-vis China in Sri Lanka. While India has extended lines of credit and emergency financial assistance, especially during the 2022 economic crisis (amounting to over \$4 billion in aid), its footprint is relatively narrow and reactive compared to China's long-term infrastructure diplomacy ^[28]. Moreover, Indian-backed projects—such as the East Container Terminal in Colombo—have faced delays or cancellations due to political resistance or competing Chinese offers. Such instances have eroded confidence in

India's capacity to deliver strategic commitments swiftly, thereby weakening its economic diplomacy.

The expanding China–Sri Lanka relationship has also introduced a strategic trust deficit between India and Sri Lanka. India's perception of being sidelined in its own maritime backyard has led to cautious recalibration of its bilateral strategy. The Indian establishment has increasingly viewed Sri Lanka through the lens of a potential vulnerability in its southern flank, particularly in light of recurring Chinese naval visits and the potential for PLA Navy (PLAN) presence in the future ^[29]. The control of or access to key maritime infrastructure such as Hambantota Port or Colombo Port City could, even if indirectly, offer the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) forward basing capabilities for logistics, surveillance, and presence operations in the Indian Ocean ^[30]. Though Sri Lanka and China have officially denied military intentions, the docking of vessels such as *Yuan Wang 5*—a dual-use satellite tracking ship—signals the blurred line between commercial and strategic objectives ^[31]. Such developments create strategic vulnerabilities for India, particularly in terms of:

- Monitoring foreign military movement in the southern maritime frontier,
- Protecting its Southern Naval Command and offshore assets,
- Ensuring freedom of navigation and secure sea-based deterrence posture.

This has further hardened India's maritime strategic posture in the southern Indian Ocean, leading to greater surveillance, submarine deployments, and partnerships with island states like the Maldives and Mauritius under the SAGAR doctrine. Another consequence has been the shift in India's diplomatic tone, especially its growing reliance on soft balancing strategies through regional and multilateral mechanisms ^[32]. India has revitalized forums such as the Colombo Security Conclave, strengthening trilateral cooperation with Sri Lanka and the Maldives, and reinforcing platforms like BIMSTEC and IORA. These are aimed at reinforcing a regional security architecture that can subtly counterbalance Chinese influence while avoiding overt confrontation ^[33].

Moreover, the China factor has also complicated domestic politics within Sri Lanka and its bilateral implications for India. The association of Chinese projects with authoritarian governance styles and opaque contracts—particularly during the Rajapaksa regime—has led to internal critiques of sovereignty erosion. India, while maintaining official diplomatic restraint, has subtly aligned with civil society discourses promoting transparency, democratic norms, and environmental safeguards in foreign investments. This introduces a new normative dimension to India–Sri Lanka ties, where India is increasingly positioning itself as a more benign and democratic development partner in contrast to China's transactional model ^[34]. Therefore, China's growing strategic intimacy with Sri Lanka has not only disrupted India's traditional bilateral equation with Colombo but also compelled New Delhi to rethink the foundations of its regional diplomacy. The trust deficit, shrinking economic influence, and heightened security anxieties have pushed India to evolve a multi-pronged strategy combining development assistance, people-to-people diplomacy and multilateral engagement to preserve its primacy in South Asia's maritime core.

5. India's Response to China's Expanding Presence and Influence in Sri Lanka

India has adopted a multi-pronged approach to deal with the 'China challenge' in the strategically important Sri Lanka. India's policy toward Sri Lanka since the early 2010s can be understood as a calibrated mix of accommodation, selective competition and hedging rather than a policy of overt containment. Conceptually this posture is best captured by the literature on soft balancing and hedging in asymmetric neighbourhoods. Rather than confronting China directly, India uses non-military instruments (development assistance, concessional finance, people-centred diplomacy) augmented by defence cooperation and multilateral cooperation strategies to constrain exclusive influence and preserve its "privileged" proximity^[35].

- **Economic Statecraft:** India has adopted the calibrated economic statecraft to improve relations with Sri Lanka. It provided Sri Lanka with concessional finance in forms of Lines of Credit (LoCs), grants, restructuring of debt and diplomatic support at multi-lateral financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Asian Development Bank during 2022 economic crisis. India proved herself a reliable friend of Sri Lanka by extending around 4 billion USD in various forms to crisis hit Sri Lanka^[36]. In practical terms, India has used LoCs, direct grants and selective debt relief/payments to reduce Colombo's near-term financing pressure and thereby blunt the political leverage that unilateral creditors can obtain during crisis episodes. These financial interventions are operationalised not simply as commercial offerings but as instruments of strategic reassurance.
- **Infrastructure alternatives and partnership building (selective competition):** Instead of mirroring China project-for-project, India has pursued selective, high-visibility initiatives and triangular partnerships to provide credible alternatives. A salient recent example is the India-UAE-Sri Lanka Trincomalee energy hub initiative launched during the Indian Prime Minister's 2025 visit — a multilateral project intended to leverage Indian commercial presence and Gulf financing to develop eastern energy logistics and bunkering capacity^[37]. Such initiatives achieve three aims: (a) place India and partners in critical nodes; (b) internationalise financing to reduce exclusive dependence on any single creditor; and (c) present commercially plausible alternatives that are politically acceptable to Colombo. Reuters and official visit records document these arrangements and their strategic logic.
- **Defence and maritime cooperation:** capacity building rather than deterrence: India has expanded maritime and defence cooperation through bilateral exercises (SLINEX, MITRA SHAKTI), port calls, training, coastal radar/cooperative maritime domain awareness measures and defence MoUs^[38]. These initiatives emphasise capacity building (search and rescue, humanitarian assistance, coastal security) to strengthen Sri Lanka's indigenous maritime competencies while embedding India as a security partner of choice. Regional security reporting and defence analyses note that such engagement is meant to undercut potential dual-use advantages that could accrue to extra-regional actors from commercial port infrastructure, while

remaining non-coercive and cognisant of Sri Lankan sovereignty.

- **Multilateral cooperation and third-party partnerships:** New Delhi has consistently sought to internationalise Sri Lanka's financing and infrastructure options by bringing in partners (UAE, Japan, multilateral lenders) and by engaging with IMF and other creditors on debt restructuring and macro stabilisation^[39]. The strategic logic here is to dilute binary, bilateral dependency and to create a multi-vector financing architecture that gives Colombo policy space. Analytical and media accounts underscore that coordination with partners over investment and energy projects is an explicit element of India's hedging strategy.
- **Soft power, humanitarian assistance and people-centred diplomacy:** India continues to leverage cultural ties (Buddhism, Tamilians, Yoga etc.) welfare-oriented projects (housing, education, health), scholarships and rapid humanitarian assistance during crises (food, fuels, disaster relief). These instruments of cultural engagement build durable goodwill among elites and public alike and are particularly potent in Sri Lanka's Tamil and northern constituencies with historical linkages to India. Thus, India is trying to revive a legacy of cultural exchanges that originated with Emperor Ashoka's mission to Sri Lanka during Mauryan period.

7. Conclusion

The intensifying strategic rivalry between China and India in Sri Lanka represents a microcosm of the broader contest for power, influence, and maritime primacy in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). What began as economic engagement through infrastructure development and financial diplomacy has evolved into a complex geostrategic equation, wherein Beijing's expanding presence in Sri Lanka has begun to alter regional alignments, disrupt traditional spheres of influence, and generate long-term security anxieties for New Delhi. Sri Lanka's transformation from a peripheral actor to a central node in the strategic chessboard of South Asia underscores the evolving nature of small state agency in great power politics. Its efforts to balance between India and China reflect both opportunism and vulnerability—leveraging competition to extract economic gains, while risking erosion of strategic autonomy and internal sovereignty. China, by embedding itself in Sri Lanka's infrastructure, economy, and strategic calculus, has effectively outpaced India in material terms, projecting both hard and soft power with long-term implications for regional order.

For India, this shift (of China's presence in Sri Lanka) challenges its historical role as the preeminent security provider in South Asia. The erosion of trust (between India and Sri Lanka), diminishing strategic leverage, and risk of encirclement necessitate a fundamental recalibration of its regional strategy. Mere reactionary diplomacy or ad hoc financial assistance is no longer sufficient. India must adopt a long-term, multidimensional approach in its engagement with Sri Lanka and the wider Indian Ocean Region (IOR). This strategy should begin with strengthening strategic partnerships with Sri Lanka, grounded in mutual respect, transparency in developmental initiatives, and sustainable cooperation. India should also enhance its maritime

capabilities and maintain a forward presence in the IOR to ensure effective deterrence and improved situational awareness. Simultaneously, investing in regional multilateral frameworks such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), and the Colombo Security Conclave is crucial for shaping the region's normative and security architecture. Additionally, India must advance digital and financial connectivity in the region by offering infrastructure alternatives to Chinese projects that come with fewer conditions and foster deeper local integration. Finally, cultivating ties with both Sri Lankan elites and civil society is essential for reasserting India's cultural closeness and democratic values in Sri Lanka's strategic imagination. Ultimately, the contest in Sri Lanka is not merely about physical infrastructure or naval access—it is about the symbolic and strategic assertion of influence in a region undergoing rapid transition. India's ability to safeguard its maritime flank, re-establish regional primacy, and respond credibly to China's strategic push in South Asia will depend on its political will, diplomatic agility, and long-term vision. The strategic triangle of India, China, and Sri Lanka will continue to shape the evolving maritime geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific. Whether this dynamic settles into a new equilibrium or spirals into greater competition depends not only on material capabilities but also on the wisdom of strategic choices. In that calculus, Sri Lanka will remain a pivotal space—between the dragon and the elephant, and at the heart of South Asia's contested future.

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