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Significance of South Asian Island Nations in India's Geopolitical Strategy

Dr. Prasanta Sahoo

Associate Professor, Centre for International Politics, Organisation and Disarmament, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India

* Corresponding Author: **Dr. Prasanta Sahoo**

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Abstract

The countries in South Asia, including the Island nations of Sri Lanka and the Maldives, have strategic significance to India within the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). These nations are given along major Sea Lines of Communication and significant buffers in the maritime strategy of India. Their role has also been rising every day, particularly due to the rising power like China for its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The relationship between India and Sri Lanka, and with the Maldives, is also founded on the goals of geography, history, culture and strategic interests. These are vital to India for the vision of its regional security, as well as the maritime policy of the SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region). With the growing influence of China in the IOR, India has an opportunity and a challenge to sustain its bonds as well as regional relations with Colombo and Male. This paper analyses the bilateral relations that India has had with these island countries, achievements, and the challenges, as well as policy actions that need to be taken. In particular, this paper examines the geopolitical, economic, and security factors contributing to these islands' strategic importance for India. It also discusses about New Delhi's maritime doctrine in regard to the responses to the same in the eyes of the regional challenges.

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Introduction

Sri Lanka and the Maldives are small island nations that are strategically very important to the Indian Ocean Region in an effort to become the net security provider. These small and populated countries have a particular role in the Indian maritime policy and the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), its ports and port infrastructure, and strategically significant locations are the keys to the Indian trade and energy security. India is also the centre of South Asia and an emerging power in the Indo-Pacific. Therefore, the Indian subcontinent places much pressure on bilateral relations with these maritime neighbours. Sri Lanka and the Maldives play a crucial role in the regional diplomacy of India, and this paper provides a wide perspective of the relations between these countries, with a focus on such themes as strategic cooperation, economic partnership, political relations, and the developing geopolitical situation. These island nations forming the IOR are very strategic from a security perspective, as they dominate strategic sea routes and are also at high risk of falling into the hands of external forces such as China and the USA.

As India strives to establish itself as a regional power, engaging with these nations is increasingly central to its foreign and maritime strategies. In various ways, this paper addresses the importance of South Asian Island countries to India and examines the role played by the countries in the big picture scenario of the Indian Indo-Pacific vision and maritime doctrine.

Geographic and Maritime Significance

India's geography is traditionally maritime in nature, having a 7,500km long coastline with centrally positioned in the Indian Ocean region. The maritime security, in turn, is firmly linked with the geopolitical identity of India. South Asian Island countries

are too well-positioned along the major shipping routes in the world where energy circulates and trade transpires between the East Asian, Middle East and the European regions. Precisely, Sri Lanka is located near vital India Ocean sea routes, particularly on the East-West shipping line that ferries nearly 80 per cent of all oil trade in the world. Meanwhile, the Maldives, with its several islands and its proximity to the Eight Degree Channel, is also of great significance in surveying the naval traffic. There is no doubt that establishing good relations with them can help India become stronger as regards its capability to project power, being mindful of the maritime domain and can protect these routes against piracy, terrorism and military intrusions.

Security and Defence Requirements

Since ancient times, the Indian Ocean has been regarded as the strategic backyard of India. Care should be taken to ensure that it prevails and is not in the control of the adversary players. The island countries are listening posts and may be future battlegrounds for the regional and extra-regional powers.

Maritime Security

A security architecture of the Indian Ocean can be found in India's Doctrine of SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region), which has emphasised the importance of the presence of such a security architecture in the Indian Ocean. This policy entails military security at sea, humanitarian assistance and disaster recovery (HADR) and anti-piracy to island states. India has been participating in bilateral and multilateral naval exercises, e.g. Milan (with Maldives) and SLINEX (with Sri Lanka). The military of the island countries is also trained in India, and patrol ships and spy planes are offered.

Countering China's Strategic Footprint

The increasing influence of China in the IOR, which is one of the components of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the so-called String of Pearls strategy, has become the key issue of security in India. Development of Chinese-dominant infrastructure, such as Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka, and dual-purpose in the Maldives and Seychelles, is viewed as efforts to encircle India. India, on its part, has improved security relations with these nations and provided an alternative to Chinese loans and investment by providing soft financing, grants and military co-operation.

Political and Diplomatic Engagement

Political diplomacy is also an influential factor in India's engagement with the island countries. It is likely that these countries are willing to support India in the international arenas and help it project the image of a local force that is harmless.

1. Sri Lanka

India and Sri Lanka are traditionally and culturally linked countries that have experienced both highs and lows in their socio-political and economic developments. India has also played a crucial role in the post-war reconstruction of the north of Sri Lanka and continues to make a big investment. The political instability and the fact that the Rajapakse family is increasingly getting linked with China have, however, put strain on the relationship between the two countries. India, in

its turn, was interested in strengthening its role, particularly in the economic crisis of 2022 in Sri Lanka, as a result of which it provided a more significant aid amount of 4 billion dollars than any other state.

2. Maldives

The Maldives is strategically located and has good cultural relations with India, which plays a significant role in the maritime security of the latter. The relationship between these two countries was at its best during the period of the former President, Ibrahim Solih, owing to his India First policy. The appearance of new issues, however, is predetermined by the political changes in the recent past and the appearance of the movement named 'India Out'. The Indian policy has incorporated today the diplomatic overture, construction of infrastructures, and strengthening of people-to-people relations as part of the sustenance of the degree of influence that it has in the region.

Economic and Connectivity Interests

The island countries have important nodes in India that are the ones with fisheries, renewable ocean energy, marine transport, and sustainable tourism.

1. Energy Security and Trade

Indian oil imports form 80 per cent of the Indian crude oil imports. As far as the energy security of India is concerned, it is important to ensure that the important chokepoints of the Straits of Hormuz, the Straits of Malacca, and the channels surrounding the Maldives and Sri Lanka are safe. The refuelling and logistics operations can be turned into an Island country to support the Indian maritime trade.

2. Connectivity Projects

India has strategised or participated in part of the connectivity projects with these two countries, like the Sethusamudram Shipping Canal Project with Sri Lanka. Further, India has assisted in the construction of the Trincomalee port of Sri Lanka. These infrastructural projects enable economic growth and offset Chinese-led initiatives of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

India's Humanitarian Assistance to Sri Lanka

A good example of the policy of India's Neighbourhood First is its humanitarian assistance to Sri Lanka. Having a very close cultural relationship, historic neighbouring and goodwill, India was there to help Sri Lanka whenever they are in distress, especially during natural calamities, civil war and most recently, during the economic meltdown that was unseen in the country in 2022. Another well-known instance involved Indian humanitarian aid on the economic crisis in Sri Lanka in 2022, when the country was in acute foreign reserves shortage, which paralysed fuel and food supplies and led to hyperinflation. India had, under the Lines of Credit (LoCs), exported over 400,000 metric tonnes of fuel and thousands of tonnes of rice, pulses and milk powder. India also received emergency medical consignments of basic medicines and vaccines against COVID-19, which were essential to the pandemic and economic crises. To stabilise the financial situation of Sri Lanka, India mobilised a 1 billion credit facility to import food and drugs, as well as a currency swap facility in the SAARC system.

India's Humanitarian Assistance to the Maldives

Humanitarian aid that India provides to the Maldives is part of its Neighbourhood First and SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) policies since there is a close cultural and historical relationship between the two countries. India has provided crucial support, particularly in a scenario that entails a crisis, such as an attempted coup, since 1988, particularly in Operation Cactus, which helped restore the Maldivian government. In a water crisis in December 2014, India demonstrated its responsiveness when the country deployed Operation Neer, which involved the INS Sukanya, which was filled with water supplies, and over 1,000 tons of drinking water carried by Indian Air Force planes to Male. This quick reaction brought India a good reputation as a humanitarian friend. India was also among the first to offer aid during the COVID-19 pandemic through its Operation Sanjeevani, consisting of 6.2 tons of medical supplies, and under its Vaccine Maitri project, India donated 100,000 doses of vaccines.

China's Closeness with Sri Lanka and the Maldives

One of the key strategic threats to the Indian influence in the IOR is the emerging power of China in South Asia, and more so, Sri Lanka and the Maldives. The increasing interconnection between China and these island states by way of infrastructure investments and its BRI weakens the traditional power of India and creates the chances of a String of Pearls around China. Sri Lanka has become a major part of the Chinese strategy in the IOR, and Chinese-funded major projects like Hambantota Port have led to a high amount of debt. China has had an influence on the foreign policy of Sri Lanka in most instances at the cost of India. The Maldives is also well-placed and has improved its relations with China and, especially, its president Abdulla Yameen (2013-2018), who emphasised the development of close relations with Beijing and became a member of the BRI, which implies increased debt.

Conclusion

The strategic position of the South Asian Island nations to India is increasing because they are important in maritime security as well as regional leadership. The ability of India to forge long-term relations with Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Mauritius and the Seychelles will determine the new equilibrium of power in South Asia as external powers are competing to have some influence in the Indian Ocean. India must offer development, security and stability, but not an intervention into the sovereignty of these smaller states. The Indian maritime strategy is based on the island doctrines. The Indian foreign policy towards Sri Lanka and the Maldives is evident in the humanitarian aid provided to the two nations. India has been fast and generous in its aid to the victims of natural disasters or the provision of developmental aid, and this has not only helped the two nations to know each other better but also ensured that it builds its reputation as a reliable neighbour. The growing Chinese influence in Sri Lanka and the Maldives poses a threat to India's strategic autonomy in South Asia. In order to guarantee national interests and dominance, India must further deepen its economic relations and offer an alternative to the Chinese debt, as well as enhance its strategic relations in the rapidly changing regional environment.

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