

**Analyzing the Maritime Affairs of India and Sri Lanka in the changing Indian Ocean
Region and the Indo Pacific**



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Introduction

The idea of ‘multipolarity’ or ‘multilateralism’ did not attract the America and its allies few years back from now. The United States of America have always wanted to be the most relevant on a global scale and create a unipolar system. From the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 to the Global Financial Crisis of 2008, the world seemed to experience a unipolar moment where USA without any dispute always managed to retain the top position. During this time-period the countries who spoke for the idea of multipolarity were Russia and China for fulfilling their individual aspirations and to possibly bring an end to the long drawn US dominance. But in 21st century the wheel has turned, the times are very uncertain and the *Indo-Pacific Region* is largely affected by this growing uncertainty. Maritime Affairs, security and associated foreign policy changes, new alliances have made it a very interesting arena for the practitioners of International Relations at large. In the current times multipolarity brings in confidence and hope for the myriads and countries including those that long-valued American leadership or were suppressed by Chinese domination.¹ The complex and many sided vastness of the Indo-Pacific provide space to discover their own power, forge new partnership and observe or deflect China's influence. Some scholars have termed this multipolarity in the Indo-Pacific as a stable approach to world politics and forging relationships, others argue that in the long run only bipolarity can bring a true balance of power to prevent potential aggression. As a result we cannot deny the emerging fact of multipolarity; there are ever-growing potential aspirations of the big powers like USA and China as they eye the Indo-Pacific region. Also cannot go unnoticed is the fact that the other middle powers like Japan, Australia, Malaysia, Indonesia, South Korea, Vietnam, the African countries, the Middle Eastern countries and to some extent the EU too, very much plan to establish their position in the region both in terms of maritime affairs and international relations.

But among all these power struggles, the rise and return of the Indo-Pacific, most importantly calls for a detailed study of the extent to which a regional player like India, which not only is one of the most powerful country of the region but also one that has had a historical role in the Indian Ocean Region and the Indo Pacific at large. Another island nation, often called as ‘The Lost Paradise’, located at the southern tip of India, has a major role to play in this changing Asia-

1. Rory Medcalf, *Contest for the Indo-Pacific: Why China Wont Map the Future*, (Carlton, Australia: La Trobe University Press in conjunction with Black Inc. 2020), 139.

Pacific. Sri Lanka, has quiet been a neutral partner to both US and China all this while, but with the growing multipolarity, the steps this buffer country takes are of utmost concern to the subjects of the region. Thus this paper deals with an analysis of the maritime affairs of India and Sri Lanka, how and what their approaches have been and what could possibly be their upcoming strategies. From port deals, to policy plans, from multilateral pacts to strengthening maritime security, this paper serves as a handbook for a post COVID, ever fluctuating Indo-Pacific region and the crucial role India and Sri Lanka plays, in the road ahead and beyond.

India's Maritime Affairs in the Indian Ocean Region and the Indo-Pacific: Pivot for India's Growth

Indian Ocean as a Region has a very important place in the evolution of the country of India. It is the base of global economic maritime activity in the 21st century. The Indian Ocean matters today perhaps more than ever. It not only stands out to be one of the major hubs for international trade (mostly energy), source of minerals and fishing, but it is also fast in nature with a densely populated geographic region which comprises of some of the world's fastest growing economies. Recently we have seen that there is a prominent resurgence of Asia. There is also a clear shift from the West to the East in trade which is inevitable, and which naturally turns the global economy towards Asia. But why the Indian Ocean Region does seem to be so important to India is firstly and most importantly because of the centrality of its location. India not only bridges the Indian Ocean to the Pacific in the East and the Mediterranean in the West, but it also can act as a watchman to the oil trades of the Eastern countries like that of China and Japan and can play a very instrumental role.

But with pros come cons too as we notice that the region is under constant threat of being undermined whether by the pirates, smugglers and terrorist organisations or by the naval competition between the states in this growing world of multipolarity rather than multilateralism. Looking at its geopolitical position and the population strength it is important for India to acquire and prepare for an Indo-Pacific Strategy which will not only meet the global priorities, but would also decide the future of Asia at large.

In the years 2019 -2020, we have seen that the whole political narrative around the world has quite become something which is equal to 'anti-China' post the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic which was first identified in Wuhan, China in December 2019. This basically pointed out the irresponsible mishandling of the novel Coronavirus by Beijing and the separation of flow of information about the disease to the rest of the world. Meanwhile the relationship between India and China, which now seems to be only deteriorating, came to a position of risk when the Galwan Valley incident in the Himalayan territory of Ladakh on 15 June 2020 amplified the 'anti-China' view and given it a Nationalist trend. Following this incident there were a lot of other things that were exercised by the Indian Government as a response to the Chinese behavior, like the banning of Chinese apps and goods, the Indian delegation often pointing out that countries should be in alliance with the bilateral policies and should respect the territorial integrity and sovereignty of other nations in several multilateral summits like that of the BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (hosted by Russia), of which the Chinese delegation was a part too. The relation of India and China at this point of time looks to be worse than before if not the worst. The Ministry of External Affairs for India headed by Dr. S Jaishankar has time and again said that India as a country can learn a lot from China in many of the occasions, but he also mentions that "it is only a multipolar Asia that can lead to a multipolar world". The minister also believes that India and China has to work together to make it truly an 'Asian Century'. Thus it is important for India to plan for a strategy based on its priorities; in and out of the waters.

Under the aegis of its Act East Policy, India has revamped and restructured its Asia ties and Indo-Pacific outreach. Indian initiatives like Sagarmala, Project Mausam, the Cotton Route, and Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) can provide collaborative opportunities to grow immensely on infrastructural, cultural fronts along with matters of trade and security.² All these key projects under its Maritime Affairs are principally based on a number of utmost priorities for India to retain its position as a major player in the changing Indo-Pacific and for attaining broader Asiatic ambitions. On assessing the current foreign policies, key projects, various initiatives and studying a handful number of interviews and lectures of India's current

2. Dr. Jagannath P. Panda, *India, the Blue Dot Network, and the "Quad Plus" Calculus (The Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs- JIPA, Vol.3 No.3)*, (Montgomery, Alabama, USA: Air University Press, 2020), 7-8.

Minister of External Affairs, S. Jaishankar, I came to know about the ‘three circle approach’ of India in the Indian Ocean and the larger Asia Pacific.³ The first circle or the core circle consists of a number of priorities, like – *developing the maritime infrastructure for the homeland, development of the Island Assets* (herein the Andaman and Nicobar Islands can be regarded as one of such assets, given its unique geographical positioning in the Indian Ocean, located immediate north to the island nations of Indonesia and Malaysia, and definitely the Strait of Malacca – which is one of the most important shipping waterways in the world from both an economic and a strategic perspective. It is the shortest shipping channel between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, linking major economies of West Asia to that of the East and South East Asia) and last but not the least – *building and promoting connectivity to the immediate neighbors* (the Neighborhood First Policy is the one India plans to go ahead with, this policy focuses on creating mutually beneficial, people-oriented, regional frameworks for stability and prosperity⁴).

The next circle advises to *look into the Maritime Space beyond India’s water and develop pacts and relations with its neighbors such Sri Lanka, Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles etc.* (recently we have seen in November 2020, India’s National Security Advisor Ajit Doval took part in the trilateral maritime dialogue in Colombo among India, Sri Lanka and the Maldives eyeing to counter terrorism & radicalism through effective intelligence cooperation. The partnership also assumes significance amid Beijing’s growing ambitions in the Indo-Pacific region including Indian Ocean Region⁵), *to rebuild connectivity and revive the Indian Ocean as a community* is the main aim of this circle.

Lastly the third or the outer circle, which has a ‘into the Pacific’ approach suggests in *converging the interests of the region to ensure core security while also promoting a stable periphery*. It further suggests *developing policy exchanges, co-operation mechanisms* (the

3. S. Jaishankar, *The India Way- Strategies of an Uncertain World*, (Noida, Uttar Pradesh, India: HarperCollins Publishers, 2020), 186-187.

4. Shri V. Muraleedharan, *Answer to the Question No.3692 by Shri Sanjay Singh ‘Neighbourhood First Policy’*, (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2019), accessed on 18th December, 2020.
<https://mea.gov.in/rajya-sabha.htm?dtl/31673/QUESTION+NO3692+NEIGHBOURHOOD+FIRST+POLICY>

5. Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, “*India, Sri Lanka and Maldives agree to bolster Maritime Security Cooperation*”, (Published by: The Economic Times, 2020) last updated on 28th November 2020, accessed on 18th December 2020,
<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/india-sri-lanka-and-maldives-agree-to-bolster-maritime-security-cooperation/articleshow/79464828.cms>

emergence of the QUAD+ coalition between India, USA, Japan and Australia) and *capability exercises* (the ‘Malabar Exercise’ between the QUAD+ nations which is a multilateral naval exercise that includes simulated war games and combat manoeuvres⁶)

Apart from India’s Act East Policy and the Neighborhood First Policy, the maritime affairs for the state demands for a Comprehensive Maritime Strategy which may focus on involving into various Port Projects (like the one that of Chabahar port with Iran, of which India is currently not a part of, but indulges in supply of various machines and parts), construction of inter-nation highways (India- Myanmar- Thailand Highway Project- project will boost trade and commerce in the ASEAN–India Free Trade Area, as well as with the rest of Southeast Asia.), to act as a smooth facilitator (this largely should be done to counter Chinese approach of the BRIs and the String of Pearls). Also keeping in mind the large amount of boundaries that India shares with various neighboring countries, trilateral and multilateral pacts/summits (ASEAN, SAARC, IORA, BIMSTEC, QUAD+ etc.) should be carefully attended and used for relationship building for the future. Hinterland economies should also be looked after carefully as it highly links to maritime trade these days.

With the growing problem of ‘uncertainty’ in alliance building and geopolitical crisis (like that of the South China Sea and the Indo-Pacific), the challenges to maritime security like that of terrorism, piracy, natural disasters, climate changes and the list would go on, India’s stances to these problems should be prominently presented to the world, intended to bring in stability into the waters. Moving from the policy to ‘performance’ (or the pragmatic work on field), India can look forward to get along the nations whose interests are aligned, which further can be well utilized in building naval exercises, strategic consultations or even infrastructural projects. Stability also cannot only be brought in, on the basis of capability. It requires laws, thus Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs) are critical for peace, stability, prosperity and development. The UNCLOS (The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea) which were adopted by the IORA (Indian Ocean Rim Association) should be reexamined and brought into use. The

6. Krishn Kaushik, Explained: The purpose, participants of the Malabar Navy Exercise, (Published by: The Indian Express, 2020), last updated on 3rd November 2020, accessed on 18th December 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/malabar-naval-exercise-india-6915447/>

growing piracy problems in the African corners of the Indian Ocean and the rest of the region is a matter of concern just like terrorism stands out to be a concern too, which should be dealt with utter deterrence and strong military approaches. Last but not the least 'climate change and its consequences' is one of the most important challenges for the countries of the Indo-Pacific, which have been leading to severe marine life depletion (like that of Corals being almost on the verge of extinction in the region around the Andaman and Nicobar Islands), which will be a crucial matter of concern for India. We all know how important India as a geopolitical entity and nation is in this Indo-Pacific region has been; a lot depends on India for the resurgence of Indo-Pacific as a community. India will be looking forward with more and more inclusivity in the region in future to rebuild a strong Indo-Pacific, and make sure this to be a contributor for the likely 'Asian Century' which maybe is not far from a little, which maybe is a mirage.

Sri Lanka's Maritime Affairs in the changing Asia Pacific

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) because of its curious geology and semi-encased character has prompted the control of extra-local forces or the regional powers in the region generally. Starting from the Portuguese times, different forces that have had access and control of different "chokepoint", also had the option to keep up its strength in the IOR. The geopolitics of IOR has been quite unique, in terms of the impact it has had as well as the mode of rivalry that has been witnessed within the region. In middle of this essential rivalry, an island country like Sri Lanka is of vital significance for all the major players in the Indian Ocean Region and has assumed an important role in the international relations of the locale. And as we all know, to retain its crucial position Sri Lanka as a country also has to keep up with the "trend" or the "change" that perhaps is taking place in the region. Thus the role of maritime affairs for this island nation has to be studied and analysed for future repercussions.

'Maritime Affairs', as we call it by the name of, used to largely be composed of the 'security' perspective of it with the emergence of the 20th century. Though we all know that historically oceans have been the gateway for several explorers, travellers, traders coming from different regions. As the world progressed, it also saw 'trade' as one of the most important factors for maritime affairs. So now the perspective about maritime affairs of the IOR is 'at large',

comprising of not only security, but trade, exchange of demography, culture, education etc. as well. Sri Lanka's location is very crucial in the Indian Ocean from a geostrategic perspective, numerous trade sea routes pass around Sri Lanka, In terms of shipping around two-third of world's oil and half of the world's container shipment passes from the south of Sri Lanka, hence Sri Lanka becomes important for the security of *Sea Lines of Communications* in the Indian Ocean. Apart from that, Sri Lanka hosts several *ports* which if developed to their full potential can be important *maritime hubs* in the Indian Ocean. Sri Lanka's geographic location and access to regional markets add immensely to its economic interests, and as the region is a hotbed for power projection of great powers, its location makes it an important player in the security and geopolitics of the Indian Ocean Region.⁷

Now before coming to the 'present', let us travel 4 years back from now, the year is 2016, Sri Lanka has called for the 'Hub of the Indian Ocean' concept to be adopted as the policy platform for Sri Lanka's maritime cooperation. This idea has become the ideal stage to address numerous strategy bottlenecks that Sri Lanka experiences, not only then but this concept remains to be very efficient even for today, be they related to *transportation, trade, foreign direct investment, security, or even issues of urbanisation and environmental degradation*. In the midst of the development of such international and financial elements in the IOR, by developing itself as a *transit point* in the trans-mainland ocean exchange interfacing Europe, the Middle East, East Africa, India and Southeast Asia, Sri Lanka will turn into a significant player in the Indian Ocean in the upcoming times. This can also drive in a lot of wealth to country in general and help revive its economy post the COVID 19 Pandemic period.

Some of the most successful sectors of the Sri Lankan economy are based on maritime trade especially port services relating to *container cargo shipment, trans-shipment* and related services. In addition the Colombo port is ranked 13th in the world according to the Drewry Port Connectivity Index (2017).⁸ Sri Lankan port development is also expanded to the 'Hambantota Port' deal with the China Merchants Ports Holdings Company Limited, about which we will talk

7. Kiran Chauhan, "Sri Lanka's Geopolitics in the Indian Ocean", (Published by: The Kootneeti, 2020), accessed on 21st December 2020, <https://thekootneeti.in/2020/09/02/sri-lankas-geopolitics-in-the-indian-ocean/>

8. Menik Wakkumbura, "Sri Lanka's maritime Affairs in the changing Indian Ocean", (Published by: LKI's Blog on International Relations,2018), accessed on 21st December 2020, <https://lki.lk/blog/sri-lankas-maritime-affairs-in-the-changing-indian-ocean/>

in a while. With the rapid shift in the *Global Power* that is very much evident in the current scenario. Various strategic developments in the maritime domain could be planned and executed by the Sri Lankan government to strengthen itself in the region. This definitely would not deny the question of whether the developments can help the South Asian States overcome the effects of alleged '*Big Brother*' syndrome in relation to India. At this point of time we also see India prudently is going ahead with its 'Neighbourhood First Policy' that has been carefully crafted to *minimise the strategic mistrust* among its neighbours. This is also the period, when the world witnesses the emergence of US interests in the Indian Ocean for which strategic alliance groups like that of the QUAD plus comprising of India, Japan, Australia and USA are coming up to put a greater surveillance in various chokepoints such as that of the Strait of Hormuz and the Strait of Malacca. These are mainly developed to counter the Chinese Belt and Road Initiatives (BRIs) associated strategically with its 'String of Pearls' approach of which Sri Lanka is a part too, and therefore acquires an instrumental position in this whole courses of actions.

Now let us look at what can be the possible interests in the region for Sri Lanka in the times ahead and beyond. An important foreign Policy goal for Sri Lanka is to make the state a regional maritime and logistic hub, Colombo can utilise its various ports for making it an important player in the maritime trade that passes from the busy east to west shipping route that's six to ten nautical miles south of Sri Lanka.⁹ It plans to be a trans-shipment center in the Indian Ocean Region. The *logistics* and *transport* sector are significant pieces of Sri Lanka's economy and creating them can add further add to the development of the nation. The important deal that was signed in Colombo port between Sri Lanka, India and Japan for the development of East Container Terminal (ECT) has seen a lot of opposition in the country and is still in limbo. But recently After Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa assumed office in November 2019, the resistance to the project grow louder, including from some opposition parties and port workers opposed to foreign involvement in "national assets".¹⁰ India very clearly has commercial and

9. Kiran Chauhan, "*Sri Lanka's Geopolitics in the Indian Ocean*", (Published by: The Kootneeti, 2020), accessed on 21st December 2020, <https://thekootneeti.in/2020/09/02/sri-lankas-geopolitics-in-the-indian-ocean/>

10. Meera Srinivasan, "No final decision on East Container Terminal taken yet, says Sri Lanka", (Published by: The Hindu-Business Line, Colombo,2020), accessed on 21st December 2020, <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/economy/logistics/no-final-decision-on-east-container-terminal-taken-yet-says-sri-lanka/article33077687.ece#>

strategic motives proceeding with the deal. Now if we want to magnify and try to break down the ‘core’ of the motive, it is very clear that the ECT adjoins the Colombo International Container Terminal (CITC) and the Sri Lanka Ports Authority’s (SLPA) joint venture with China Merchants Port Holding Company Limited- ‘the Hambantota Port Deal’ creates doubt in the mind of New Delhi and pose a Chinese threat to it. Thus the New Delhi wants to develop even greater ties with Colombo, as we also saw the recent statement by Sri Lanka’s Foreign Secretary Jayanath Colabage, where he says that Colombo will follow a neutral foreign policy but with ‘India First’ approach in strategic and security matters, suggest a tilt towards India. At the same time he has termed the Hambantota Port deal with the Chinese agency as a mistake for the country.¹¹ Academicians and scholars have also pointed out that cases like the Hambantota can push the country in a “*debt trap*”. The other house assessment of the nation completely disregards this claim and terms it as an “assumed myth”. They say that it is incorrect to claim that China acquired Hambantota port because Sri Lanka failed to pay off the debt obtained to construct the port. The often quoted “*port deal*” was actually a lease agreement clearly separate from the loans obtained for the purpose of constructing the port and the money obtained from the lease was used to strengthen the foreign reserves of the country, not to repay China.¹² So the 99 years port deal still lacks clarification which only time can bring to the table, while it is needless to say that Sri Lanka as a nation needs to deeply assess, analyse and find out ways for the developmental plans and make the right choices at the right time.

If we try and note down, what are the probable challenges in maritime affairs for Sri Lanka, and what could possibly be the ones? The list would be longer than expected. In such a time of fluctuating power shift, the growing China, the consistent USA and an ambitious India, Sri Lanka needs to find a midway in its foreign policies, depend less on the Western powers and strengthen its external sovereignty. The impact that terrorism sponsored by the LTTE (or The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) have had on the Sri Lankan population did not go unnoticed.

11. Times of India, “Will have India First Policy, China port deal a mistake: Sri Lanka”, (Published by Times of India, 2020), last updated on 26th August 2020, accessed on 21st December 2020,

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/south-asia/will-have-india-first-policy-china-port-deal-a-mistake-lanka/articleshow/77754433.cms>

12. Umesh Moramudali, “The Hambantota Port Deal: Myths and Realities”, (Published by: The Diplomat, 2020), accessed on 21st December 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/01/the-hambantota-port-deal-myths-and-realities/>

The area also faces challenges of illegal poaching to its waters. Securities reports reveal that smuggling activities, drug trafficking and human trafficking are carried out across the maritime boundaries between India and Sri Lanka. According to media reports fishermen and some who pose as fishermen from across the Palk Strait were not only engaged in poaching but also in drug trafficking, thereby turning the Northern region into a hub for drugs.¹³ During the LTTE period, the country also saw an upsurge in the emergence of other terrorist bodies. Also in the recent 2019 the world witnessed the barbaric Easter bombing in Sri Lanka, because of which still the affected citizens are trying to recover from. Other than these, deforestation stands as an important environmental challenge for the country. The COVID-19 Pandemic has created a global impact and Sri Lanka has faced a setback in its maritime trade just like the rest of the world. The initial impact of the pandemic was a substantial fall in international trade, owing to demand and supply shocks. Being a key trading hub in the Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka experienced a fall in cargo volumes. The magnitude of the shock as a result of dampened demand, as Sri Lanka's key trading partners around the world, imposed strict curfews and lockdowns. As well as a contraction in supply as local industries scaled back production due to import controls and lack of raw materials. More recently, however, there are signs of a modest up-turn in Sri Lanka's maritime trade. Moving forward, Sri Lanka should prioritise policy measures to support recovery in maritime trade, projects related to greater digitisation of port operations, promoting automation, and cutting of red tape pertaining to international trade should be implemented.¹⁴

Now honestly there are a number of limitations for Sri Lanka to respond to- the Pandemic and other challenges that it faces. Apart from these, ensuring maritime security and coming up with policy responses can be a very tricky subject in the years to come. But it should definitely stratify its approach in the form of *global, national and industrial level* and move ahead with its plans. At the global level there should be quite diplomacy and corporation that can help address the business tensions and the rising protectionism the maritime crimes and the geopolitical risks.

13. Osantha Nayanapriya Thalpapwila, "Maritime Issues and Security Implications for Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean Region", (Published by: Research Gate,2020), accessed on 21st December 2020, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/344096256_MARITIME_ISSUES_AND_SECURITY_IMPLICATIONS_FOR_SRI_LANKA_IN_THE_INDIAN_OCEAN_REGION

14. Ganeshan Wignaraja and Pabasara Kannangara, "A Coordinated Response Will Aid Global and Sri Lankan Maritime Post-COVID Recovery", (Published by: : LKI's Blog on International Relations, 2020), accessed on 21st December 2020, <https://lki.lk/blog/a-coordinated-response-will-aid-global-and-sri-lankan-maritime-post-covid-recovery/>

Only coordination can tackle the problems of this changing Indian Ocean Region and the multidimensional Indo-Pacific region.

Conclusion

For managing the Indo-Pacific affairs and associated activities, we have already seen that India keenly focuses on ‘connectivity’ as one of its main instruments, along with the ‘Neighbourhood First Policy’. As Delhi’s difficulties with Beijing continue to rise, only relying upon the United States would not be enough for a stable future ahead. Collaborating and coordinating with the European countries, herein can serve as a key strategy for achieving greater successes. Recently we see three such developments that underline India’s changing strategic perceptions of Europe. One is India’s support for France’s membership of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). Second, India’s backing for a larger European role in the Indo-Pacific. Delhi has also welcomed the interests of Germany and Netherlands in building a new geopolitical architecture in the Indo-Pacific. Third, security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific is also emerging as an important theme in the plans to work out a decade-long road map to transform the partnership between Delhi and London, which is in the throes of separating from Europe and defining a new international role for itself.¹⁵

As it is, China’s increasing presence in the Indian Ocean is causing disquiet in India’s security establishment, where policy planners and maritime observers believe Chinese maritime activities are diminishing India’s strategic leverage in the littorals. The People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is expanding engagement with regional navies and that has served to heighten Indian anxiety, with growing worries that China might be attempting to position itself as a stakeholder and security provider in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). So wooing Europe and anchoring friendship with countries like France, England etc. will only help India to strengthen its position for a longer term in the Indo-Pacific region. Various Chinese developments such as the one in the Djibouti, a country in the East African region, where China has built a military base for monitoring the maritime activities happening across the Strait of Hormuz, heighten the concerns

15. C Raja Mohan, “India’s New Europolitik”, (published by: The Indian Express, 2020), last updated on 22nd December 2020, accessed on 1st January 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/delhi-now-sees-european-powers-as-natural-partners-in-constructing-a-durable-balance-of-power-in-indo-pacific-7114110/>

for India in this region. India's counter-mechanism could be a practice of controlling China's oil shipments through the Strait of Malacca which has to pass by the Ten Degree Channel between Andaman and Nicobar Islands. India's naval planners surmise that Indian Navy could stifle the flow of Chinese traffic, while aggressively patrolling the Indian Ocean chokepoints, keeping an eye on Chinese naval reinforcements. To maintain a high tempo of operations in the Eastern Indian Ocean, the Indian navy will need to increase the frequency of bilateral and trilateral operational exercises with Quad partners and regional maritime forces.¹⁶

So to sum up, India's post COVID approach to the Indo-Pacific will definitely be determined by an ocean of uncertainties, countering China, keeping up with the existing friendships, resolving wider conflicts of the littoral and a lot more. As India's External Affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar writes in his book *'The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World'*, he quiet well sums up India's viewpoint, and foreign policy goals in this age of disruption which he says would be depending on making new partnerships, keeping a great goodwill, and extend more influence to its subjects.

For Colombo's unique geographical location in the new Maritime Silk Road amidst the Persian Gulf and Strait of Malacca, brings both opportunities and challenges for the island nation. With a rising and assertive China and the rise of new cold war, Indian Ocean is bound to become an important arena of power projection, as numerous powers attempt to increase their influence in the Indian Ocean Region, as a result to which Sri Lanka is going to become crucial to their Geostrategic calculations.¹⁷ Colombo needs to utilize this occasion to care for its inclinations and improve its security in the region. But it also has to keep in mind various security challenges and challenges in general that it would have to face in this fluctuating scenario. A 'Post COVID World' will definitely have implications on the island nation too, like it would be having effects in the surrounding regions. Responding to this, Sri Lanka should structure its policy formations, and well align it with the challenges of the Indo-Pacific. In terms of maritime trade too we have seen the juggernaut impact that the pandemic has had all over the world, adversely impacted

16. Abhijit Singh, *India's China Challenge in the Indian Ocean and Beyond*, (Published by: Council for Strategic and Defence Research, Special Issue No.1, Policy Paper 2, 2020).

17. Kiran Chauhan, *"Sri Lanka's Geopolitics in the Indian Ocean"*, (Published by: The Kootneeti, 2020), accessed on 4th January 2021, <https://thekootneeti.in/2020/09/02/sri-lankas-geopolitics-in-the-indian-ocean/>

global maritime trade and the world economy. Global container traffic is estimated to contract in 2020, as world trade volumes world GDP is likely to decline severely. Looking at the GFC experience and other indicators points to a recovery in global container traffic in 2021. Whether this is sustained or not depends on the influence of various risks that cloud the global maritime outlook. A coordinated response at global, national, and industry levels is needed to set the foundations for a recovery in global maritime trade. Sri Lanka, being a strategic trading nation, should also push forth key policy measures that will not only aid the recovery process but also address the growing maritime competition in the South Asian region.¹⁸ To properly tackle maritime security threats, Sri Lanka needs to first take stock of its resources. For a country that struggles to pay external debt, reducing its fiscal deficit while also maintaining a sizeable armed force and modernizing it, is going to be a serious challenge. Thus, optimal use of its available resources to mitigate the most urgent threats such as IUU fishing and drugs trafficking while also investing in the technology of the future such as maritime drones is a good strategy. However, due to its debt issues and lack of a defense industrial base, foreign assistance may always be on the cards for Sri Lanka. Colombo must be careful in its dealings with both regional and extra-regional powers that provide it military assistance, keeping in mind the possible agendas and interests of these countries and avoiding any fallout of conflict on or near its shores.¹⁹

It is very clear from the analysis that we have made earlier about ‘the Pearl of the Indian Ocean’ or Sri Lanka, that with its India First Policy, keeping up both with the US and China, Sri Lanka as a nation is going to play a pivotal role in managing and affecting the Indo-Pacific affairs at large. Whether it is the US trying to become relevant in the Indo-Pacific or China trying to expand its regional powers, Sri Lanka should scrutinize each and every move taking place in the region, form allies and very carefully go ahead in this uncertain ‘Asia-Pacific’.

18. Ganeshan Wignaraja and Pabasara Kannangara, “A Coordinated Response Will Aid Global and Sri Lankan Maritime Post-COVID Recovery”, (Published by: : LKI’s Blog on International Relations, 2020), accessed on 4th January 2021, <https://lki.lk/blog/a-coordinated-response-will-aid-global-and-sri-lankan-maritime-post-covid-recovery/>

19. Natasha Fernando, “Sri Lanka’s Maritime Security Dilemma”, (Published by: South Asian Voices, 2019), accessed on 4th January 2021, <https://southasianvoices.org/sri-lanka-maritime-security-dilemma/>