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THE GEO-POLITICS OF NORTH INDIAN OCEAN: INDIA'S POSSIBLE RETALIATIONS TO CHINESE AGGRESSION

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ABSTRACT

Over the last two decades, China and India have shown significant economic and political growth in the Indo-Pacific region. Despite the source of Covid-19, China has successfully recovered and boosting its production. Where India, USA and European countries are experiencing negative growth, China still have 3.6% growth rate. It is the best time for China to show it's hegemony in the Indo-Pacific region. It is reviving its export through the North Indian Ocean Maritime Route. During this Covid-19 pandemic, the boundary dispute between India and China has become worst after 1962. To establish itself as global superpower, China is creating geopolitical pressure on India. India can retaliate this Chinese aggression, obstructing North Indian Ocean Maritime Route. China's geostrategic interest in this region is mainly to protect its ship-liners. Sri Lanka's enticing geostrategic position is favourable for maritime surveillance and security. All most every Chinese ship has to pass the southern coastline of Sri Lanka during the course between Strait of Hormuz and Malacca. Thus, China has invested a lot to establish its strategic posts in Sri Lanka which directly strike Indian dominance in North Indian Ocean. This paper suggests a few counter mechanisms which India could adopt in responses to this Chinese aggression in the North Indian Ocean and Sri Lanka.

KEYWORDS: *China, Geopolitics, India, North Indian Maritime Route, Sri Lankan Ports.*

INTRODUCTION:

Oceans have great importance as the sources of resources, means of transport and strategic command. They provide the security and prosperity; even in the 21st century, with the emergence of an increasingly globalised world trading system (Geoffrey, 2013). Sea control is a strategic concept, where the main objective of a nation is to ensure the avenue of resources and global exposures. Actually, sea power is the ability to influence people's behaviour in support of national interests (Giok, 2014). Sea power has two objectives, the naval dimension and the maritime or commercial aspect seafaring (Mahan, 1918). Sea power provides enormous strategic grip where global economic integration accelerates (Tangredi, 2002). Like sea control, the complexity in foreign policy is translated to a single strategic concept; forward presence or deployment (Rexrode, 2004). The success of a forward strategy depends on the maritime capability and experiences to keep open the sea communications. Thus, the major sea powers are interested to control the strategic seaports in their proximity and across the prime maritime routes. In this context, interactive foreign policy and geopolitics play the key role.

The rise of the China and India and their competition has shifted the maritime pivot of the world towards the Asia-Pacific region. China is clearly a giant economic force and thus a national power on the world scene (Black, 2006). China is not only spreading its influence in the Asia Pacific region but also across the world. A stable, peaceful China in the Asia-Pacific is very essential for India. But China's faster economic growth has given it a voracious thirst for resources and markets to sell its goods across the world. This thirst is challenging the Indian dominance in the North Indian Ocean. Like other global powers, India is worried about China's huge defence spending and aggressive maritime policy. China's aggressive actions in north Indian Ocean is due to its economic and geo-political needs. China is experiencing the fastest growths in energy demand in the last two decades (Xu, 2007). In 2016, China has imported 51% of its crude oil from Arab peninsula and 19% from East African countries (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2017) through the Strait of Malacca. Moreover, China is the major investor in East Africa (Pilling, 2017). Thus China is very much interested to enhance its presence across the North Indian Ocean. Over the last twenty years, it has aggressively increased its activities in this region which includes diplomatic and economic engagements with the South Asian countries (Khurana, 2016). China is interested to control naval movement across the North Indian Ocean that is a matter of concern for global powers including India. India is the major player here. Recent Chinese aggression is a directly hit to Indian authority over this region. The Chinese 'String of Pearl Policy' also acts against India's interest. As a part of this policy, China is developing port facilities in Hambantota and Colombo in Sri Lanka (Srinivasan, 2017). India's apprehensions about the growing Chinese presence in the island country are well known. This paper is about the recent geopolitical conditions over North Indian Ocean and Sri Lanka in context of China's aggressive move and India's possible retaliation.

OBJECTIVES:

This paper deals with the following objectives:

- i. To study Chinese geopolitical interests on North Indian Ocean and Sri Lanka.
- ii. To study India's concern and retaliation to Chinese aggression in North Indian Ocean and Sri Lanka.

MATERIALS AND METHOD:

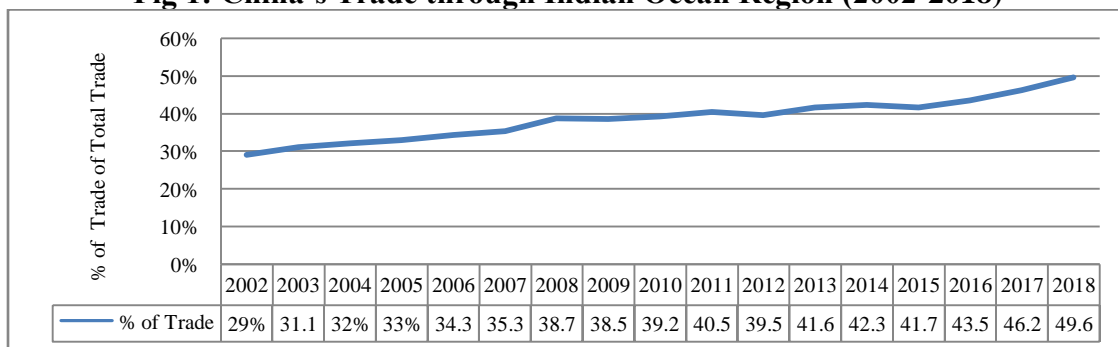
The most important research question of the present studies is how India responds on Chinese aggression in North Indian Ocean Region. Previous researchers have emphasised only in geopolitical tension between India and China in this region. But no clear indication has been noticed about India's possible retaliation to China. This paper is a serious attempt which specifically discusses about India's counter mechanism to Chinese geopolitical aggression in North Indian Ocean, specifically in Sri Lanka. This paper is based on secondary data sources. Intensive library work has been conducted in different libraries, news paper archives in this regard. Secondary data, information were collected from different research papers, news paper articles, edited volumes and blogs. Several books, newspaper reports, articles, research papers, government reports (discussed in introduction/literature review) were also collected and consulted. Collected data were analyzed with specific statistical and graphical methods. For the preparation of maps Google Earth Pro software was used.

DISCUSSIONS:

CHINA'S GEO-POLITICAL INTERESTS ON NORTH INDIAN OCEAN AND SRI LANKA:

China is one of biggest economies in the world and in last two decades it has shown significant growth. Present day, China's economy is mostly depended on export across the world. Despite the strike of Covid-19, China has successfully recovered and boosting its production. Where India, USA and European Union are experiencing negative growth, China still have 3.6% growth rate (Davidson and Kuo, 2020). It is the ideal time for the 'Red Giant' to show its supremacy in Indo-Pacific region. China's military power depends on its economy, more precisely its export. In post Covid-19 situation, it will expand it export to secure more investment in defense sector. South Asia, Arab peninsula and East Africa are the main markets for Chinese goods. China's geopolitical imperatives in the Indian Ocean are mostly related with economy which supports its political thirst. In recent years China is doing huge trade through Indian Ocean Maritime Route (Fig: 1). It has presence in South Asia, East Africa and Arab peninsula as the major trading partner. China is the key investor in East Africa. In recent times, Chinese companies invested a lot in East African states to access the hydrocarbon and other precious minerals (Pilling,2017). Gradually, Africa is becoming China's constant source of raw materials and dumping ground of finished goods. So, free maritime movement in North Indian Ocean is essential for China.

Fig 1: China's Trade through Indian Ocean Region (2002-2018)



Source: World Trade Statistical Review, 2019

China is not self-reliance in hydrocarbon production. China is the largest consumer and importer of crude oil. It imported 7.59 million barrels of crude oil/day in 2016, an increase of 13.6 percent over the previous year. It is predicted that China's consumption of crude oil will be 12 million barrels / day by in 2020, and in 2030 near about 80 percent of China's crude oil supply will be imported (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2017). In 2016, it produced only 199.7 million ton crude oil and consumed 578.7 million ton (BP Statistical Review of World Energy, 2017). This clearly indicates that China has imported 65.49% of crude oil from abroad. In 2016, it has imported 51% of its crude oil from Arab peninsula and 19% from East African countries (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2017) through the Strait of Malacca.

In this context, Indian Ocean is very important for China to access the Arab peninsula and African nations. In 2014, 'The Blue Book on Indian Ocean Region', the annual report on the Indian Ocean Region was published which mentioned that China's interest in this region is only commercial (Lin, 2015). However, the 'Maritime Silk Road' and 'String Pearl policy' are the serious representation of aggressive foreign policy of China. It is geo-strategic compulsion of China due to poor coast/area ratio and long distance of south and western part of it from major hydrocarbon sources (the Arab peninsula and Africa) region. The capital of Xinjiang province, Kashgarh is 4000 km away from Chinese port Guangzhou but Gwadar of Pakistan is only 2000 km away to access the Arabian Sea (Das, 2014). On the other side, the southern part of Tibet is near about 600 km away from the coastline of the Bay of Bengal where Chinese Pacific coast is more than 2000 km away (Khurana, 2016). The coast/area ratio of China is 1.55, very low (Table: 1) in consideration to other big players in global politics and well below of world average i.e. 7.80.

TABLE 1: COAST/AREA RATIO OF GLOBAL POWERS

Country	Length of Coast (Km)	Land Area (Km ²)	Coast/area Ratio (m/km ²) in TWF method
United Kingdom	12429	241,930	51.40
India	7516	2,973,193	2.29
China	14,500	9,326,410	1.55
South Korea	2413	100,210	24.1
France	4853	640427	7.58
Russia	37653	16,377,742	2.30
Australia	25,760	7,682,300	3.35
U.S.A	19,924	9,147,593	2.17
Japan	29,751	364,485	81.60

Source: CIA, World Fact Book, 2016

According to 'Defense White Paper, 2014' of China, port facilities are very urgent in Sri Lanka to ensure the strategic sea-liner communication in the north Indian Ocean (China's Military Strategy, 2014). So for the secure transportation of crude oil and goods, Chinese control over north Indian Ocean is very vital, overcoming the India-U.S.A nexus. Considering these facts and aiming to encircle India (String Pearl policy), China has been developing a series of port facilities across the Northern Indian Ocean region such as Gwadar in Pakistan, Kyaukpyu in Myanmar, Chittagong in Bangladesh and Hambantota in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka is located at the northern fringe of Indian Ocean, favourable for maritime surveillance and security. All most every

Chinese ship-liner has to pass the southern coastline of Sri Lanka during its journey between Strait of Hormuz and Malacca. In this regard, Sri Lanka could play a vital role in favour of the 'Red Giant'. Hambantota (6° 7' 10" N, 81° 6' 29" E) is located in the southern tip of Sri Lanka, blessed with natural harbour with deep sea facilities. Recently a deep sea port has been developed with the collaboration of China in 2016 and the port was handed over to China for next 99 years lease (Chazan, 2017). The total cost of the first phase of the project was 1.4 billion U.S Dollar and 85% of the funding was issued by Chinese Government (Chazan, 2017). The Chinese agencies have also shown interest in development of highway network and industrial zone in and around Hambantota. Not only that, China is modernizing the Colombo port. Under this agreement, China will get 88 hectares on a 99-year lease and another 20 hectares on a freehold in Colombo Port City Projects (Tortajada and Biswas, 2015). The activities of Colombo port are very much related to India. So, this project can directly hit the Indian interest. In addition to this, China proposed the Lankan authority to deploy a submarine and naval ship in Colombo port (Tortajada and Biswas, 2015). This was a massive tension in between India and Sri Lanka.

INDIA'S CONCERN ON CHINESE PRESENCE IN NORTH INDIAN OCEAN REGION AND SRI LANKA:

Historically India is the key player in North Indian Ocean Region due to its' proximity, vast coastline and political hegemony. But recent Chinese aggression is a direct hit to the Indian supremacy and interests over this region. Strategically it is very important for India to tighten up the maritime and naval security in this region for regional balance of power. The geopolitical environment of North Indian Ocean Region is becoming very dynamic and volatile due to Chinese presence. China's 'String of Pearl Policy' and 'One Belt One Road Initiative' are encircling India very fast. The Chinese investments and ongoing port development projects across South Asia is a part of the same mission which creates a geo-strategic challenge to India. Chinese presence in the coastline of Bangladesh, Pakistan or Myanmar is not so worried but its' aggressive presence in Sri Lankan territory is a great threat for India. The movement of Indian navy and commercial ship-liners would be under the strict surveillance of China. Even the maritime movement in between two coasts of India could be threatening as the large vessels cannot pass through the strait of Palk. Moreover, the supply of hydrocarbons from the Arab peninsula to the eastern coast of India could be cut-off during war situation. Majority of the merchant ships and oil tankers of Indian Ocean pass through the channel in between Maldives and Sri Lanka. China has also concretized its presence in the Maldives, replacing India for the same interest. For the past fifteen years, Beijing has strategically invested in the Maldives to enhance its presence in North Indian Ocean and accelerating the 'One Belt One Road Initiative'. China has purchased the unpopulated island, Feydhoo Finolhu, just 75 nautical miles away from India's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), to install radar facility (Ranade, 2018). Entire western and southern coast of India shall be under the surveillance of this Chinese radar.

The economy also enforces India to participate in port politics in North Indian Ocean Region including Sri Lanka. India was the major exporter to Sri Lanka, presently replaced by China. In 2016, Sri Lanka imported 4273.58 million US dollar from China against 3827.50 US dollar from India (International Trade Statistics of Sri Lanka, 2016). Before 2016, consistently India was the prime exporter. Still Sri Lanka largely depends on India for refine petroleum, cement, automobiles, machinery, garments and steel. India is still the third largest destination of Lankan

goods (551.21 million US dollar) where China received only 199.15 million US dollar of Lankan goods in 2016 (International Trade Statistics of Sri Lanka, 2016). So, overall India still is the major trading partner of Sri Lanka. So, Chinese presence in Sri Lankan port is making the condition more complex for Indian companies doing business in this island country.

INDIA'S RETALIATION TO CHINESE INITIATIVES IN NORTH INDIAN OCEAN REGION AND SRI LANKA:

Due to apprehensions about the Chinese presence in Sri Lanka, India has stepped up its strategic presence in Sri Lanka and other parts of Indian Ocean Region. India has great strategic advantages in this Ocean due to proximity and presence of military establishments in Andaman and Nicobar Island, close to Strait of Malacca. This strategic presence allows strong surveillance of maritime movements around this strait. India is also developing the port Chabahar in Iran, 375 km away from Strait of Hormuz (Das, 2014) for the same purpose. It is also developing strategic outpost in the south-western part of Indian Ocean, across the maritime route that carries oil from Africa to East Asia. In 2015, Indian Foreign Ministry had finalised the agreement with Seychelles and Mauritius to establish strategic presence respectively in Assumption Island and Agalega Island (Brewster, 2017). In these islands, India has deployed radar and airstrip for enhancing maritime surveillance.

In continuation to this, India is strengthening its presence in Sri Lanka. Since 2011, India has a presence in Kankesanthurai (9°49' 0" N, 80°2' 0" E), a northern Lankan port, very close to the southern tip of India. Indian government is also interested in controlling the Trincomalee (8°34' 38.8" N, 81°13' 42.5" E) port of eastern coast of Sri Lanka. This port has significant strategic importance. It is the key transit point of Indian sea-liners from the Indian Ocean towards its eastern coast. In April 2017, during the visit of the Lankan prime minister, India has declared that it would operate an oil storage facility and LNG plant in Trincomalee and modernize the port of Trincomalee with a joint partnership of Japan (Pararajasingham, 2017). Another big opportunity has arrived, when Sri Lanka indicated that it could hand over the Chinese built Rajapaksa International airport at Mattala, 40 km away from Hambantota, to India. The airport was built at a cost of 209 million US Dollar of which 190 million US Dollar loan came from Exim Bank of China (Shepard, 2017). Presently this airport is unable to generate any business due to the remote location. In August of 2017, India offered Lankan government to purchase 70% of stake hold of the said airport for 40 years lease. This attempt of India could be an answer to Chinese presence at Hambantota as it could monitor the Chinese activities at the southern coast of Sri Lanka.

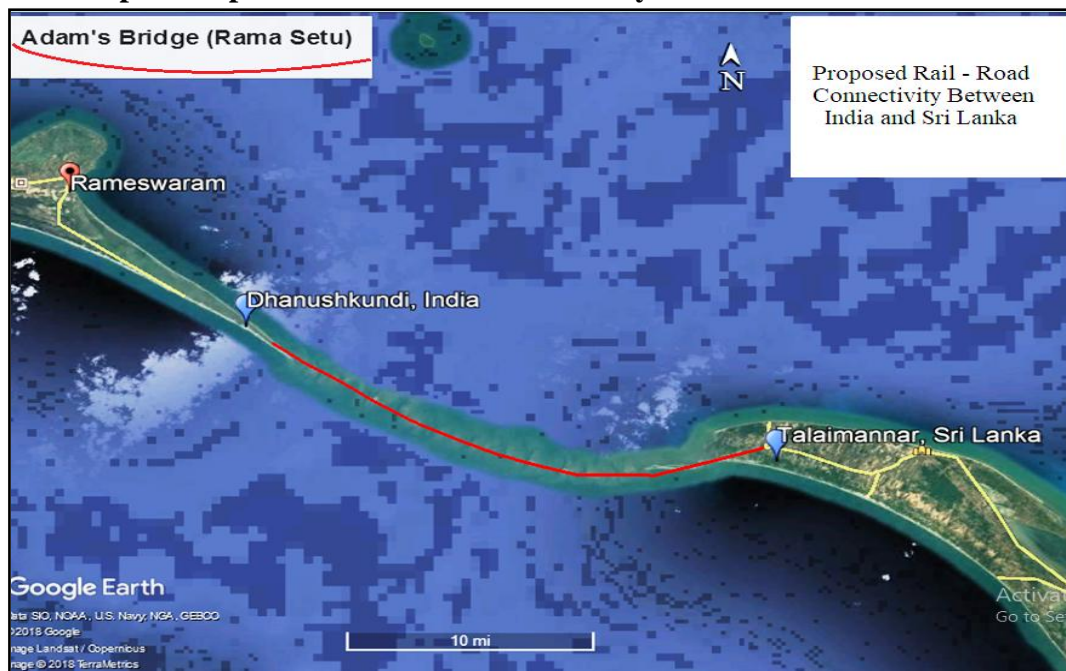
RECENT DEVELOPMENTS:

This geopolitical tug of war between two Asian Giants has created enormous opportunity for Sri Lanka to emerge as a promising economic centre with better sea and air connectivity. Its strategic location on maritime routes of Indian Ocean, allows it for a graceful deal with China and India. In the post-civil war situation, Sri Lanka has inclined towards China for its own interests and passively challenged the Indian hegemony in South Asia. During the rule of Mahindra Rajapaksa, Sri Lankan foreign policy was pro-Chinese. Both countries served each other interests over a decade. During the tenure of Ranil Wickremesinghe, the situation changed due to different facts. The high interest rate of Chinese loan has created a negative impact on Lankan people. For the Hambantota port project, Sri Lanka took 301 million US Dollar loan from China with an interest rate of 6.3%, while the interest rates on soft loans from the World Bank and Asian Development

Bank are only 0.25-3% (Roy Chaudhury, 2018). Whereas, India provides loan to its neighbouring countries as low as 1% interest rate or even less in special cases. Estimated national debt of Sri Lanka is 64.9 billion US Dollar of which 8 billion dollar to China as the debt trap (Roy Chaudhury, 2018). The local people are opposing the adjoining 15,000 acre Chinese Industrial zone near Hambantota and in January 2017, protesters clashed with the police at the proposed site (Aneez, 2017). The management of Hambantota port is under the direct control of China and Colombo port is gradually occupied in the same way. This is becoming the question of sovereignty of Sri Lanka. On the other hand, certain Sinhalese groups have apathy on India due to Tamil issue. They are not in favour to hand over the port Trincomalee to India. At present, Sri Lanka's attempt to balance India and China by playing against each other has proven effective. Sri Lanka is showing significant economic growth in the South Asian region despite Covid-19 pandemic and becoming a place of common interest for China and India.

CONCLUSION:

In post Covid-19 situation, India has to be more flexible and lenient in bilateral relationship with Sri Lanka. India and Sri Lanka both have century-old ethnic and cultural bondage. But this was hampered in last two and half decades due to India's support to Tamil community. The 26 years long civil war was ended in 2009. In post civil war situation, most of the western countries restricted bilateral relation and investments with Sri Lanka due to the violation of human rights. Even, India halted bilateral relations due to Tamil sentiment in domestic politics. In this critical stage, China stepped up the post-war reconstruction in Sri Lanka. From that time China is replacing India strategically and politically from Lankan soil. Sri Lanka is one of the major members and destinations of Chinese 'One Belt One Road Initiative'. Actually, China wants to transform Sri Lanka as a 'Satellite State' in its favour to challenge India's hegemony in north Indian Ocean Region. On the other hand, in spite of long civil war against Tamils, India continued assistance in infrastructural development and social amenities in Sri Lanka. But these attempts were not satisfactory from Sri Lankan point of view. So, after initial recompense India has started counter mechanism. Now, New Delhi's key focus is to resume the strategic and economic relationship with Sri Lanka. Both these country are the member of SAARC, BIMSTEC and signatories of the South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA). India is keen to use these platforms to enhance political and economic relations with Sri Lanka. Due to proximity and traditional linkage, India has opportunity to replace China from the island nation and regain its strategic supremacy in north Indian Ocean. This Ocean is the interior lines of India and exterior limit for China. India has some natural advantages; shorter distance from its own base and major hydrocarbon source (Arab peninsula) of the world, strong military establishments in Andaman Nicobar Island near the Strait of Malacca etc. In addition to this, the Government of India started a feasibility study of rail-road connectivity between India and Sri Lanka. This rail-road linkage will connect Rameswaram in India and Talaimannar of Sri Lanka through Adam's Bridge (Rama Setu) in the Palk Strait. The distance between Dhanushkundi in Rameswaram and Sri Lankan territory is only 23 km which could be joined through a bridge as most of the sandbanks are either dry or shallow. India is also engaged in modernisation of railway connectivity in Sri Lanka. This rail-road connectivity will allow India to reach Lankan soil much faster and it can strengthen its strategic presence there. On the other hand, Sri Lanka could use this land connectivity to join the South Asian transport network.

Map 1: Proposed Rail –Road Connectivity between Indian and Sri Lanka

Courtesy: Google Earth

Another advantage of India is that the human rights violation in Sri Lanka is becoming less in number and now Govt. of India has less pressure in domestic politics regarding Tamil issues. So, there is a good opportunity for India to get back its lost position in Sri Lanka. North Indian Ocean is one of the politically unstable regions of the world with the presence of fragile states, except India. China is utilizing this to anchor its strategic presence over this region. In this context, India must play an important role to maintain peace and stabilities in north Indian Ocean Region as a responsible regional power with the quad of U.S.A, Japan and Australia. This quad is also effective to overcome Chinese threat across Indian Ocean and maritime security.

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