

# Geo-strategic importance of Hambantota Port in the Indian Ocean: A Geo-political Analysis

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## ABSTRACT

The paper examines the impact of Hambantota port of Sri-Lanka on the geo-political dynamics in the Indian Ocean. Emerging powers like India and China want to control this port to expand their influence in the Indian Ocean. China is among the very few nations in the world which has used geo-politics for its geo-strategic and commercial advantage. It has established a dynamic relationship with many Afro-Asian countries to achieve its aim to become the subsequent superpower. These diplomatic steps precipitating from trade and geo-political ambitions, many a times claimed as a diplomatic and trade inevitability by China, allows it to bargain for the significant infrastructure projects in other countries to sustain its economic growth, and to spread its sphere of influence by investment agreements with the Afro-Asian countries. This aggressive policy of China devoided the competing and neighbouring nations strategic depth in the Indian ocean and African continent. China's current relationship with the world has significantly changed from what it was in the early 1960s, when its boundaries were bordered by its adverse countries, the friends with either the former Soviet Union or United States of America. It was after the India-China 1962 war and the subsequent Indo-Soviet strategic agreement, China chalked out a strategy to contain its potential adversaries through geo-political containments. India on the other hand too, as an emerging nation is trying to reclaim its historic influence in the Indian Ocean. Also, it is converting its brown water navy into a blue water one to protect its economic and security interests.

**Keywords:** Port, Geopolitics, Indian Ocean

## I. INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka has historical ties with India, the country even being referred as Lankapura in India's mythological texts. The two countries gained freedom almost at the same time from the colonial rule. The later Sri Lankan Civil War and the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment brought the two countries closer but also created suspicion between them.

The Hambantota Sea Port of Sri Lanka is very important according to military and civil importance

for Sri Lanka, and also the development of this sea port may have geo-economic impact on India and the Indian Ocean. Sea port of Hambantota is planned to develop as a service and industrial port. Hambantota is one of the lowest per capita income regions in Sri Lanka. Thus, the construction of the port will be an important catalyst for a major economic development in Sri Lanka and further it will reduce the prevailing unemployment percentage in the Hambantota region. This port is in the Hambantota District, Southern Regions of Sri Lanka, where the former president of Sri Lanka M. Rajapaksha was elected.

In view of the deeper berth and location advantages at Hambantota, it may be possible to attract most of the port related industries here. Since the maximum draft at Colombo is about 10 minutes for general cargo vessels, manufactures may invest in Hambantota to get the advantage on economies of scale.

Sea-ports are backbone of trade; and play a key role in economic development between India and Sri Lanka, but China got a big chance through developing Hambantota as a sea port.

### **Background of study:**

Since ancient times ports have played an important role in the Indian Ocean, connecting the Indian Sub-continent to the other continents through sea lanes. Many kingdoms of the Sub-continent with coast-lands had well equipped ports which developed as thriving trade centers. Later, the process of colonization of the sub-continent was possible mainly through ports.

Since the Second World War, a new geopolitical order is shaping up in the Indian Ocean Region. Through the decolonization process that began on the shore of the Indian Ocean as early as 1947-48 with the independence of India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and other countries, the people of the region have regained political control over their respective territories. In the 1960s, the old colonial order was definitively replaced by a new order which we suggest to call an 'Indian Oceanic Order'.

The Indian Oceanic Region, at the end of the Cold War founded expression in a much greater autonomy for States in regards to their International relations, allowing to develop ties with all neighbours as well as with other States. So countries like Sri-Lanka could develop ports like Colombo and Hambantota (now called Magmapura Rajapaksa Port) with the help of other countries in lieu of strengthening bilateral relations. The necessity of other countries can turn

into opportunity for these countries in increasing their geopolitical importance.

Sea Ports are the back bone of world trade, and play a key role in the inward and outward movements of goods. Countries who build good sea ports with excellent infrastructure become competitive manufacturing hubs. So it will be important to see how the present and future world geopolitics will be influenced by this geostrategic region, and the role the sea ports will play in it. So far there has been no specific study done on this area where geostrategic importance of ports have been highlighted.

The Indian Ocean has been of great strategic importance for India. The "land locked" nature of the Indian Ocean has given India a commanding position. From the eastern coast of Africa and the shores of the Persian Gulf to the Strait of Malacca, no other country rivals India's dominant location in the Indian Ocean. The strategic importance of this Ocean is further enhanced by the fact that it is accessible from the west and the east through narrow straits only. The Red Sea and the Persian Gulf are the narrow outlets in the west while in the east; there are the Strait of Malacca and the Timor and Arafura Sea.

The Indian Ocean has limited outlets. Before the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, the only contact of littoral states of the Indian Ocean with the western Countries was via Cape Hope by circumnavigating the whole continent of Africa. On the eastern side hence are two outlets, one through islands of Indonesia and second is the South Australia. Indian Ocean can be choked any time by controlling these outlets. Since the Indian Ocean and the countries surrounding it are very rich in natural resources, such a possibility has considerably enhanced the geopolitical strategy of this Ocean.

In spite of above mentioned geopolitical limitations, the Indian Ocean has never been a barrier between the countries. On the other hand it has served as a

linkage between the countries lying on its coasts and even further beyond. It has bridges the gap between east and west. It is encircled by 46 countries , 27 littoral including Australia, 7 islands countries and 12 landlocked countries as recognized by the United Nations.

India and Sri Lanka are separated from each other by a narrow and shallow sea called Palk Strait. Dhanush Kodi on the Tamil Nadu Coast in India is only 32 k.m. away from Talaimannar in Jaffna Peninsula in Sri Lanka. These two points are joined by a group of islands forming Adam's Bridge. The northern and north eastern parts of the islands have large number of Tamils who migrated from Tami Nadu to that country.

The maritime boundary between India and Sri Lanka passes through Palk Strait, touching Dhanushkodi. This boundary has remained peaceful barring a few minor clashes between the fishermen of the two countries over the fishing rights. Some bitterness was created over the ownership of kachchitevu Island (area 1.92 s. k. m. from the Tamil Nadu Coast). The problem was resolved with the demarcation of India and Sri Lanka boundary line. This Island was given to Sri Lanka as a result of agreement 1974. The maritime boundary between India and Sri Lank become lively in 1980's with insurgents demanding a separate homeland for Sri Lankan Tamils within the Island.

## INFRASTRUCTURE ASPECTS OF PORT OF HAMBANTOTA

**Table 1.** Main port parameters (Phase II )

1	Design Vessel	100,000 DWT
2	Approach Channel width	21 OM
3	Eastern Break Water	12 M
4	Western Break Water	958 m
5	Turning Circle	600 m
6	Quay Length (Genre Cargo )	600 m
7	Service Quarry	105 m

8	Oil Quarry	610 m/ -17m depth
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The Phase-I officially commenced on 15<sup>th</sup> January 2008 and project is successfully completed. Total construction cost of the project is US \$ 501 million and jointly funded by the Ex-Im bank of the peoples Republic of China and Sri Lanka Ports Authority.

**Table 2**

1	Design Vessel	100,000 DWT
2	Main Container Berth	838.5 M/ -17 M
3	Feeder Container terminal	460 m/ -12 m
4	Multipurpose Berth	838.5 M/ -17
5	Transition Berth	208 M
6	New Oil Terminal	300 M
7	Harbor Basin	600 M / -17
8	Yard Area (to be completed )	65 Ha.

The phase II was officially commenced on 15<sup>th</sup> November 2012 and project is completed.

### Banking Facility and Tank Farm project

The Banking facility and tank farm at Hambantota has been constructed approximately 1.2 km away from the water front and is connected to the Oil terminal through a pipe line. This facility consist more than 14 tanks with a total storage capacity of 80,000 m<sup>3</sup> fuel and individual, storage capacity of 51,000 m<sup>3</sup> for banker fuel; 23,000 m<sup>3</sup> for aviation fuel and 6000 m<sup>3</sup> for LPG. Apart storing the tank farm comprises of oil blending facility, fuel testing facility, firefighting equipments, truck loading facility etc. Both loading terminals are fitted with flow meters for each product to ensure accuracy of measurement. The project was completed and bunking operations commenced on June 2014.

### Present Status:

In order to expand bunker business it has been decided to lease out the facility to an International

bunking service provider. In this regard, calling for expressions of intervals will be carried out in the near future.

The port of Hambantota have approximately 800 hectare ( 8  $km^2$ ) of ample lands. An Industrial zone, is the one of the biggest port related Industrial zone in the south Asian region. The port of Hambantota is basically planned to operate as a Green port as well.

Sri Lanka on 9<sup>th</sup> December 2017 formally handed over the strategic southern port to China on a 99-year lease.

## II. METHODS AND MATERIAL [ Page Layout ]

The following methodology will be used to analyse Geo-strategic importance of Hambantota port in the Indian Ocean.

Analyzing the long term strategic importance of Hambantota port, the data related to export and import, the connected routes, the frequency of transportation, total input and output of the port, cargo handled in a year, number of vessels visits in a year, service rendered as a port of call etc. will be collected.

The study will also analyze the socio-political impact of the port.

### OBJECTS OF STUDY

To study India's stake in the Indian Ocean and the importance of Hambantota port according to Indian perspective.

#### 1.General Study of Importance of Ports in World Geopolitics:

World Geopolitics has become very intense in recent years and Geo-strategic ports have become immensely important to control maritime trade, exploitation of ocean resources and for naval dominance. This is also true in the Indian Ocean where emerging powers like India and China are in race for a stronger foot hold.

The Indian Ocean has great strategic importance for India. The "Land Locked" nature of the Indian Ocean has given India a commanding position from the Eastern Coast of Africa and the shores of the Persian Gulf to the Strait of Malacca. No other country rivals India's dominant location in the Indian Ocean. But in real sense the big world powers are expanding their strategic weapons in the Indian Ocean for their world interest and it is a challenge for India. How finely it is tackled by India, is an important study factor of this thesis. So the study of development of Hambantota in the Indian Ocean is a part of this view.

#### 2.Study of Hambantota Sea-port and to predict its geo-political ramification:

When we see the geomorphological characters of Southern India and Sri Lanka, the Hambantota Sea-port of Sri Lanka is very important according to military and civil importance for Sri Lanka. Also, the development of this Sea-port may have geo-political impact on India and the Indian Ocean. Sea-port of Hambantota is planned to develop as a service and industrial port. Hambantota is one of the lower per capita income regions in Sri Lanka. Thus, the construction of a port in Hambantota will be an important catalyst for a major economic development in Sri Lanka and also it will reduce the prevailing unemployment percentage in the Hambantota region. In view of the deeper berth and location advantages at Hambantota, it may be possible to attract most of the port related industries. Since the maximum draft at Colombo is about 10 mile for general cargo vessels, manufacture may invest economy of scale.

So the relation of Kochi Sea-port of India and one of developing a sea-port in Tamil Nadu near Kanyakumari in India and the Colombo and Hambantota sea-port are very important backbone of trade, and play a key role in economic development between India and Sri Lanka. But China got a big opportunity to develop Hambantota as a sea-port. The involvement of Chinese companies in the

development of Hambantota port have been claimed by some analysts that it is part of China's "String of Pearls strategy". Other analysts have argued that, it would not be in Sri Lanka interests to allow the China's navy's access to the port and in any event the exposed nature of the port would make it of dubious value to China in time of conflict.

#### **ATTITUDE OF THIS RESOURCE STUDY**

Here attitude means a complete mental state involving benefits, values and dispositions to act in a certain ways.

In this resource study the conceptual basis of geopolitics in its embryonic form can be traced back to a handful of pioneering works of Alfred Thayer Mahan, Friedrich Ratzel, Halford Mackinder, James Fairgrieve and Rudolf Kjllén. Subsequently, Nicholas Spykman and Alexander P. de Seversky also contributed their thoughts to both Mahan and Mackinder and advanced what seemed to be contrary views on the relative importance of sea power and power for global dominance. In his perspective on classical mercantilism and the clash of nations competing for maritime trade, Mahan advocated sea power as the path to national greatness. He was hopeful of the recurrence of the phenomenon in the twentieth century.

When we see the physical geographical area of Southern India and Sri Lanka it can be seen that Hambantota Sea Port of Sri Lanka is very important according to military and civil importance of Sri Lanka. Sea Port of Hambantota is planned to develop as a service and industrial port.

On the other hand, construction of the port in a dense vegetative region have raised environmental concerns. There was blasting of rocks on the continental shelf to deepen the originally shallow shelf for passage of large vessels. This has caused huge damage to the ecosystem. Many environmental NGO's therefore have opposed and demonstrated against the project. Since the construction of ports, local fishermen are prohibited

to catch fish here. It has created problems for their traditional livelihood.

#### **International aspect and Geo-strategic importance:**

Thayer Mahan had stated about a century ago that whoever controlled the Indian Ocean would dominate Asia that this Ocean was the key to seven seas in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For that is why the all world power like U.S.A., Russia, China and others are strengthening their sea powers. In the recent visit of U.S. President Barak Obama to India, on the event of Republic day on 26<sup>th</sup> day of January 2015 as a chief guest, both leaders, Indian Prime Minister Modi and Obama declared the strategy of the countries having access to the Indian Ocean. Country that dominates the sea has a decisive advantage over its rivals because:

- ✓ It can control the maritime trade which is assuming added importance.
- ✓ It can facilitate easy transportation of its troops to fight in any littoral area and thus dominate it.
- ✓ It can use its Navy for blockade and for short and long bombardment and for landing troops and material at a given point and time. If pressed the enemy can even be retreated to the high seas.

So here we can see that, because of the competition with U.S.A. and India, China is planning to increase its influence in the Indian Ocean as a sea power. If India desires to become a strong sea power in the Indian Ocean, it should have control of strategic ports. World Geopolitics have become very intense in recent years and geostrategic ports have become immensely important to control maritime trade; exploitation of ocean resources and for naval dominance.

Sea Ports are backbone of world trade and play a key role inward and outward movement of goods. Countries which build good sea ports with excellent infrastructure become industrial and trade hubs. The passage of sea lanes of oil has attracted the attention of U.S.A. and its allied NATO nations in the Indian

Ocean. India too wants to secure her interest by preparing to play a more pro-active role.

One of the important player, but still considered small country in the Indian Ocean is the Island of Sri Lanka whose strategic location in the Indian Ocean with important ports makes it a potential ally in the Indian Ocean. It's very close proximity to India has increased its importance from India perspectives.

### III. CONCLUSION

So my opinion is that, time has come for India to develop a parallel port in the Indian peninsula to balance the new Geopolitical paradigm in the Indian Ocean.

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