

## The Importance of Sri Lanka for India in Balancing China

Pankaj Yadav\* & Prof. Suryabhan Prasad

\*Research scholar, Mahatma Gandhi Kashi Vidyapeeth

\*\*Research Supervisor

### ABSTRACT:

*The global identity and credibility of any nation are established through its strong, healthy, effective, and independent foreign policy. Today, as the first quarter of the 21st century passes and the era of Western dominance fades, the powers of the Eastern world have become significant. In such a scenario, competition between the two major civilizations of Asia, India and China is natural. It is equally important, however, that this competition does not lead to global disorder. Currently, the increasing recognition and appreciation of the efficiency, skill, and utility of India's foreign policy by the international community is a testament to India's healthy diplomacy. While India enjoys strong and harmonious relations with all its neighboring countries, including Sri Lanka, China is being viewed with suspicion on the global stage. India presently shares a very cooperative and warm relationship with Sri Lanka, which holds strategic importance for India. However, China, through its conspiratorial and dominance-driven foreign policy, continues to sour India-Sri Lanka relations.*

*Today, China is not just a challenge for India but for the world at large.*

**KEYWORDS:** Power balance, soft power, One Belt One Road, String of Pearls, debt-trap diplomacy, Buddhist Circuit, Kachchatheevu Island, Neighborhood First, debt policy, etc.

### OBJECTIVE:

This research paper uses analytical and evaluative research methodology to study the impact of China's foreign policy on the cordial relations between India and Sri Lanka. India and China are both major global players and rivals in international politics. India has now surpassed China in population, but in many other areas, it still lags behind. Nevertheless, India remains the second most powerful country in Asia. Besides being neighbors, India and China appear to be opposites in governance, culture, education, health, and religion. China, as a global power, needs allies like Sri Lanka to maintain its influence—nations that can be sacrificed when necessary. Since the NDA government came into power, India's foreign policy has witnessed new energy and enthusiasm. In addition to the current strong ties, India and Sri Lanka share a golden past of relations, which further strengthens their bond—whether it be reconstruction efforts or cooperation in overcoming economic crises. However, China is unable to tolerate this and is working to build an anti-India faction within Sri Lanka. Located at the crossroads of international trade and maritime routes, Sri Lanka is a place where India must enhance its credibility and get closer through partnerships and cooperation. Simultaneously, India must open new issues like Tibet against China and develop the Andaman and Nicobar Islands as an alternative to Sri Lanka.

### **TheNeedtoKeepChina Balanced**

No matter what the global political scenario may be, the importance of power balance will never diminish. This fact has become even more significant in the current global context. Today, India and China are the two major rivals in the Asian continent. China, on a global level, is challenging a superpower like the United States and simultaneously trying to encircle India. Currently, under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India's foreign policy is experiencing its strongest and most influential phase in global public opinion. To maintain this reputation, a key neighboring country like Sri Lanka is of utmost importance. Therefore, India must remain even more alert and strategic, countering China at every front, sustaining its global stature, and continuing to act with commitment to national interest.

China, which has emerged as an economic superpower, is striving to become the number one power in the world. With the world's largest and most powerful workforce, and a strong, well-equipped military, it poses a growing threat. China follows the "Five-Finger" strategy from the principle of Panchsheel, and its primary policy remains imperialism. It is a permanent member of the UN Security Council and is actively working to destabilize world peace and the dollar-based economy. Countries like Russia and even neighbors of China have started agreeing to conduct trade in currencies like the Yuan, ignoring border disputes. China is aggressively implementing policies like "trade traps" and "debt diplomacy," and several countries remain unaware or indifferent to this threat. Confronting China requires strong and united policies. Otherwise, China's rise will continue to block the path to global peace and economic development.

China has already occupied the Indian territory of Aksai Chin, which Pakistan has handed over as the Karakoram corridor. From Ladakh to Sikkim, China regularly attempts incursions along the buffer zone of the declared border. Annually, there are more than 100 instances of Chinese intrusions across the Indian border. China even claims that Arunachal Pradesh is not part of India but southern China. As part of its encirclement strategy, China has set up a reconnaissance base on Myanmar's Coco Islands, near the Andaman archipelago.

Similarly, it is trying to act as a benefactor to Bangladesh and Myanmar, harming India and its allies. It economically traps these developing nations and then manipulates them at will. Through its ambitious "String of Pearls" initiative, China is attempting to encircle both the U.S. and India. Its audacity has reached such heights that it has even ignored rulings of the International Court of Justice, and has seized the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea from Vietnam and the Philippines. We also occasionally witness tensions between China and Japan. Communism in Russia and China often complement each other, to mutual benefit, while third parties suffer losses. During the COVID era, China's arrogance, carelessness, cowardice, and insensitivity toward the world resulted in massive global losses. Data published by the United Nations clearly reflects this. In India alone, nearly 4 million people died from COVID.

Modern-day China is far ahead of Mao-era China. The "New China" initiated by Mao is now spreading a different kind of fear across the world. Its ideology, economy, social policies, cultural dominance, and worldview are increasingly disrupting global peace and order. The recent incident involving a Chinese "spy balloon" over the U.S., and China's cowardly denial, has left the world questioning how a global power can behave so irresponsibly. China is gradually becoming a global challenge, demanding coordinated and structured responses at both collective and individual

levels. All possible options to contain the Chinese dragon must be explored, and steps should be taken with caution. Europe, the United States, Japan, India, and ASEAN countries must unite in defending their mutual interests to counter this threat together. It would be foolish to fall into the trap of self-interest like France's President Macron. Because China will always view liberal values as untouchable and reject them as worthless.

### **The Importance of Sri Lanka for India**

For India, balancing China is essential. However, this should not come at the cost of compromising its dignity and character. Therefore, it is necessary for India to manage China through its relations with Sri Lanka. On this front, India's strong strategy is capable of thwarting China's imperialistic intentions. The current situation in Sri Lanka is very sensitive, but the public and leadership there are becoming increasingly aware of China's hidden motives. At the same time, they are once again adopting a positive attitude toward their most natural and traditional ally—India. Hence, India must demonstrate its large-heartedness by standing with Sri Lanka in its time of crisis. India must provide proof of its opposition to all forms of imperialism.

The relationship between India and Sri Lanka is not merely based on geographical proximity. These two nations share over 2,500 years of historical ties. From the ancient Ramayana era to the Buddhist period, their connection is evident in literature and culture. Both countries were under British colonialism and gained independence within a year of each other—India in 1947 and Sri Lanka in 1948. Since then, their cultural, political, economic, and trade relations have been of great significance. However, due to the Tamil-Sinhalese conflict that arose in the 1980s, relations became somewhat strained, with foreign powers playing a role and misunderstandings between the nations. After 2009, China's manipulative efforts deepened the divide further. Yet in recent times, the ties have begun to improve. Tamil relations have become a central element in shaping India's foreign policy.

India's foreign policy has always been based on peaceful coexistence and the Panchsheel principles laid down by Jawaharlal Nehru. On the other hand, D.S. Senanayake, who laid the foundation of Sri Lanka's foreign policy, viewed neighboring India as a potential threat to the island's security. An example of this fear is the 1947 defense agreement between Sri Lanka and Britain. Although D.S. Senanayake never publicly expressed this fear of India, his successor Prime Minister Kotelawala expressed it more firmly. According to Kotelawala, "If the British base is removed from the Sri Lankan island, our neighboring country may take over the island."

Tamils in Sri Lanka are a minority and have historical ties to India. With the introduction of the Citizenship Act in 1948, about one million Tamils were rendered stateless. In 1956, Sinhala was declared the sole official language of government, which led to the birth of the Tamil issue. The government deliberately discriminated against Tamils. Efforts were made to resolve the issue, including the 1953 Nehru-Kotelawala Agreement and the 1964 Shastri-Srimavo Agreement.

However, the worst phase of India-Sri Lanka relations came during Rajiv Gandhi's tenure when Tamils turned to violent measures to resist oppression. The Sri Lankan army brutally suppressed these actions. In 1987, the Rajiv Gandhi-Jayewardene Agreement was signed to find a resolution. India decided to send its peacekeeping forces to Sri Lanka. To implement this agreement, the Sri Lankan government passed the 13th Constitutional Amendment. However, it is noteworthy that this

amendment has not been practically implemented to this day. After the defeat of the LTTE in 2009, the civil war in Sri Lanka ended, though the Tamil issue still remains unresolved.

In this way, Sri Lanka's foreign policy has inherently developed a fear of India, whereas India's South Asian-centric foreign policy has aimed to shield theregion from great power rivalries. Meanwhile, Sri Lanka's foreign policy has mainly centered around India. Factors such as the Tamil issue, the Kachchatheevu Island dispute, the fishermen's issue, border security, smuggling, and the growing Chinese influence are the major causes of strained relations between India and Sri Lanka.

### **Sri Lanka's Position in Maintaining Balance**

Although Sri Lanka desires balanced relations with both India and China, the current circumstances are pushing it to lean towards India while trying to manage China. From 2005 to 2015, during Mahinda Rajapaksa's presidency, China played a significant role in Sri Lankan governance. After Rajapaksa's electoral defeat in 2015, under the leadership of Maithripala Sirisena (2015–2019), there was some improvement in India–Sri Lanka relations. However, the 2019 electoral victory of Gotabaya Rajapaksa brought China back to the center of Sri Lankan politics and increased its distance from New Delhi. Eventually, Gotabaya Rajapaksa resigned from the presidency in 2022 due to Sri Lanka's economic crisis, rising inflation, China's debt trap, and rampant corruption. After his resignation, Ranil Wickremesinghe took over as president, and in September 2024, Churara Kumara Dissanayake was elected president. Prime Minister Narendra Modi congratulated him and reiterated Sri Lanka's importance in India's "Neighbourhood First" and "Vision SAGAR" (Security and Growth for All in the Region) initiatives, expressing eagerness for multifaceted cooperation. Indian Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar also met the new president and, during a media briefing, announced the beginning of a strong and warm bilateral relationship.

Currently, Chinese interference has emerged as a major challenge in India–Sri Lanka relations. Over the past two decades, successive Sri Lankan governments have deepened ties with China. A major milestone was the 2005 joint declaration between the two countries on "sincere mutual support and a lasting friendship," which laid the foundation for their comprehensive cooperation. Sri Lanka also ensured its participation in China's proposed "One Belt One Road" (OBOR) initiative. China focused on developing strategic infrastructure projects in Sri Lanka, including the Hambantota Port, Mattala Airport, Colombo South Harbour expansion project, Katunayake-Colombo Expressway, Norocholai coal power plant, and the 661-room Shangri-La Hotel. These Chinese-backed projects pushed Sri Lanka into a debt trap. However, China is not solely responsible for this crisis—Sri Lanka's own ambitious and unproductive investments, as well as the implementation of populist political policies, also played a role.

To help Sri Lanka cope with the severe economic crisis that cost billions of dollars, India provided financial assistance amounting to \$3.8 billion in 2022. India also made efforts to help Sri Lanka overcome food and fuel shortages. In contrast, despite Sri Lanka appealing to its "close friend" China for help, China showed reluctance in waiving its loans. Instead, China offered new loans while avoiding debt restructuring, which is not a viable solution for Sri Lanka's already strained economy. Many South Asian governments supported Chinese initiatives and policies in an effort to reduce dependence on India. However, this ultimately proved detrimental to their economies, leading to negative trade balances with China, debt traps, and unsustainable interest obligations.



## CONCLUSION

If we pay attention to the above facts, it becomes evident that China's approach toward Sri Lanka is long-term and multidimensional, aimed at limiting India's influence in South Asia. Therefore, India must also take this fact into consideration and work collaboratively to develop Sri Lanka's geopolitical and strategic interests. Sri Lanka shares historical, cultural, linguistic, and ethnic similarities with India, which China does not. Hence, India should focus on strengthening cultural diplomacy and people-to-people ties. Through the Buddhist circuit and the Ramayana circuit, India can emphasize cultural unity with Sri Lanka. There are issues between India and Sri Lanka—such as the Tamil conflict, the Katchatheevu island dispute, and the fishermen issue—that have caused strains in their relationship. Both countries need to focus on peaceful and long-term resolutions to these disputes in order to establish regional stability. Sri Lanka is an important partner in India's "Neighbourhood First" policy and its "SAGAR" (Security and Growth for All in the Region) initiative in the Indian Ocean. Additionally, both countries are members of regional organizations like SAARC and BIMSTEC. The world has now witnessed the dire economic situation Sri Lanka is facing, a situation that has primarily resulted from China's imperialist exploitation and the struggle for dominance, leading to this crisis.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- i. [www.pmindia.gov.in/hi/news\\_updates](http://www.pmindia.gov.in/hi/news_updates)
- ii. [www.airuniversity.af.edu/DesktopModules/ArticleCS/Print.aspx?PortalId](http://www.airuniversity.af.edu/DesktopModules/ArticleCS/Print.aspx?PortalId)
- iii. [www.bbc.com/hindi/international-61500162.amp](http://www.bbc.com/hindi/international-61500162.amp)
- iv. [www.mea.gov.in/distinguished-lectures-detail-hi.htm?864](http://www.mea.gov.in/distinguished-lectures-detail-hi.htm?864)
- v. [www.icwa.in/show\\_content.php?lang=2&level=2&ls\\_id=3609&lid=2813](http://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=2&level=2&ls_id=3609&lid=2813)
- vi. [www.thehindu.com/news/international/watch-who-is-anura-kumara-dissanayake-the-new-president-of-sri-lanka/article68671891.ece](http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/watch-who-is-anura-kumara-dissanayake-the-new-president-of-sri-lanka/article68671891.ece)
- vii. <https://journal.sijss.com/index.php/home/article/view/936>
- viii. [www.ipcs.org](http://www.ipcs.org)
- ix. Devi, V. P.; Swatantra Bharat ki Videsh Neeti (Foreign Policy of Independent India), National Book Trust, New Delhi, 2014.
- x. Dixit, J. N.; Bhartiya Videsh Neeti (Indian Foreign Policy), Prabhat Prakashan, New Delhi, 2021.
- xi. Jaishankar, Subrahmanyam; Parivartansheel Vishva Mein Bharat Ki Rananeeti (India's Strategy in a Changing World), Translated by Deepak Naresh, Prabhat Prakashan, New Delhi, 2023.

- xii. Acharya, Dr. Dagardas Basu; Bharat Ka Samvidhan - Ek Parichay (The Constitution of India – An Introduction), Badhwa, Nagpur, 2005.
- xiii. Ganguly, Sumit; India's Foreign Policy (Retrospect and Prospect), Oxford India Paperbacks, 2011.
- xiv. Bajpai, Arunoday; India in Indian Ocean: Emerging Strategic Dynamics and Power Game, International Journal of Political Science, 2019(1), pp. 17–29.
- xv. Suman Siri Liyange & Anisha Kinra; Perspective of India-Sri Lanka Relations, Manak Publications Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 2011.