

---

# Sri Lanka's Geo-Strategic Relevance for India

---

Priyanshu Gupta

Research Scholar Department of Defence and Strategic Studies University of Allahabad  
Allahabad U.P.

## Abstract

*"Geostrategy is the geographic direction of a state's foreign policy. More precisely, geostrategy describes where a state concentrates its efforts by projecting military power and directing diplomatic activity. The unique geographic position of Sri Lanka makes it a bridge between the east and the west. The specific Geostrategic location of Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean has been the most important factor in their relations Sri Lanka is Virtually located in the centre of Asia and the sea lanes between the far east and the west Asia in other words this location gives the island centre position Midway on the ancient Maritime trade route between west and the East. Other factor which influences their relations is location. Sri Lanka also uses her location to neutralize India's position by cultivating extra regional powers and even expressing a desire to give base facilities to the United States of America. India's always worried about harbor's occupation by an external power will have serious repercussions for security. Strategically important harbors in the Colombo and Trincomalee have always been occupied an important place in India's foreign policy calculations.*

Keywords- National Security, IOR, Maritime Boundary, LTTE, Extremism, Strategic Interests

## Geo-Strategic Location of Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka, an island nation, has a coastline of 1340 kilometers which makes it as one of the most significant geographical entity in the Northern Indian Ocean in close proximity to the international sea lines of communications. If Sri Lanka allows its coastline to be used by China for military or non-military purposes, it will erode maritime influence of India and thus will create a strategic imbalance in the region. China has incorporated Sri Lanka as a trade and transit partner to pursue the maritime silk route diplomacy. Sri Lanka has given green signal to China in March, 2016 for construction of \$1.5 billion China-funded Colombo Port City project.<sup>2</sup> Though Sri Lanka in no way can replace India in the IOR but Sri Lanka has the potential to provide a toe hold to China between Malacca Straights to the African Coast. Geostrategic location of Sri

Lanka at the top of the Northern Indian Ocean needs to be examined since it will impact vital national, cultural and economic interests of India. Sri Lanka has witnessed internal instability in the past on account of Jana Vimukthi Peramuna (People's Liberation Front) a communist uprising in the early 1970s, which took the lives of almost 15000 youth, and later the three decade old Tamil insurgency spearheaded by Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE). Sri Lanka emerged out of the twin uprising primarily by using excessive force to crush the armed rebellion fighting against the state. Sri Lanka has been undergoing international pressure to deal with war crimes allegedly committed in the final stage of the conflict in 2009.<sup>3</sup> Sri Lanka is yet to come to terms with regard to the war crimes since a UN report has found that as many as 40,000 people may have been killed in the

last months of the civil war, though the Sri Lankan government has disputed these figures.<sup>4</sup> Sri Lanka has delayed and deferred the process of bringing the guilty to book and at the same time the government has to put in place the reconstruction and reconciliation process. Actions of Mahinda Rajapaksa government were considered not transparent and this remains a challenge to the Maithripala Sirisena government. In the regional context, Sri Lanka assumes great significance since China pursuing an aggressive policy for maritime expansion in the IOR. The strategy of the maritime silk route is here to stay and so are the Chinese naval war ships/submarines. In the backdrop of the above, it is unwise to allow Sri Lanka to drift away from India. Entry of China in the Northern IOR has altered the power balance in the region. It has increased direct competition between India and China and has set a race to establish bases and places across the rim nations and archipelagos in the IOR. At this stage, when China is on the hunt for bases and lily pads in IOR, US would like to leverage its position to give strategic balance in favor of India to prevent dominance of China directly or indirectly in the Indian Ocean. Sri Lanka has now become a focal point of regional and extra regional power competition due to its geo strategic location. The significance of Sri Lanka at the head of the Northern Indian Ocean cannot be ignored and needs to be taken note in the security calculus for the IOR.

### **Geostrategic Relevance of Sri Lanka for India**

A politically and economically stable Sri Lanka is important for both India and the region. Former **Ambassador Lalit Man Singh** said India may not have any direct threat from its neighbors (Sri Lanka) but

they can surrogate indirect threat to India's national security.

Sri Lanka directly impacts the maritime and coastal security of India. If favourably disposed toward India, it adds to the strategic significance and if it is unfavorable, in that case it erodes the maritime periphery of India. **If China and Pakistan are able to draw out Sri Lanka from the Indian sphere of influence, it will assist Pakistan and China to open the third front (maritime) against India.** This will allow both the adversaries to encircle India in collusion with each other. India must look at Sri Lanka as an enabler for maritime security of India. In fact, to a great extent, maritime security and aspiration of India to be a regional power hinges on the posture adopted by Sri Lanka. There is a growing need to deepen military and economic relationship with Sri Lanka to promote regional cooperation and prevention of militarization of the region.

**Growth in China and East Asia is slowing down and it has opened opportunities to India and South Asia.**

The region's rim states do share a number of common strategic interests such as-

- 1 security of sea lanes of communication,
- 2 environmental protection esp. marine ecology
- 3 regulated extraction of **raw material and food** from the sea,
- 4 Terrorism and religious extremism
- 5 illegal migration issues
- 6 human rights violation cases
- 7 human and drug trafficking
- 8 illegal arms trade and Proliferation of small arms
- 9 rules-based cooperation and competition in the economic fields.

Given the diverse and complex demography, economic interests and security paradox, the rim nations are unlikely to become a

conglomerate or union of nations to pursue common objectives. As a consequence, the IOR continues to remain fragile and, at the same time, it is also emerging as the most important **economic region of the world**. In the backdrop of the above, the only option India has is to seize the opportunity to be the leader of regional countries. India should strive to become a caretaker or net security provider in IOR, but if it fails to develop an understanding with the rim nations and, more importantly, archipelagos in Northern IOR, the space will be encroached upon by China or other extra regional powers. Thus, Sri Lanka becomes an important partner of India to protect the economic and maritime interests of India.

The island Nation does occupies an important place in the critical sea lines of Communications Trincomalee has the capacity to serve as a major Naval base and an extra regional level force could well dominate the sea routes in the area and disrupt Indian Shipping. The British realized its strategic importance of Sri Lanka and the concept of strategic unity of India and Sri Lanka emerged whereby the position of Sri Lanka came to be regarded as a prerequisite of the defence and security of India. After the British Indian policy makers were also very sensitive towards Sri Lanka. K M Panikkar as well known Indian writer scholar advocated the strategic unity of India, Burma and Sri Lanka for India's Defence. Jawaharlal Nehru in 1945 and pointed out the ethnic linguistic and cultural unity of India and Sri Lanka and supported the formation of a closed Union of autonomous units of the Indian Federation. Ravi Kaul opined that, "fears were not about a threat from Sri Lanka but if anybody with inimical interest towards India gained a

foothold In The Island nation India security interest could be adversely affected"

However, in Sri Lanka comedies used it by the Indians were looked upon as an expression of expansionism Sri Lankan Prime Minister John Kotelawala told in the Parliament that the writing of KM Panikkar what tantamount to a proclamation of Monroe Doctrine for South Asia he further commented that the desi Launde dispensed with Englishman completely the island would go under India moreover it was made clear that the defence agreement of 1947 between Sri Lanka and Britain for the shield against external military intervention in Sri Lanka as a counterbalance to India, Sri Lanka adopted up through Western attitude which created security problem for India Jawaharlal Nehru himself in a special message to Sri Lanka government repudiated any such suggestion and said that India did not wish to interfere with the island sovereignty and I showed them from India's goodwill and peaceful intention to word Sri Lanka since then, almost all the prime minister has assured Sri Lanka the India had no intention to humiliate her sovereignty and territorial integrity at Sri Lanka politicians always create the fear psychosis for the danger from the big neighbor.

Approximately 70% of the crude oil and trade vessels pass below the Sri Lanka's feet that is INDIAN OCEAN. The Indian Ocean region (IOR) is emerging as a Centre Stage for the 21st Century power play. The Indian Ocean gives India a large maneuvering space. It extends India's reach to the extremities of strategic boundaries and gives it depth to secure the territorial boundaries as well. It is indeed a springboard for India's quest to be a

comprehensive national power. It makes India relevant to the regional and global community and a net security provider to the region. Therefore, the island nations and archipelagos in the Northern Indian Ocean Region become more significant. Erosion of influence in the periphery of the maritime boundary of India certainly will be counterproductive and will also impact the other nations in regional proximity.

### Conclusion

The implication of Sri Lanka's geo-strategic location is a concern to India with its disparity in size, population and power. The island nation occupies on the critical Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC) of Indian Ocean and overlooking the trade and naval activities in the Indian Ocean Region. The Trincomalee, the strategically located natural harbor of Sri Lanka, serves as a major naval base. If any extra regional power who controls the harbor, could dominate the SLOC and thereby can disrupt Indian Ocean shipping. Thus, the occupation of Sri Lanka by a hostile power would gravely endanger India's security. The strategic interests of India lies in the security of the member states in the sub continent is being influenced by the Maritime issues and the ethnic issue.

### End Notes

1. Brown E Micheal,(1993).Ethnic Conflict and International Security,Princeton: Princeton University Press, p.43.
2. Jain, B.M. (ed). (1994), South Asia in the New World Order. Jaipur: RBSA Publishers, pp.1-4 Brown E Micheal, Opcit., p.44
3. Kenneth Christie, (1993). Ethnic Conflict, Tribal Politics-A Tribal Perspective, New Delhi: Curzon Press,.
4. Rajeshwari RR,. (Sept. 1997)“Ethnic conflict in South Asia: cases of India and Sri Lanka”, Strategic Analysis Vol. XXI/6, p.943
5. . Deshingkar Giri, (1987). “Arms, technology, and the global military order” in Raino Varyrynen (ed.) The Quest for Peace, London: Sage Publication, p. 263.
6. Dixit J.N. (Ed),(2004), External Affairs:Cross Border Relations, NewDelhi: Roli Books, pp. 1-2
7. Kodikara S.U, (1990), South Asian Strategic Issues – Sri Lankan Perspective. New Delhi: Sage Publications. p.82
8. Silva K.M. de., (1986). Managing Ethnic Terrorism in Multi-Ethnic Society – Sri Lanka 1980-1985.New York: University Press of America.
9. Gunaratna Rohan.. (1993). Indian Intervention in Sri Lanka. Colombo:
10. South Asian Network in Conflict Research , p.55
11. Murthy Padmaja. (May-2000). “Indo-Sri Lankan Security Perceptions: Divergences and Convergences”. Strategic Analysis Vol. XXIV, No:2
12. Adluri Subramaniam Raju and Keethaponchalam (2006). Maritime Cooperation between India and Sri Lanka. Colombo: Regional Centre for Strategic Studies. p.2 and Jonathan I Charney and Lewis M. Alexander(1996). International Maritime Boundaries.Vol.II., The Netherlands: