

The Role of Domestic Factors in Sri Lanka's Foreign Affairs

Implications for the United States' Engagements

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Abstract

This article examines the geopolitical dynamics in South Asia, focusing on Sri Lanka's strategic position amid rising powers India and China. It explores how Sri Lanka's domestic political environment and socioeconomic needs shape Colombo's foreign policy engagements. The article highlights the impact of external shocks, such as the global pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which have made Sri Lanka more susceptible to external influences. It critiques the United States' foreign policy approach, which prioritizes national security over economic development, creating a mismatch with Sri Lanka's domestic needs. The article suggests that the United States should revisit its approach toward Sri Lanka, prioritizing economic policy to achieve its strategic objectives. It underscores the significant role of domestic factors in shaping Sri Lanka's foreign policy, particularly in the postwar era, and how Western pressure has limited Sri Lanka's access to developmental assistance. The article calls for a more nuanced understanding of Sri Lanka's domestic situation in shaping foreign policy engagements.

Sri Lanka occupies a critical geostrategic space within maritime South Asia, a region historically preoccupied with internal affairs rather than geopolitical concerns. The ascent of China and its widening reach in foreign politics and economics has redrawn this landscape. Once under the unchallenged sway of India, Colombo now finds itself contending with China for influence. In this arena, smaller states like Sri Lanka find themselves caught in the crosscurrents of power dynamics among greater powers. In the contemporary era, the burgeoning ambitions and strategic interests of rising powers such as India and China—compounded by external shocks like the global pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine—have triggered a succession of domestic crises (political, economic and social), rendering Sri Lanka increasingly susceptible and vulnerable to external pressures.

In such a precarious predicament, it becomes imperative for external stakeholders, notably the United States, to grasp the significance of domestic institutions and actors that shape Sri Lanka's external involvements. Since its independence, domestic needs and development aspirations have been the primary drivers in Sri Lanka's foreign policy engagements with China, India, and the United States.

Yet, US foreign policy in South Asia has been predominantly preoccupied with national security concerns and aspirations rather than economic development. Specifically, Washington has been ensnared by regional security dilemmas—ranging from Sino-Indian tensions to Pakistan-India relations—and the post-9/11 counterterrorism campaign, alongside normative issues relating to democracy, human rights, and development.¹ This mismatch impedes the US foreign policy apparatus from effectively prioritizing and accommodating Sri Lanka's domestic exigencies and critical needs.

This article explores the triangular power relationship that Sri Lanka finds itself enmeshed in and analyzes the implications of that three-way interplay on US engagements in South Asia. Specifically, it delves into the power dynamics and the implications of Sri Lanka's domestic political environment on its regional politics with India and China in Sri Lanka-US engagements. The leadership and their regimes have been crucial in shaping Sri Lanka's interactions with external powers, including India, China, and the United States. The article recommends that the United States revisit its approaches toward Sri Lanka, emphasizing a heightened emphasis on economic policies to effectively pursue strategic objectives.

Domestic Factors as Preconditions to Sri Lanka's Foreign Policy Conducts

Internal factors wield significant influence over the trajectory of Sri Lanka's foreign policy engagements. In the aftermath of the Sri Lankan Civil War (post-2009), Sri Lanka's socioeconomic landscape, developmental imperatives, and leadership dynamics have been pivotal in shaping its approach toward China, India, and the Western bloc. The nation's protracted history of internal political strife, particularly the Sinhala-Tamil tensions culminating in the civil war (1983–2009) with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), has profoundly influenced its domestic economic and political milieu.

Emerging from the ravages of war, Sri Lanka faced pressing demands for financial assistance to fuel its socioeconomic recovery. However, Western scrutiny, notably from the United States, regarding alleged wartime transgressions by the Sri Lankan government led to diplomatic isolation and constrained developmental aid—comprising concessional loans and assistance—from international donors

¹ Dinshaw Mistry, "U.S. Foreign Policy and Security and Governance in South Asia," in *Enduring and Emerging Issues in South Asian Security*, ed. Dinshaw Mistry and Sumit Ganguly (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2022): 1–24, <http://www.jstor.org/>; and Waseem Ishaque, Aman Ullah, and Fazal Noman, "United States Foreign Policy Towards South Asia; Analyzing Implications for Pakistan," *Global Political Review* 5, no. 3 (September 2020): 24–31, <https://www.gprjournal.com/>.

and organizations.² These funds, albeit limited, were contingent upon adherence to good governance standards, human rights accountability, and societal reconciliation. While well-intentioned, such conditionalities restricted the efficacy of the aid in addressing Sri Lanka's fundamental developmental requirements.

The diplomatic and economic ostracization compelled the Sri Lankan government to seek alternative avenues for support. As observed by Roshni Kapur and Chulanee Attanayake, the United States' "continuous pressure during and after the war," coupled with the resulting isolation by traditional partners, prompted the Rajapaksa administration to tilt toward China. This realignment facilitated an expansion of China's geopolitical influence within Sri Lanka.

In addition to seeking foreign aid and investment, the Mahinda Rajapaksa government found itself in need of diplomatic backing amid Western-led isolation. China emerged as a crucial ally, extending both political and diplomatic support to further Sri Lanka's interests on the global stage, while also providing substantial economic assistance for large-scale infrastructural development projects. Consequently, China assumed a prominent role in Sri Lanka's postconflict reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts, contributing to the construction of vital infrastructure such as roads, housing, and bridges, thereby challenging India's influence in the region.³

According to Sri Lankan scholars, the competition between China and India for influence in Sri Lanka intensified significantly from 2009 onward, coinciding with the final stages of the civil war and the onset of US-led isolation measures.⁴ Thus, the domestic dynamics of the Sri Lankan conflict profoundly influenced the country's initial approach toward China, consequently shaping the parameters within which subsequent engagement with the United States could unfold.

In tandem with these internal dynamics, shifts in the geopolitical landscape have magnified the roles of domestic actors in shaping Sri Lanka's foreign policy trajectory. Externally, the ascendance of China, alongside the entrenched leadership of Xi Jinping and Narendra Modi, coupled with the Obama administration's strategic pivot to Asia, heightened strategic competition and rivalries among external powers—namely, India, China, and the United States—over Sri Lanka and other smaller South Asian states.

² N.P. Ravindra Deyshappriya, "Sri Lanka–China Economic Relations in Comparative Perspective: Ample Room to Grow," *China Report* 55, no.4 (2019): 364–92, <https://journals.sagepub.com/>; and Chulanee Attanayake and Archana Atmakuri, "Navigating the Sino-Indian power struggle in the Indian Ocean: The case of Sri Lanka," *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 17, no. 1 (2021): 114–33, <https://doi.org/>.

³ All the interviews for this research are conducted under the Chatham House rule. Interviewee 1, interview by author; 2 May 2023, Sri Lanka, Colombo; Interviewee 3, (written) interview by author, 2 May 2023, Sri Lanka, Colombo; and Interviewee 5, interview by author, 4 May 2023, Sri Lanka, Colombo.

⁴ Interviewees 1 and 3, and Interviewee 11, interview by author, 11 May 2023, Sri Lanka, Colombo.

Since 2013, China has pursued increasingly ambitious economic agendas, both regionally and globally, notably through initiatives such as the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Consequently, Sri Lanka's significance to China has been revitalized within the framework of these maritime ambitions in the Indian Ocean region (IOR).⁵ In the contemporary era, Sri Lanka holds geostrategic, geoeconomic, and military importance for China, with bilateral engagements between the two nations intensifying across political, economic, defense, and cultural domains.

Similarly, 2014 marked a turning point for India as Narendra Modi took the reins. With a watchful eye on China's growing influence in Sri Lanka, India found itself compelled to pragmatically reassess its foreign policies in South Asia. This shift in strategy is evident in the Neighbourhood First policy and the Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) diplomacy. But India did not stop there. New Delhi fortified its partnerships with the United States, Japan, and other members of the Quad alliance, enhancing maritime security cooperation.⁶ These foreign policies were not reactive but proactive, designed to engage with South Asian neighbors and mitigate China's influence.

The relationship between China and India deteriorated significantly following the 2017 Doklam clashes, further exacerbated by subsequent clashes in Galwan and Tawang in 2020 and 2022.⁷ This has contributed to the emergence of a South Asian regional framework characterized by heightened great-power rivalry between China and India, marked by conflicts and competition.⁸ Indian scholars posit that this dynamic has spurred a "healthy competition" for India, as the Sino-Indian rivalry fuels competition in economic, defense, and cultural arenas.⁹ Amid this backdrop, Sri Lanka has emerged as a geostrategic and geoeconomic milieu for

⁵ Zhen Wang and Feng Ye, "China-Sri Lanka Relations in the Context of the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road: Motives, Challenges, and Prospects," *Asian Perspective* 43, no. 3 (2019): 481–503, <https://doi.org/>; Interviewee 11; and Interviewee 10, interview by author, 11 May 2023, Sri Lanka, Colombo.

⁶ Rahul Roy-Chaudhury and Viraj Solanki, "China-South Asia Relations: Indian Perspectives," in *Crossing the Himalayas: Buddhist Ties, Regional Integration and Great-Power Rivalry*, ed. Nian Peng, Ghulam Ali and Yi Zhang (Singapore: Springer, 2022), 37–57, <https://doi.org/>.

⁷ Interviewee 14, interview by author, 9 December 2022, India, New Delhi; Interviewee 15, interview by author, 11 December 2022, India, New Delhi; Interviewee 16, interview by author, 17 December 2022, India, New Delhi; and Interviewee 19, interview by author, 12 December 2022, India, New Delhi.

⁸ Jo Inge Bekkevold, "Norway's relationship with China Over 70 Years: Small State Idealism and Realism in the Face of a Great Power," *David Cowbig's Translation Blog*, 29 October 2021, <https://gaodawei.wordpress.com/>; Interviewees 14, 15, and 19; Interviewee 17, interview by author, 14 December 2022, India, New Delhi; and Interviewee 18, interview by author, 14 December 2022, India, New Delhi.

⁹ Interviewees 1 and 4.

these great-power politics, as both China and India want to “access to other regions through Sri Lanka and Indian Ocean, and for their security reasons.”¹⁰

Consequently, Sri Lanka, like other South Asian nations, must navigate its foreign policy within this complex regional-systemic structure and the intricate geopolitics it entails. Yet, the ongoing border tensions between India and China pose potential risks to Sri Lanka's hedging strategy. Should developmental needs remain paramount, Colombo's alignment may ultimately gravitate toward the state or bloc positioned to best meet these requirements.

Today, amid critical international events, Sri Lanka grapples with its worst political, economic, and social crisis. The nation faces bankruptcy and political and social instability, with the real gross domestic product (GDP) contracting by 7.8 percent and external debt reaching USD 49.678 billion.¹¹ Internally, the crisis stems from several factors, including the country's import-driven economic model, which has exacerbated the economic downturn. Sri Lanka's trade deficit plummeted to a record low of USD 5.2 billion in 2022 (see table 1).¹² Correspondingly, Sri Lanka's trade deficits with China and India in 2021 were USD 4.26 billion and USD 3.6 billion, respectively, due to growing imports and limited exports.¹³ Additionally, policy failures, entrenched corruption within the government, particularly within the Rajapaksa administration, and patron-client political structures have contributed to socioeconomic and political unrest, undermining the nation's sovereign authority.¹⁴ The government's “borrowing spree,” coupled with low returns

¹⁰ Interviewees 3, 5, 11.

¹¹ “Sri Lanka: Macroeconomic Developments in Charts, Second Quarter 2023,” Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2023, <https://www.cbsl.gov.lk/>; and Department of Census and Statistics, “Economic Statistics of Sri Lanka 2023,” Ministry of Finance, Sri Lanka, August 2023, i–72, <http://www.statistics.gov.lk/>.

¹² *Annual Report (Volume I) of the Monetary Board to the Hon. Minister of Finance for the Year 2021* (Colombo: Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2022), <https://www.cbsl.gov.lk/>.

¹³ Department of Commerce, “International Trade Statistics of Sri Lanka – 2021,” Ministry of Trade, Sri Lanka, 2021, ii–xxviii, <https://www.doc.gov.lk/>.

¹⁴ Interviewee 4 contends that the “patron-client relationship” between leaders and voters has spurred corruption-tainted, Chinese-funded “white elephant projects.” In this dynamic, leaders must repay voter loyalty by crafting policies like welfare systems, which distribute wealth to their supporters but don't necessarily promote national growth. The development activities in Hambantota, the home of the Rajapaksa family, exemplify this issue. The benefits from the construction and operation of the port primarily serve the leaders' supporters. Interviewees 5 and 11; Interviewee 4, interview by author, 3 May 2023, Sri Lanka, Colombo; and Interviewee 8, interview by author, 9 May 2023, Sri Lanka, Colombo.

on corruption-riddled mega-infrastructure projects, ill-conceived fiscal policies, and a controversial fertilizer ban, have only compounded the economic crisis.¹⁵

In the international arena, Sri Lanka's economic situation has deteriorated due to a confluence of factors: external loans, the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and the ensuing global inflation. The pandemic thwarted the government's economic stimulation efforts through tax reductions, leading to an economic contraction of 3.6 percent in 2020. However, the economy rebounded slightly with a growth of 3.7% in 2021.¹⁶ The war between Ukraine and Russia, coupled with soaring global commodity prices, triggered a 57-percent surge in food inflation, exacerbating the already crisis-ridden economic situation.¹⁷ These external shocks have precipitated economic, political, and social crises in Sri Lanka. By 2021, Sri Lanka's external debt had ballooned to USD 51.8 billion. Interestingly, only 10 percent and 2 percent of this debt was owed to China and India respectively.¹⁸ This minimal share of total external debt owed to China and India underscores the prominence of domestic factors in the crisis. It is the ill-conceived domestic policies, whose impacts have been magnified by these external circumstances, which are at the heart of Sri Lanka's structural economic crisis.

¹⁵ These led to a mounting external debt (USD 50.7 billion), a drop in foreign-currency reserves slip (USD 1.6 billion by 2021), currency depreciation (50 percent against the US dollar), and inflation in 2022. According to an opinion poll conducted by Julie Ray, 61 percent of Sri Lankans in December 2021 expressed that their local economic conditions were getting worse, and 52 percent said they had no confidence in their national government. Julie Ray, "Sri Lankans Lose Faith in Leadership as Economy Spirals," Gallup, 25 April 2022, <https://news.gallup.com/>. This shows the public pessimism toward Sri Lankan leaders and their economic mismanagement. The 2022 field research this author conducted in Sri Lanka confirmed the pessimism and despair regarding the country's economy. See also, Amita Arudpragasam, "How the Rajapaksas Destroyed Sri Lanka's Economy," *Foreign Policy*, 28 April 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/>; and Ted Nordhaus and Saloni Shah, "In Sri Lanka, Organic Farming Went Catastrophically Wrong," *Foreign Policy*, 5 March 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/>.

¹⁶ *BTI 2022 Country Report: Sri Lanka* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2022), <https://bti-project.org/>.

¹⁷ Uditha Jayasinghe, "Sri Lanka needs \$1.5 billion, help from China for essentials," *Reuters*, 7 June 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

¹⁸ Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2022; and External Development Board, "Sri Lanka's Export Performance in January 2022," External Development Board, Sri Lanka, 2022, <https://www.srilankabusiness.com/>.

Table 1. Sri Lanka's trade and external debt. (Source: Central Bank of Sri Lanka)

Year	Value (USD in Billion)			
	Imports	Exports	Trade Deficit	External Debt
2019	19.9	11.9	8.0	54.8
2020	16.1	10.0	6.0	49.2
2021	20.6	12.5	8.1	51.8
2022	18.3	13.1	5.2	49.7

Today, Sri Lanka's sovereign power and agency in its external engagements have been significantly eroded. The nation is in dire need of economic support and rescue from any willing actor. The stringent preconditions for an International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout have profoundly impacted Sri Lanka's domestic and foreign policy making, particularly in relation to economic policy restructuring.¹⁹ This has drastically curtailed Sri Lanka's bargaining power, agency, and sovereignty. The nation is no longer able to favor one power over another or to antagonize India or the United States.²⁰ This situation underscores Sri Lanka's diminishing sovereignty and bargaining power with external powers, a consequence of its economic catastrophe.

Sri Lanka's predicament strongly suggests that economic stability is a prerequisite for a small power's foreign policy autonomy. Consequently, Sri Lanka is more susceptible to external influence, and foreign powers have increased leverage in shaping its domestic policy.²¹ Amid this, President Ranil Wickremesinghe is pursuing a nationalist and non-aligned foreign policy with any external power. However, in practice, his government aligns with the state that imposes the fewest restrictions on Sri Lanka's development and the ruling party's capacity to deliver that development. Under such fragile political and economic conditions, it is crucial for the United States to prioritize providing financial and economic assistance to Sri Lanka with minimal preconditions. In essence, it needs to position itself as a replacement for—or a preferred alternative to—China.

In sum, both domestic and international factors have been instrumental in shaping Sri Lanka's foreign policy conduct with its external powers since its independence. The role of domestic factors has become more pronounced in Sri Lanka's

¹⁹ Interviewees 5 and 11; Interviewee 12, interview by author, 11 May 2023, Sri Lanka, Colombo; and Interviewee 13, interview by author, 11 May 2023, Sri Lanka, Colombo.

²⁰ Interviewees 1, 4, and 5; and Interviewee 7, interview by author, 4 May 2023, Sri Lanka, Colombo.

²¹ Interviewee 7.

contemporary foreign policy making. Therefore, understanding the interplay of internal and external factors in Sri Lanka's foreign policy making—beginning with its foreign policy engagements with India and China—is crucial, as it has significant implications for Sri Lanka–US foreign policy engagements.

Contemporary Sri Lanka–China–India Relationships

Given that China and India are Sri Lanka's main economic and strategic partners, it is crucial to assess the role of domestic factors in its interactions with these nations and comprehend the implications for Sri Lanka–US relations. Despite its efforts to maintain a policy of non-alignment and strike a balance between India and China, domestic circumstances inevitably draw Sri Lanka into the orbits of these major powers.²² In the postwar era, domestic factors, such as regime types and leadership, have been the primary drivers of Sri Lanka's engagements with India and China. In the current scenario, the crisis—intensified by leadership—fundamentally shapes Sri Lanka's foreign policy and agency toward India, China, and other external powers.²³ This section delves into the impact of regime type and various leaderships on Sri Lanka's political, economic, and strategic engagements with India and China. It underscores the importance of understanding the interplay of domestic and international factors in shaping Sri Lanka's foreign policy.

Political Engagements

Leadership and domestic circumstances are the driving forces behind Sri Lanka's contemporary foreign policy engagements with China and India. Both China and India, as significant regional actors and neighbors, carry substantial economic and security implications for Sri Lanka. The strategic rivalry between China and India in South Asia has become more pronounced and competitive in the twenty-first century. With the ascendance of China and India and the intensification of geopolitics, smaller actors like Sri Lanka have emerged as crucial partners in amassing power to shape the regional political landscape. Sri Lanka, along with other small South Asian states, must navigate their foreign policy engagements amid the escalating pressure and competitive geopolitics in the IOR, the United States' Indo-Pacific strategy, and the great-power politics in Asia. This regional structure allows domestic actors to play significant roles in Sri Lanka's foreign policy engagements with India and China.

²² Interviewees 1 and 5.

²³ Interviewees 1, 4, 5, and 7; and Interviewee 6, interview by author, 4 May 2023, Sri Lanka, Colombo.

In the twenty-first century, Sri Lanka has bolstered its political and strategic relations with external powers—China, India, and the United States—primarily due to its domestic and international needs and leadership preferences. As previously mentioned, the civil war and subsequent domestic and international circumstances have pushed (and continue to push) Sri Lanka and its leaders closer to China's orbit for economic and political security since the postwar era. Simultaneously, geographical proximity, domestic politics, and ethnic issues (i.e., Tamil politics) stemming from shared culture, history, ethnicity, and language have critically shaped Sri Lanka–India bilateral relations since independence.

In the current era, the leadership and their respective regimes largely shape Sri Lanka's foreign policy stance toward India and China. The regime of Mahinda Rajapaksa (2005–2015), under the banner of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), significantly fortified political and diplomatic relations with China. The two nations evolved into strategic partners and upgraded their bilateral relationship to a Strategic Cooperative Partnership in 2013.²⁴ The Rajapaksa leadership sought China's domestic and international backing for their regime's viability. China continues to extend diplomatic support to Sri Lanka against the United States-sponsored UNHRC resolutions for accountability and reconciliation regarding war crimes since 2009 (i.e., for the 2009, 2012, 2013, and 2021 UNHRC resolutions).²⁵ As the current Sri Lankan ambassador to China, Dr. Palitha Kohona, stated, "China has been a consistent ally of Sri Lanka and has been a great strength in international fora."²⁶ China emerged as an indispensable external power for Rajapaksa's leadership in both domestic and international arenas. Domestic circumstances and Western isolation have paved the way for an increase in Chinese influence in Sri Lanka since its postwar period.

A shift in leadership/regimes in both Sri Lanka and India nudged Sri Lanka closer to India between 2015 and 2019. Narendra Modi of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India and Maithripala Sirisena of the coalition government of the United National Party (UNP) in Sri Lanka assumed power in 2014 and 2015, respectively. Both countries sought a more pragmatic approach, focusing on the

²⁴ Janaka Wijayasiri, "Balancing Economic Partnership for Growth in the Post-conflict Sri Lanka," in *Managing Domestic and International Challenges and Opportunities in Post-conflict Development*, ed. Dushni Weerakoon and Sirsira Jayasuriya (Singapore: Springer, 2019), 133–50, <https://doi.org/>.

²⁵ Ivan Campbell et al., *China and Conflict-Affected States: Between Principle and Pragmatism* (London: SAF-ERWORLD, January 2012), <https://www.ecosonline.org/>; and Marwaan Macan-Markar, "Sri Lanka assured of China's help in burying post-war obligations," *NIKKEI Asia*, 28 October 2020, <https://asia.nikkei.com/>.

²⁶ Macan-Markar, "Sri Lanka assured of China's help."

functional necessities of their contemporary bilateral relations.²⁷ Sri Lanka holds a “central place” in Modi’s Neighbourhood First policy aimed at containing China’s expanding presence and encirclement.²⁸ The Sirisena-Wickremesinghe regime sought a balanced approach between India and China and even suspended Chinese luxury real estate projects worth USD 1.5 billion in Colombo to mend ties with India.²⁹ This could suggest that Sri Lanka’s initiatives with India come at the expense of cooperation with China, a zero-sum game in which Sri Lanka has limited opportunities for change.

Between 2015 and 2017, there were numerous high-level visits.³⁰ President Sirisena visited India in February 2015, reciprocated by Modi’s visit in March 2015, marking the first visit by an Indian prime minister in twenty-eight years.³¹ India began to support Sri Lanka’s interests and the UNHRC resolutions in 2014 (and again in 2015, 2017, and 2019), respecting the commitments and reconciliation steps of Sirisena’s government.³² This occurred amid Sri Lanka’s growing strategic significance “as an avenue” to expand New Delhi’s footprint across the Indo-Pacific and challenge “China’s rising assertiveness” in Sri Lanka and the region.³³ Hence, the political relationships between Sri Lanka and India strengthened under the leadership of Sirisena and Wickremesinghe.

Similar to Mahinda Rajapaksa’s regime, his brother Gotabaya’s administration (2019–2022), under the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), maintained close relations with China. Gotabaya’s regime championed two significant foreign

²⁷ S. Chaminda Padmakumara and S.M.D.P. Harsha Senanayake, “Contemporary India–Sri Lanka Relations from Sri Lankan Perspectives,” in *India in South Asia*, ed. Amit Ranjan (Singapore: Springer, 2019), 203–13, <https://doi.org/>.

²⁸ *Annual Report | 2021–2022* (New Delhi: Ministry of External Affairs, 2022), <https://www.mea.gov.in/>; and Interviewee 7.

²⁹ Harsh V. Pant, *Indian Foreign Policy: An Overview* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2017).

³⁰ Wijayasiri, “Balancing Economic Partnership.”

³¹ Pant, *Indian Foreign Policy*.

³² Santosh Chaubey, “Why India’s Vote Against Sri Lanka in UNHRC in 2012 and 2013 Should be Seen as an Aberration,” *NEWS 18*, 25 March 2022, <https://www.news18.com/>.

³³ However, domestic pressures drove the UNP regimes to engage with China, despite initially aiming for a balanced policy. Sirisena’s administration had to rekindle economic and trade ties with China to address the dire financial situation left by the Rajapaksa administration. In 2017, Sri Lanka even leased the Hambantota Port to the China Merchants Port Holdings Company (CMPorts) for 99 years, granting an 85-percent stake along with 1,235 acres of surrounding land. In return, Sri Lanka received USD 1.12 billion, which it used to bolster its foreign exchange reserves. See, Ganeshan Wignaraja, “Grappling with Great Power Rivalries: Reflections on Sri Lanka’s Engagement with the United States and China” (working paper, Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute, November 2019), 2–11, <https://lki.lk/>; Pascal Lottaz and Asanka Prabodani Jayathilake argue that this was inevitable due to the previous Rajapaksa government’s uncontrollable debt levels. Pascal Lottaz and Asanka Prabodani Jayathilake, “Sri Lanka Discovers Neutrality: Strategy or Excuse?,” *The Diplomat*, 19 March 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/>. Also, Chaubey, “Why India’s Vote against Sri Lanka.”

policies to rejuvenate: (1) the economy with a focus on security and sovereignty, and (2) relations with both China and India.³⁴ Initially, the regime advocated for a “friendly, non-aligned foreign policy,” articulating an “equidistant foreign policy” in an attempt to remain neutral between India and China.³⁵ The Chinese government withdrew from energy projects in the northern islands following pressure from India and Sri Lanka.³⁶ There was also an imbroglio over a shipment of inorganic fertilizer that caused a “diplomatic stink”³⁷ and led to the blacklisting of the People’s Bank of Sri Lanka. Uditha Devapriya argues that these diplomatic skirmishes with China occurred while pursuing amicable relations with India.³⁸ Despite this, Gotabaya’s regime forged closer economic ties with China, worked on the developments of the Colombo Port City project, and was further drawn toward Beijing for financial needs.³⁹ This is because Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist leaders like the Rajapaksa brothers “prefer . . . direct relations with (the) US and China rather than India,” while Sinhalese and Buddhist clergy “would indirectly instigate protests against Indian development plans.”⁴⁰ The images, ethnonationalism, perceptions, and Buddhist ideologies of the Rajapaksas shaped their domestic and foreign policy conduct.

Presently, the regime of Ranil Wickremesinghe (2022–current) strives to adopt a nationalist and nonaligned foreign policy with its external powers, including China, India, and the United States, to maximize international support and

³⁴ Chulanee Attanayake, “Sri Lanka in 2021: Foreign Policy in Prognosis,” *ISAS Briefs*, 18 January 2021, <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/>.

³⁵ Asanga Abeyagoonasekera, “Sri Lanka’s Foreign Policy: Past, Present, and Future,” in *Routledge Handbook on South Asian Foreign Policy*, ed. Aparna Pande (New York: Routledge, 2022), 349; and Ren Yuanzhe, “Sri Lanka’s Presidential Election 2019: A Chinese Perspective on its Impact on China-Sri Lanka Relations,” *ISAS Briefs*, 3 December 2019, <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/>.

³⁶ Zulfick Farzan, “China suspends northern islands power projects.” *NEWS 1st*, 2 December 2021, <https://www.newsfirst.lk/>.

³⁷ Anbarasan Ethirajan, “Ship-load of ‘toxic’ Chinese fertilizer causes diplomatic stink.” *BBC News*, 13 November 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/>.

³⁸ Uditha Devapriya, “Is Sri Lanka Under Gotabaya Rajapaksa Really Tilting Toward China?,” *The Diplomat*, 1 February 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

³⁹ Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu, “The Rajapaksa Dynasty in Sri Lanka: Democracy in Decline,” *The Diplomat*, 1 August 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

⁴⁰ The Sinhala–Tamil ethnic polarization is a divisive force in Sri Lanka’s foreign policy, influencing its interactions with India and China. The Buddhist clergy, Sinhalese, and their leaders “prefer . . . direct relations with . . . China rather than India” (Interviewee 3). Conversely, Tamils favor India due to ethnic ties, India’s initial support during the civil war, and its leverage over the Sri Lankan government on Tamil-related issues. Thus, it is not just the regimes but also their electoral supporters that shape the orientation between these two powers. Securing a social foothold in such an ethnically and religiously divided landscape will be problematic for any new power.

economic recovery amid the crisis.⁴¹ During a keynote address to the third annual Indo-Pacific Islands dialogue, President Wickremesinghe declared, “definitely, I am not pro-India . . . also not pro-China . . . I am pro-Sri Lanka. . . Today, our priorities are . . . economic, social, ecological”—a departure from the priorities of the great powers in the region—and “we are prepared to work with any actors, state or non-state actor, who will help us achieve these objectives.”⁴² This statement strongly reflects Sri Lanka’s economic priority and its practice of an economic-oriented foreign policy. Amid the economic crisis, Sri Lanka has resumed its negotiations on free trade agreements (FTA) with India, China, and other countries since 2023.⁴³ As Passang Dorji argues, such a pragmatic policy is a form of “strategic hedging—increasingly prominent in South Asian small states—where they avoid alignments with external powers, but rather become more (pro)nationalist for their greater foreign policy maneuverability.”⁴⁴

In such crisis-stricken situations, the urgent need for economic rescue has further empowered Sri Lankan elites in negotiating with domestic forces, while external powers exploit Sri Lanka’s vulnerable situation and the weakened negotiating/sovereign power.⁴⁵ The incumbent regime has also proposed the Anti-Terrorism Bill to replace the Prevention of Terrorism Act to curtail excessive executive powers and suppress domestic dissidents, thereby meeting the IMF’s restructuring conditions.⁴⁶ However, in its external dealings, Sri Lanka is greatly lacking in agency due to the “corrupted” political leadership and institutions that allow international communities to deal directly with individuals in power, bypassing state institutions. Hence, there is a “delicate connection between domestic affinities and foreign relations” in Sri Lanka.⁴⁷ As Sri Lankan scholars and journalists have commented, Sri Lanka lacks a “consistent foreign policy,” and it varies “depending on financial resources and economic-political needs” and leaderships.⁴⁸ Thus, the regime

⁴¹ Interviewee 5.

⁴² “Ocean Nations: The 3rd Annual Indo-Pacific Islands Dialogue,” hosted by the Carnegie Endowment on 18 September 2023. President Ranil Wickremesinghe made his keynote speech moderated by Dan Baer, Senior Vice President for Policy Research at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. The recorded talk is available at Carnegie’s YouTube page. Carnegie Endowment, “Islands Dialogue: Keynote Address: President Ranil Wickremesinghe,” *YouTube*, 19 September 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/>.

⁴³ M. Ramesh, “Sri Lanka will renegotiate FTAs with all countries, says Minister,” *businessline*, 11 August, 2023, <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/>.

⁴⁴ Interviewee 26, interview by author, 19 January 2024, Thimphu, Bhutan.

⁴⁵ Interviewees 11, 12, and 13.

⁴⁶ “Call to Sri Lanka to revise anti-terrorism bill” (press briefing, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, United Nations, Geneva, 19 January 2024), <https://www.ohchr.org/>; and Interviewee 11.

⁴⁷ Lottaz and Prabodani Jayathilake, “Sri Lanka Discovers Neutrality.”

⁴⁸ Interviewees 3 and 9.

in power determines Sri Lanka's foreign policy directions, but—in the absence of another long-term development partner—its structural domestic and international situations consistently swing Sri Lanka between China and India.

Economic Engagements

Much like political relations, Sri Lanka's economic engagements with China and India are largely governed by external and internal factors. In the immediate aftermath of the war, Sri Lanka found itself inevitably drawn toward China for economic interests, in addition to its diplomatic interests. Amid Western pressure and having graduated from the Least Developed Country Status (LDCS), Sri Lanka had limited access to concessional loans and aid, including those from the IMF and the World Bank, which came with conditionalities. China emerged as the “only bilateral partner” and non-traditional donor offering “quick loans and assistance with minimal prerequisites” and substantial foreign direct investment (FDI).⁴⁹ Since then, China has become an economically significant entity in Sri Lanka, eager to meet Sri Lanka's aid needs and challenge India's influence in Colombo.⁵⁰

China and India are important trade partners of contemporary Sri Lanka. China's maritime objectives and projects align with Sri Lanka's economic and developmental needs. The five major goals of China's BRI include “policy coordination, connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people to people contacts.”⁵¹ Chinese investments through BRI projects have offered Sri Lanka opportunities for infrastructural development, increased trade and investment, the potential to become an economic hub in the Indian Ocean, participation in global value chains (GVC), growth in tourism, and other related soft and hard developments.⁵² Consequently, Sri Lanka welcomed Chinese investments and entered into numerous contracts for various infrastructure projects during Mahinda Rajapaksa's regime (2005–2015). The Hambantota Port and Colombo International Financial

⁴⁹ Attanayake and Atmakuri, “Navigating the Sino-Indian power struggle”; and Deyshappriya, “Sri Lanka–China Economic Relations in Comparative Perspective.”

⁵⁰ Interviewee 34, interview by author, Colombo, 2 May 2023, Sri Lanka, May 2, 2023; Interviewee 36, (written) interview by author, 2 May 2023, Colombo, Sri Lanka; and Interviewee 38, interview by author, 4 May 2023, Colombo, Sri Lanka.

⁵¹ Janaka Wijayasiri and Nuwanthi Senaratne, “China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Sri Lanka,” in *China: BRI o el nuevo camino de la seda*, ed. Arturo Oropeza (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México/ Instituto de Investigaciones Jurídicas, 2018): 386, <https://archivos.juridicas.unam.mx/>.

⁵² Wijayasiri and Nuwanthi Senaratne, “China's Belt and Road Initiative.”

City (CIFC) are two flagship projects of BRI in Sri Lanka.⁵³ According to Lee Jones and Shahar Hameiri, the governments of developing countries and their associated political and economic interests “determine the nature of BRI projects on their territory.”⁵⁴ Within Sri Lanka, the Rajapaksa administrations largely decided on Chinese projects and investments.⁵⁵

Nonetheless, small and medium enterprises (SME) “lobbied against radical trade opening with China” under the proposed Sri Lanka–China FTA because of their “concerns” about the competitive market from “cheap Chinese imports, which benefit unfairly from state subsidies.”⁵⁶ Consequently, disagreements on the pace of trade liberalization—Sri Lanka advocated for a gradual approach while China insisted on a faster one—ultimately led to the suspension of the FTA in 2017.⁵⁷ Interestingly, the FTA, proposed in 2014 under the pro-China Mahinda regime, was halted under the pro-India Sirisena–Wickremesinghe regime in 2017. The incumbent pro-Western regime has since restarted the FTA negotiations with China. This suggests the importance of regimes and leadership in shaping Sri Lanka’s economic policy orientations between India and China. Therefore, domestic actors influence and even determine the nature of the Chinese-funded projects while ensuring further economic inroads for China. Beijing also capitalizes on “the Sinhalese’s fear of India” and the US–India’s “soft handling of Sri Lanka” to implement China’s plan and “make Sri Lanka a favorable country” for it.⁵⁸ The soft economic stance of India and the United States provides strategic space for China to expand its economic footprints in Sri Lanka.

Similarly, India’s domestic and regional interests have facilitated improved economic engagements with Sri Lanka in the immediate postwar era. Reconciliation efforts were at the forefront of Sri Lanka–India relations, aimed at improving the socioeconomic conditions of the Tamil minority in the northern and eastern provinces and incorporating the domestic interests of Tamil Nadu.⁵⁹ India’s substantial humanitarian assistance was primarily focused on the socioeconomic well-being of the Tamil communities in the north. Bilateral trade has surged since the implementation of

⁵³ Natasha Fernando, “Sri Lanka–China relations and the BRI.” *OBOReuropa*, 7 June 2020, <https://www.oboreurope.com/>.

⁵⁴ Lee Jones and Shahar Hameiri, “Debunking the Myth of ‘Debt-trap Diplomacy’: How Recipient Countries Shape China’s Belt and Road Initiative,” *Chatham House*, 19 August 2020, 3, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/>.

⁵⁵ Interviewees 8 and 11.

⁵⁶ Wignaraja, “Grappling with Great Power Rivalries.”

⁵⁷ Wignaraja, “Grappling with Great Power Rivalries.”

⁵⁸ Interviewee 3.

⁵⁹ Nagaioh Manoharan, “Brothers, Not Friends: India–Sri Lanka Relations,” *South Asian Survey* 18, no. 2 (2011): 225–36, <https://doi.org/>.

the Indo-Sri Lanka Free-Trade Agreement (ISFTA) in March 2000.⁶⁰ Much like Colombo's relations with China, economic interests and needs are key drivers in Sri Lanka's economic engagements with India.

Consequently, there has been a surge in Sino-Indian economic and commercial interactions with Sri Lanka in recent times. India held the position of the primary source of imports and trading partner from 2001 until China overtook it in 2016, with a value of USD 4.270 billion, accounting for 14.9 percent of the total, compared to India's share of 14.7 percent.⁶¹ India continued to be a significant trading partner from 2017, with a trade value exceeding the USD 5 billion threshold, until China surpassed it once again in 2020 with a total of 3.577 billion. However, India reclaimed its position as the main trading partner in 2021 and maintained this status in 2022.⁶² In 2022, Sri Lanka's share of imports from India and China stood at USD 4.7 billion (25.9 percent) and USD 3.3 billion (18 percent), respectively, while the respective exports were USD 0.85 billion (6.6 percent) and 0.25 billion (2 percent).⁶³

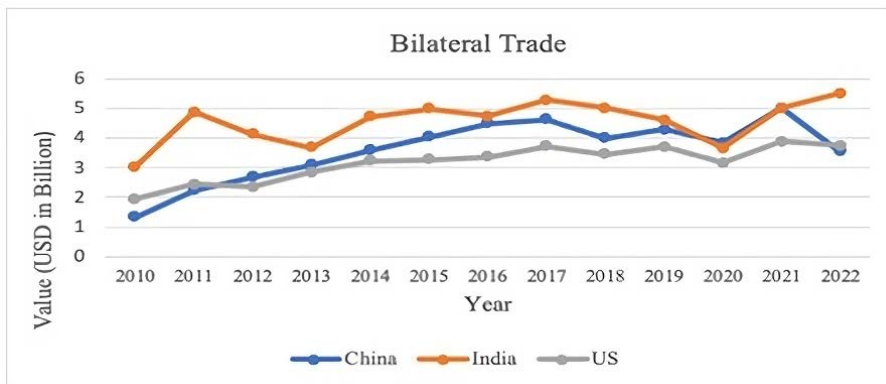


Figure 1. Sri Lanka's bilateral trade with China, India, and the United States. (Created by author. Source: International Trade Centre; Central Bank of Sri Lanka; World Integrated Trade Solution; Department of Commerce, Sri Lanka; US Department of State)

⁶⁰ Wijayasiri, "Balancing Economic Partnership"; and Angela Huettemann, Chathuni Pabasara, and Nikhita Panwar, "Sri Lanka—India Relations: Opportunities for a New Connectivity Strategy," Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute of International Relations and Strategic Studies, 21 August 2020, <https://lki.lk/>.

⁶¹ *Annual Report of the Monetary Board to the Hon. Minister of Finance for the Year 2016* (Colombo: Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 19 April 2017), <https://www.cbsl.gov.lk/>.

⁶² *Annual Report (Volume I) of the Monetary Board to the Hon. Minister of Finance for the Year 2020* (Colombo: Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 23 April 2021), <https://www.cbsl.gov.lk/>.

⁶³ *Economic and Social Statistics of Sri Lanka 2023* no. XLV (Colombo: Central Bank of Sri Lanka, August 2023), <https://www.cbsl.gov.lk/>.

In contrast to India, China holds a dominant position as Sri Lanka's source of FDI. From 2011 to 2015, China emerged as the top FDI donor country, accounting for the lion's share, with USD 989.6 million (15.5 percent) of Sri Lanka's total FDI inflows, and Beijing stands as a leading bilateral donor in grants.⁶⁴ In 2019, China maintained its position as the largest investor in Sri Lanka, with an FDI inflow of USD 293 million, while India was the third-largest source, contributing USD 139 million.⁶⁵ This is largely attributable to China's substantial investments in major infrastructure and connectivity projects such as airports, seaports, roads, special economic zones, power, and energy.⁶⁶ Also, as "Rajapaksa confidants have admitted," Beijing's financial support comes "with few conditions on transparency and accountability," a sentiment echoed by Sri Lankan scholars.⁶⁷

Specifically, China offers loans without attaching any preconditions, allowing recipient countries to determine the types of projects and investments. For instance, the widely cited "debt trap" project, the Hambantota port, was proposed and commissioned by Mahinda in 2006. It was funded by a "profit-seeking" (i.e., commercial loan) Chinese state-owned enterprise, the China Harbor Engineering Group (CHEG), after India and the US declined to provide assistance.⁶⁸ The project was labeled as "a corrupt and unsustainable developmental programme."⁶⁹

In contrast, the United States and India require Sri Lanka to uphold human rights, democratic values, and reconciliation with Tamils—as stipulated by the

⁶⁴ Wijayasiri and Senaratne, "China's Belt and Road Initiative"; and Wijayasiri, "Balancing Economic Partnership."

⁶⁵ The latest data as of June 2022 from the Board of Investment of Sri Lanka. The latest annual report on Sri Lanka's investment is available only until 2019. "Board of Investment of Sri Lanka: Annual Report 2019," Board of Investment of Sri Lanka, 2019, <https://investsrilanka.com/>.

⁶⁶ Chulanee Attanayake, "Sri Lanka Amid Sino-Indian Himalayan Rivalry," in *Crossing the Himalayas: Buddhist Ties, Regional Integration and Great-Power Rivalry*, ed. Nian Peng, Ghulam Ali, and Yi Zhang (Singapore: Springer, 2022), 111–32; and Deyshappriya, "Sri Lanka–China Economic Relations," 378.

⁶⁷ Marwaan Macan-Markar, "Sri Lanka Meltdown Exposes China Loan Policy: 5 Things to Know," *NIK-KEI Asia*, 13 May 2022, <https://asia.nikkei.com/>; and Interviewees 3, 12 and 13.

⁶⁸ The CHEG, initially deployed as the Chinese government's aid-policy implementer in Sri Lanka after the 2004 tsunami, evolved into a "full-fledged market actor," aligning its commercial interests with Mahinda Rajapaksa's development plan. (Zhu 2015: 8). It was CHEG that proposed transforming Mahinda's fisheries port in Hambantota into a major international port, facilitating the signing of memoranda of understanding between the Chinese and Sri Lankan governments (ibid.). Thus, all actors achieved their interests: (1) to Sri Lanka in meeting economic and infrastructural requirements in post-war reconstruction through large-scale projects and strengthening Rajapaksa's government; (2) to the CHEG in moving up in the Global Value Chains (GVCs) through increased capacity and "higher internal investment return"; and (3) to China's interest in its "commitment to international development by enabling Sri Lanka to enhance its own economic infrastructure." Xiao'ou Zhu, "Demystifying the Role of Chinese Commercial Actors in Shaping China's Foreign Assistance: The Case of Post-war Sri Lanka," *Stability* 4, no. 1 (2015), <https://doi.org/>.

⁶⁹ Jones and Hameiri, "Debunking the Myth of 'Debt-trap Diplomacy,'" 13.

UNHRC resolutions and the 13th Amendment—as preconditions for their development aid.⁷⁰ As previously mentioned, Sri Lankan leaders, particularly the Rajapaksas, inevitably gravitated towards Chinese loans and assistance in the postwar era. Also, “Sri Lanka prefers bilateral loans over multilateral” because of fewer preconditions.⁷¹ Moreover, as Sri Lanka holds “strategic and military importance to China (and India) in case of the war,” China expands its investments as its maritime interests grow.⁷² This supports the patron–client resource distribution patterns of the Sri Lankan leadership.⁷³

In comparison, India’s investments are concentrated in the information technology, banking and tourism services, real estate, and manufacturing and infrastructure sectors, primarily in Tamil provinces.⁷⁴ India’s own resource constraints, “long red-tape bureaucracy,” and preconditions (the 13th Amendment) also push Sri Lanka (and its neighbors) toward China for quick investments.⁷⁵ While Indian investments are located in northern and eastern Sri Lanka, such as the Trincomalee port city, Chinese investments dominate in the southern and western parts of the country, such as the Hambantota port city and Mattala airport.⁷⁶ Hence, their strategic dominance and influence in Sri Lanka. In short, India dominates in Sri Lanka’s trade while China dominates in investments. Nevertheless, similar to political and strategic relations, Sri Lanka’s own domestic needs and actors shape the nature of economic engagements with India and China.

⁷⁰ The 13th Amendment, a by-product of the 1987 Indo-Lanka agreement, remains a political tool for India in its dealings with Sri Lanka, impacting contemporary bilateral engagements. Interviewee 36.

⁷¹ Interviewees 12 and 13.

⁷² Interviewee 5.

⁷³ Political institutions are corrupted, and the “patron–client relationship” obliges leaders to return favors to their political supporters; thus, leaders formulate policies for resource distribution (Interviewee 4). This is evident as Sri Lankan citizens, including Rajapaksa’s supporters in Hambantota, view the Chinese-funded white elephant projects as the Rajapaksa family’s vanity projects. Two-thirds of the Chinese-funded projects are in the Hambantota district, and only the Rajapaksa family and the Chinese are believed to have benefited from them. Jones and Hameiri, “Debunking the Myth of ‘Debt-trap Diplomacy.’”) Consequently, Chinese-funded projects became white elephant ventures with no economic return, causing mounting debt and losses for the country. The Sri Lankan public blames their leadership for this economic mismanagement.

⁷⁴ Wijayasiri, “Balancing Economic Partnership,” 143

⁷⁵ Interviewees 3 and 6; Attanayake and Atmakuri, “Navigating the Sino-Indian power struggle”; Interviewee 20, interview by author, 24 May 2023, Male, Maldives; and Interviewee 22, interview by author, 11 June 2023, Male, Maldives.

⁷⁶ Interviewees 3 and 11.

Strategic Engagements

In the strategic realm, Sri Lanka and China have seen a steady increase in military ties across the army, navy, and air force since the 2000s. China has been the primary supplier of conventional arms to Sri Lanka, including small arms, ammunition, landmines, naval vessels, and aircraft, since the 1950s.⁷⁷ This trend significantly escalated since 2007 in response to Sri Lanka's demand.⁷⁸ During the war, China provided military aid, essential equipment, and training to the Sri Lankan forces.⁷⁹ High-level visits by military officials occurred in 2012 and 2014, and Chinese naval ships made port calls in 1985, 2007, 2009, and 2020.⁸⁰ China and Sri Lanka concluded two rounds of the Defense Cooperation Dialogue in 2015 and 2016 and signed two agreements to provide USD 2.6 billion in military assistance and an offshore patrol vessel to Sri Lanka.⁸¹ Defense ties have further intensified since 2018. The Chinese hospital ship *Peace Ark* visited the Colombo Port in August 2017 on its broader voyage across the Indian Ocean, reflecting its expanding military cooperation.⁸² Among small South Asian states, Sri Lanka holds military importance for China due to the port cities.⁸³ The final stage of the Sri Lankan Civil War provided a strategic opportunity for China to assist the former and to strengthen its security ties afterward, particularly during Mahinda Rajapaksa's regime.

In the case of India, geographical proximity and domestic factors of the respective countries shape defense and security cooperation. Sri Lanka and India hold strategic importance for each other's security. To Sri Lanka, India has been its security provider and first responder during crises, such as the final phase of the civil war, the 2019 Easter Sunday attack, the 2019 pandemic, and the economic crisis in 2022.⁸⁴ Sri Lanka also holds military significance for India (and China) due to its "natural harbor for deep seaports" and military drills with highly skilled

⁷⁷ S. Y. Surendra Kumar, "China's Strategic Engagement with Sri Lanka: Implications for India," *Contemporary Chinese Political Economy and Strategic Relations* 3, no. 3 (2017): 1109–38, <https://www.researchgate.net/>.

⁷⁸ M. Mayilvaganan, "Engaging Post-LTTE Sri Lanka: India's Policy Options," *India Quarterly* 68, no. 1 (2012): 17–28.

⁷⁹ Interviewees 1 and 3; and "China aided Sri Lanka's bloodbath," *Economic Times*, 8 June 2009, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/>.

⁸⁰ "Foreign Debt Summary (as of end April 2021)," Department of External Resources, Sri Lanka, 2021, <http://www.erd.gov.lk/>.

⁸¹ "China to provide Rs. 2.6 million worth military aid to Sri Lanka," *Business Standard*, 17 October 2016, <https://www.business-standard.com/>.

⁸² "China's naval hospital ship makes first visit to Sri Lanka," *ChinaDaily*, 7 August 2017, <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/>.

⁸³ Interviewee 5; and Interviewee 9, interview by author, 10 May 2023, Colombo, Sri Lanka.

⁸⁴ Interviewee 9.

Sri Lankan military personnel from their long civil war.⁸⁵ India has consistently been involved in Sri Lanka's domestic security due to the civil war—either as a supporter of the LTTE (early in the war) or the Sri Lankan government (in the latter stages of the conflict). Furthermore, like other South Asian neighbors, India is wary of any foreign military presence in Sri Lanka. For instance, the military support from Pakistan and China during the war and Chinese economic assistance in the postwar era were perceived as threats to India's security sphere.⁸⁶ Hence, today, Sri Lanka and India have initiated and strengthened military, defense, and security ties.

In 2011, Sri Lanka and India agreed to initiate an annual defense dialogue, hold regular discussions between different military services, and conduct the first joint naval exercise in Sri Lankan waters. Additionally, India offered 1,400 training placements for the Sri Lankan security forces.⁸⁷ Trilateral meetings between the national security advisors (NSA) and deputy NSAs from the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and India, which began in 2011, ultimately led to the formation of a “minilateral group,” the Colombo Security Conclave (CSC), in 2020.⁸⁸ Since 2021, the CSC “has operationalized practical cooperation” and hosts “regular security-focused exercises,” including “maritime search and rescue; cybersecurity; coastal security; and investigation of terrorism cases.”⁸⁹ Despite certain setbacks due to Tamil Nadu politics, India provides support in military training (nearly 80 percent), building the navy's operational capacity, and strengthening Sri Lankan intelligence service and counter-terrorism training following the 2019 Easter Sunday Attack.⁹⁰ Amid the pandemic, there were high-level exchanges, programs, and dialogues between coast guards, police chiefs, the joint military exercise Mitra Shakti, and the joint working group on tourism. Comparatively, Sri Lanka maintains stronger defense

⁸⁵ Interviewee 9; and Interviewee 10, interview by author, 11 May 2023, Colombo, Sri Lanka.

⁸⁶ Mayilvaganan, “Engaging Post-LTTE Sri Lanka”; and Interviewee 3.

⁸⁷ R. K. Radhakrishnan, “India offers training slots for Sri Lankan military personnel,” *The Hindu*, 17 November 2021, <https://www.thehindu.com/>; and Christian Wagner, “India's Bilateral Security Relationship in South Asia,” *Strategic Analysis* 42, no. 1 (2018): 15–28, <https://doi.org/>.

⁸⁸ Mauritius became a member in 2020, while Bangladesh and the Seychelles remain observers. In March 2020, the CSC adopted an agenda with five pillars: “maritime safety and security; countering terrorism and radicalization; combating trafficking and transnational organized crime; cybersecurity and protection of critical infrastructure and technology; and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.” Viraj Solanki, “The Colombo Security Conclave: What is it and what does it mean for Australia?,” *Observer Research Foundation*, 16 May 2023, <https://www.orfonline.org/>.

⁸⁹ Solanki, “The Colombo Security Conclave.”

⁹⁰ Christian Wagner, “India as a Regional Security Provider in South Asia,” *South Asia Scan* 8 (June 2020), <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/>; and Bharatha Mallawarachi, “India, Sri Lanka Agree to Step Up Anti-Terrorism Efforts,” *The Diplomat*, 10 June 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

ties with India due to geographical proximity and shared traditional and non-traditional security concerns in the IOR. Consequently, the United States holds a comparative advantage over China in the strategic space due to the robust defense ties between Sri Lanka and India.

Triangular Summary

To sum up, both external and internal factors have equivalently shaped Sri Lanka's political, economic, and strategic relations with India and China since its postwar era. The pressures from the United States and the need for postwar reconstruction have economically and diplomatically steered Sri Lanka toward China. Today, Sri Lanka's geostrategic and geoeconomic significance in the IOR, the dynamics of great power politics, and domestic factors shape its foreign policy conduct with external powers. In recent years, poor domestic policies and mismanagement, compounded by a deteriorating external environment—the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine—have exacerbated a severe socio-economic and political crisis. This has ultimately weakened Sri Lanka's bargaining power amid bailout negotiations with the IMF and its lead creditors, namely India, China, Japan, and France.⁹¹ As a Sri Lankan scholar describes, Sri Lanka has become an “economic battleground for India and China whose supports come with pre-conditions for its domestic economic and political matters, and it does not have any say in it. We are not in a position to put pre-conditions on others.”⁹² As a result, Sri Lanka's “domestic policy is determined by (the) foreign powers.”⁹³ Amid the crisis and competitive Sino-Indian engagements, economic needs have consistently been Sri Lanka's priority. The overriding need to ensure the country's development dominates Sri Lanka's engagements with India and China. This need transcends regime typologies as greater development allows the party in power to meet both national needs and the demands of their clients.

Consequently, India has gained a comparative strategic advantage from the crisis due to its ability to provide immediate assistance to Sri Lanka. India favors a politically and economically stable neighbor for its own domestic and national security. The foreign policy between Sri Lanka and India is delicately connected to their respective domestic (i.e., Tamil politics) and external factors (i.e., geographical proximity). During the crisis, India ensured swift diplomatic support, extended a line of credit worth USD 1 billion, deferred USD 515 million, and

⁹¹ Interviewees 5, 11, 12, and 13.

⁹² Interviewee 1.

⁹³ Interviewee 7.

offered a currency swap of USD 400 million.⁹⁴ In contrast, China initially displayed wariness and reluctance, even adopting a “hands-off approach” to assisting the crisis after Sri Lanka approached the IMF for a bailout.⁹⁵ To the Sri Lankan public today, New Delhi is seen as a credible supporter and rescuer during the crisis, while Beijing’s reluctance has sparked greater public skepticism about Chinese-funded projects.⁹⁶ In this regard, India is perceived as strategically dominant over China in Sri Lanka during the crisis. Similarly, Sri Lanka’s current vulnerability presents a strategic opportunity for the United States to further extend its economic and financial assistance to Colombo, positioning itself as an alternative to China. Economic needs are the policy priority in Sri Lanka, and the United States has the potential to meet that need.

Implications for the United States’ Engagements in Sri Lanka

As mentioned, the United States’ foreign policy in South Asia has been primarily driven by national security issues, objectives, and ambitions—largely stemming from regional security issues: i.e., India–Pakistan nuclearization, Afghanistan and Pakistan in the aftermath of the global war on terrorism, and the emerging democratic partner India in the current geopolitics with China.⁹⁷ Economic priorities have taken a backseat to broader US geopolitical strategies within its security-oriented foreign policy objectives.⁹⁸ Unlike in other regions, the United States has not been both the strategic and economic guarantor of all states. While many states have benefited from the United States’ strategic umbrella and force deployment in the region, most states’ economic security has been provided by India. Even those states geopolitically or economically aligned toward other blocs have still enjoyed positive externalities arising from the United States’ presence in the region. Although India was politically nonaligned, its generally friendly orientation toward the United

⁹⁴ Smruti S. Pattanaik, “The India–China Geo-Economic Contest for Influence in Nepal, Sri Lanka and Maldives,” in *The Belt and Road Initiative and the Politics of Connectivity: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the 21st Century*, ed. Bhumitra Chakma and Xiudian Dai (Singapore: Springer, 2022), 216.

⁹⁵ Interviewee 5.

⁹⁶ Interviewees 5 and 11; and Harsh V. Pant, “Colombo at a crossroads: India’s balanced response to Sri Lanka crisis,” *ORF*, 14 May 2022, <https://www.orfonline.org/>.

⁹⁷ Mistry, “U.S. Foreign Policy and Security”; and Ishaque, Ullah, and Noman, “United States Foreign Policy.”

⁹⁸ Only recently, economic objectives started to gain prominence in the United States’ foreign policy making. In May 2022, the United States launched the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) with its Indo-Pacific partners to strengthen “technological innovation and the global economy” with a focus on four key pillars: connected economy, resilient economy, clean economy, and fair economy. This statement highlights the equal attention to economic policies in recent US foreign policy and diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific region.

States and Europe meant that this bifurcation of strategic and security interests did not present a challenge to the United States in the region. Thus, the United States' foreign policy in South Asia is based on the "zero-sum" game, but this largely overlooks the domestic situations, needs, and desires of South Asian nations like Sri Lanka.⁹⁹

The United States' foreign policy initiatives in Sri Lanka have fallen under a broader umbrella of its security-related foreign policy evolutions in Asia and through US–China–India relations since the Cold War politics. The declassified *U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific* policy document (hereafter, framework) in 2021 emphasized its South Asian foreign policy mainly from building a stronger and "enduring strategic partnership with India," primarily on defense and security grounds. The framework recognizes strengthening "the capacity of emerging partners in South Asia, including the Maldives, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, to contribute to a free and open order" and establishing "a new initiative with South Asian partners modeled on the Maritime Security Initiative in Southeast Asia to improve maritime domain awareness, interoperability, and data-sharing with the United States."¹⁰⁰ This reflects that US policy makers have only recently recognized the role of other small South Asian states, including Sri Lanka, along the sea lines of communication (SLOC) in strengthening its maritime security. This came amid intensifying Sino-Indian competition, the US–China rivalry, and the growing geostrategic and geoeconomic significance of Sri Lanka and other small maritime states along the SLOCs in the IOR.¹⁰¹ Locally, Sri Lanka is important for the "war preparations" of big countries such as India, China, and the United States, as "all countries are preparing for war" today.¹⁰² Since then, the US Navy has undertaken "significant exchanges with India and smaller-scale initiatives with . . . Sri Lanka" (besides Pakistan and Bangladesh).¹⁰³ Thus, contemporary Sri Lanka holds a strategic significance to the United States due to increasing Chinese activities—such as in the Hambantota port—in the island nation and elsewhere in the IOR.

Defense objectives, along with democracy and human rights, are the mainstays of the United States' foreign policy engagements with Sri Lanka. Despite establishing diplomatic relations in October 1948, bilateral interactions have become more dynamic in the twenty-first century. The "U.S. policy toward Sri Lanka is

⁹⁹ Ishaque, Ullah, and Noman, "United States Foreign Policy."

¹⁰⁰ "U.S. Strategy Framework for the Indo-Pacific," declassified, 2021, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/>.

¹⁰¹ Interviewees 5, 10, 11 and 3; and Attanayake and Atmakuri, "Navigating the Sino-Indian power struggle."

¹⁰² Interviewees 6 and 7; and Zhen and Feng, "China-Sri Lanka Relations"; and Attanayake and Atmakuri, "Navigating the Sino-Indian power struggle."

¹⁰³ Mistry, "U.S. Foreign Policy and Security."

characterized by respect for its independence, sovereignty, and moderate nonaligned foreign policy; support for the country's unity, territorial integrity, and democratic institutions; and encouragement of its social and economic development."¹⁰⁴ The United States is a "strong supporter of ethnic reconciliation in Sri Lanka" following the conclusion of the civil war in 2009.¹⁰⁵ This reflects the United States' primary emphasis on security and institutions in Sri Lanka, while socioeconomic development has been a secondary objective. Since 2009, democracy, human rights, and reconciliation with the Tamil minority have been at the forefront of the United States' engagements with Sri Lanka. The insistence on human rights accountability as a prerequisite for political and economic engagements has impeded the United States from forging strong relationships with anti-Western leaders, Mahinda and Gotabaya Rajapaksa. Conversely, it has pushed Colombo further toward China, paving the way for Beijing's increased influence in Sri Lanka since then.

In a similar vein to India and China, the regime in power in both Sri Lanka and the United States plays a decisive role in shaping their engagements. In Sri Lanka, the foreign policy orientations of two dominant political parties dictate its external engagements: the foreign policy of the UNP is West-leaning, while that of the SLFP is Eastern-oriented.¹⁰⁶ Mahinda Rajapaksa's SLFP regime gravitated toward China as it offered development assistance and diplomatic support against the United States-sponsored UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) resolutions for war crime accountability and reconciliation since 2009 (i.e., for the 2009, 2012, 2013, and 2021 UNHRC resolutions).¹⁰⁷ In the United States, the Obama administration's emphasis on human rights obscured US prioritization of Sri Lanka's urgent needs for socioeconomic development in the postwar reconstruction, further hindering relations under Mahinda Rajapaksa's administration. Similarly, the cancellation of the Millennium Challenge Compact (MCC) and withdrawal from the UNHRC in 2020 during Gotabaya Rajapaksa's SLPP administration strained bilateral relations.¹⁰⁸ Thus, the Rajapaksa brothers' view the United States under the Democrats as "pursuing an interventionist and intrusive foreign policy," while

¹⁰⁴ US Embassy in Sri Lanka, "U.S.-Sri Lanka Relations," n.d., <https://www.devex.com/>.

¹⁰⁵ US Embassy in Sri Lanka, "U.S.-Sri Lanka Relations."

¹⁰⁶ Kapur and Attanayake, "Human Rights, Geopolitics and National Priorities."

¹⁰⁷ Ivan Campbell et al., "China and Conflict-Affected States"; and Macan-Markar, "Sri Lanka assured of China's help."

¹⁰⁸ The Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) serves as a political platform for members of the United People's Freedom Alliance who support Mahinda Rajapaksa. This affiliation underscores Mahinda Rajapaksa's enduring influence within the party. Furthermore, Gotabaya Rajapaksa's foreign policy, particularly his approach to China and the United States, is shaped by this legacy, reflecting a complex interplay of domestic politics and international relations.

the latter perceive the Rajapaksas as “populist, anti-democratic and authoritarian.”¹⁰⁹ These ideological differences between the regimes often pose constraints on Sri Lanka–US engagements.

In January 2015, the election of Sirisena–Wickremesinghe’s UNP regime “ushered in a new political era and opportunity for renewed U.S. diplomatic and development engagement” in Sri Lanka.¹¹⁰ Historically, Sri Lanka–U.S. relations have been stronger whenever the UNP-led government has been in power, and this trend continued from 2015 to 2019. During this period, the bilateral relationship significantly improved, with defense and political ties between the two countries cemented under the UNP regime.¹¹¹

Despite US President Donald Trump’s “America First” policy and relative indifference to human rights, evidenced by the U.S. withdrawal from the UNHRC in 2018, the US vision for containing China’s regional influence contributed to enhanced engagements.¹¹² This alignment of interests fostered cordial relationships during the UNP and Republican administrations in the late 2010s.

Since 2022, Wickremesinghe’s Western-aligned leadership has continued to pursue pragmatic foreign policy engagements with external powers, including the United States, to secure financial assistance amid the crisis. This approach provides a strategic opportunity for the United States to prioritize Sri Lanka’s domestic needs. In 2023, a significant policy initiative in the bilateral relationship was announced: a USD 553-million infrastructure investment by the United States—“the largest infrastructure investment in Asia”—to build the West Container Terminal in Colombo in partnership with the Indian conglomerate Adani Group.¹¹³ This initiative directly aims to counter Chinese economic and military influence by offering alternative infrastructure investments to smaller nations.¹¹⁴

Despite political and ideological hurdles, the United States remains Sri Lanka’s largest export market, accounting for nearly USD 3 billion in annual exports. Since 2005, Sri Lanka has enjoyed an average trade surplus of USD 2.1 billion with the United States, in stark contrast to its substantial trade deficit with China. In 2022,

¹⁰⁹ Kapur and Attanayake, “Human Rights, Geopolitics and National Priorities.”

¹¹⁰ US Embassy in Sri Lanka, “U.S.-Sri Lanka Relations.”

¹¹¹ Kapur and Attanayake, “Human Rights, Geopolitics and National Priorities.”

¹¹² Kapur and Attanayake, “Human Rights, Geopolitics and National Priorities.”

¹¹³ Bloomberg, “US invests US\$553 million in Gautam Adani’s Sri Lanka port to curb China’s influence,” *South China Morning Post*, 10 November 2023, <https://www.scmp.com/>; and Skandha Gunasekara and Alex Travelli, “U.S. Finance Agency Lends to Sri Lankan Port to Counter Chinese Influence,” *New York Times*, 8 November 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/>.

¹¹⁴ Biman Mukherji, “A China rivalry twist emerges in Sri Lanka’s new US-funded, Indian-built port,” *South China Morning Post*, 4 December 2023, <https://www.scmp.com/>; and Gunasekera and Travelli, “U.S. Finance Agency Lends to Sri Lankan Port.”

Sri Lanka's exports to and imports from the United States totaled USD 3.4 billion and USD 337 million, respectively, resulting in a trade surplus of USD 3.1 billion—a 25-percent increase from 2021.¹¹⁵ Figure 2 illustrates that bilateral trade and trade surplus with the United States rose during the UNP regime (2015 to 2019), with a decline in 2020 under the anti-Western SLPP regime. The UNP government facilitated US efforts to strengthen democratic systems, promote sustainable economic growth, and support marginalized and disaster-affected communities.¹¹⁶ Since 2002, the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement has served as the institutional framework guiding trade and economic cooperation between Sri Lanka and the United States.¹¹⁷ Sri Lanka's bilateral trade with the United States has steadily grown, driven by its significant exports compared to those with India and China. However, Sri Lanka's trade volume with China surpasses the total trade between the United States and Sri Lanka.

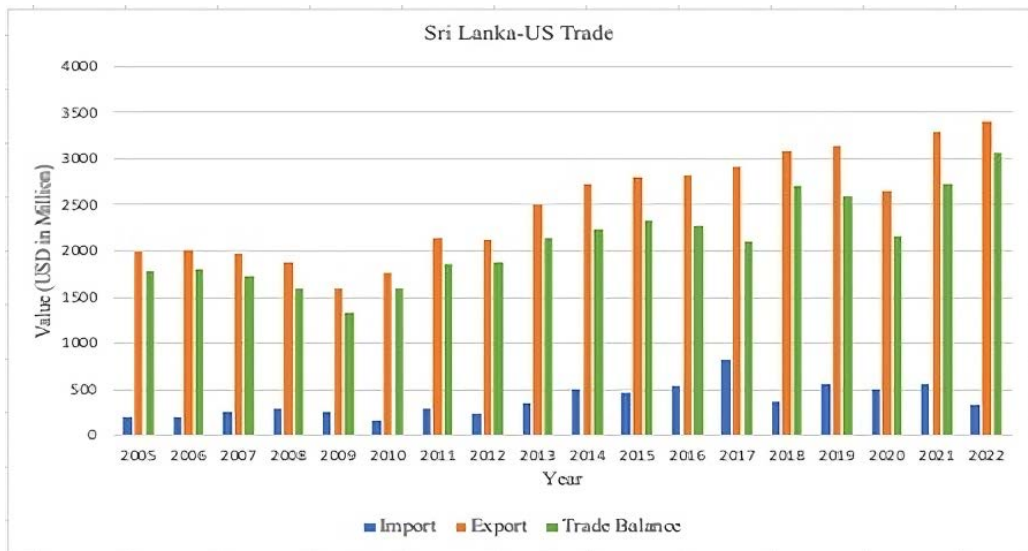


Figure 2. Sri Lanka's imports, exports, and trade surplus with the United States. (Created by author. Source: Central Bank of Sri Lanka; World Integrated Trade Solution; Department of Commerce, Sri Lanka; US Department of State)

The United States faces challenges in competing with Chinese investments in Sri Lanka due to limited aid and ideological differences. Through the United States

¹¹⁵ "Sri Lanka Trade & Investment Summary," Office of the United States Trade Representative, n.d., <https://ustr.gov/>.

¹¹⁶ Wignaraja, "Grappling with Great Power Rivalries," 4.

¹¹⁷ Department of Commerce, "International Trade Statistics of Sri Lanka."

Agency for International Development (USAID), the United States has provided more than USD 2 billion in assistance to Sri Lanka since 1956, supporting agricultural, educational, health, business, and humanitarian developments, among other areas.¹¹⁸ In 2022, the United States' FDI to Sri Lanka stood at USD 234 million, marking a 13-percent increase from 2021. In contrast, Chinese FDI from 2006 to 2019 totaled USD 12.1 billion, equivalent to 14 percent of Sri Lanka's 2018 GDP. During the pre-BRI (2006–2012) period, Chinese investment amounted to USD 5.4 billion across 15 projects, and during the BRI (2013–2019) period, it reached USD 6.8 billion across 13 projects.¹¹⁹ Chinese investments, primarily through commercial loans for mega-infrastructure projects, have significantly helped bridge Sri Lanka's infrastructure finance gap, thereby increasing economic reliance on China.¹²⁰

The United States emphasizes security, democratic institutions, and human rights accountability in its engagements with Sri Lanka, which has constrained bilateral relationships under the SLFP and SLPP regimes. However, for leadership credibility, regime stability, and ultimately institutional stability in South Asian developing nations like Sri Lanka, economic stability and development are crucial. These regimes aim to develop their economies and reduce dependency on regional powers.¹²¹ Therefore, the United States should align its engagement strategy more closely with the domestic and economic needs of Sri Lanka.

Conclusion

Domestic and international circumstances have crucially shaped Sri Lanka's domestic and foreign policy. Internal factors have become particularly significant in the postwar era. Leadership and economic objectives determine Sri Lanka's alignments with China, India, and the United States. The Sino-Indian rivalry and the complex geopolitics of the IOR have further complicated Sri Lanka's foreign policy. Amid these challenges, the economic crisis has severely limited Sri Lanka's agency and foreign policy maneuverability.¹²² Military and economic capabilities determine a country's agency, but Sri Lanka's economic woes have restricted its "active role," forcing it to cooperate passively at international forums.¹²³ Currently,

¹¹⁸ Interviewees 4; and Interviewee 23, interview by author, 12 June 2023, Male, Maldives.

¹¹⁹ Ganeshan Wignaraja et al., "Chinese Investment and the BRI in Sri Lanka," *Chatham House*, March 2020, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/>.

¹²⁰ Rahul Nath Choudhury, *Mapping Chinese Investment in South Asia* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 175–207, <https://doi.org/>.

¹²¹ Interviewee 23.

¹²² Interviewees 4 and 7.

¹²³ Interviewee 5.

Sri Lanka must “manage everyone and give concessions to every actor, including the United States. When the country is economically weak, big powers want to gain from it.”¹²⁴ As a result, Sri Lanka remains vulnerable to external influences, particularly from India and China.

As Sri Lanka strives for economic stability through pragmatic approaches, it is imperative for the United States to prioritize providing financial and development assistance. The 2023 Indian Ocean Conference and the Indo-Pacific Subcommittee hearing on the Indian Ocean identified a “gap” in the United States’ “free and open” Indo-Pacific strategy. These forums highlighted the need for stronger and broader engagements with smaller states to bolster regional economic value chains, enhance security through defensive capacity building, and build resilience against modern threats and great-power politics. This finding emphasizes that economic development is the key starting point for enhancing security. It reflects the developmental needs of smaller states in the IOR and offers a starting point for a more substantive US policy toward the region, particularly Sri Lanka.

New Delhi is already beginning to change India’s foreign policy approach toward its South Asian neighbors.¹²⁵ However, India’s financial constraints, bureaucratic red tape, and inefficient delivery push its neighbors further toward China.¹²⁶ The desire for political leadership to access quick and generous resources without conditions or internal interference naturally drives South Asian countries, including Sri Lanka, toward China. Consequently, China becomes an immediate alternative to India because of its generous and swift assistance (loans) without internal interference.¹²⁷ This dynamic shows China is financially and institutionally more attractive compared to the traditional economic partner, India.

Today, Sri Lanka seeks “a pragmatic strategic relationship” with the United States to expand its economic partnership and strengthen its security resilience. President Wickremesinghe has openly expressed a willingness to work with any state or nonstate actor willing to help achieve the country’s economic objectives, acknowledging that Sri Lanka’s priorities differ from those of great powers in the region.¹²⁸ Socioeconomic development has been a primary and consistent focus of all Sri

¹²⁴ Interviewee 7.

¹²⁵ As India’s “over-emphasis on its security linkages with its neighbours” – by being “extra-vigilant” to neighbors’ domestic and foreign policy – have caused resentments towards it, India is transforming its Neighbourhood First policy from “overt security-centric approach” to building developmental partnerships. Patta-naik, “The India-China Geo-Economic Contest,” 440.

¹²⁶ Interviewees 22 and 20.

¹²⁷ Interviewees 14 and 20; Interviewee 21, interview by author, 8 June 2023, Male, Maldives; and Interviewee 24, interview by author, 13 June 2023, Male, Maldives.

¹²⁸ Carnegie Endowment, “Islands Dialogue.”

Lankan elites since the postwar era. China has provided generous funding and flexibility to recipient countries regarding the nature of investments, although trade and FDI inflows from external powers depend on the regimes. Today, development needs are crucial in contemporary Sri Lanka and other smaller states in their post-LDCS era, impacting leaders' legitimacy. Therefore, Washington should capitalize on Wickremesinghe's Western-oriented leadership, which emphasizes pragmatism, economy, and nationalism—attributes consistent with Sri Lanka's foreign policy practices. The US-India initiative to build the West Container Terminal in Colombo offers Sri Lanka breathing space in its infrastructural development as an alternative to Chinese-funded projects. It also provides a policy space to advance US-Sri Lanka geostrategic engagements.

Sri Lanka desperately needs economic support, a need shared by other smaller states in the region that prioritize economic opportunities over security concerns. Economic insecurity is the preeminent security threat to contemporary Sri Lanka. Regional powers—India and China—strategically compete over Sri Lanka primarily through economic and developmental lenses. For the United States to be successful in the long term, it needs to prioritize Sri Lanka's fundamental needs, which are socioeconomic, and offer development assistance that provides alternatives to those offered by other powers. Washington has strong security and defense ties with Colombo due to India. Emphasizing economic policy and carefully calibrating support to meet Sri Lanka's domestic needs would give the United States a strategic advantage in the IOR in the long run. ✪

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Appendix

Field Research: Interview Table

Interviewee's Code Name	Profession/ Background	Affiliation	Place	Date
Interviewee 1	Scholar	University of Colombo	Colombo, Sri Lanka	2 May 2023
Interviewee 2	Scholar	University of Colombo	Colombo, Sri Lanka	2 May 2023
Interviewee 3	Senior Journalist and Political Analyst	N/A	Colombo, Sri Lanka	2 May 2023
Interviewee 4	Scholar	University of Colombo	Colombo, Sri Lanka	3 May 2023
Interviewee 5	Scholar	University of Colombo	Colombo, Sri Lanka	4 May 2023
Interviewee 6	Journalist	Ceylon Today	Colombo, Sri Lanka	4 May 2023
Interviewee 7	Scholar; Executive Member	University of Colombo; Bandaranaike Centre for International Studies (BCIS); Regional Centre for Strategic Studies (RCSS)	Colombo, Sri Lanka	4 May 2023
Interviewee 8	Scholar	University of Colombo	Colombo, Sri Lanka	9 May 2023
Interviewee 9	Scholar, Executive Member	University of Colombo; Regional Centre for Strategic Studies (RCSS)	Colombo, Sri Lanka	10 May 2023
Interviewee 10	Scholar	Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU)	Colombo, Sri Lanka	11 May 2023
Interviewee 11	Staff	Movement for Land and Agricultural Reform (MONLAR)	Colombo, Sri Lanka	11 May 2023
Interviewee 12	Staff	MONLAR	Colombo, Sri Lanka	11 May 2023
Interviewee 13	Staff	MONLAR	Colombo, Sri Lanka	11 May 2023
Interviewee 14	Research Fellow	Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP)	New Delhi, India	9 December 2022
Interviewee 15	Research Fellow	Observer Research Foundation (ORF)	New Delhi, India	11 December 2022
Interviewee 16	Journalist	Newsreel Asia	New Delhi, India	12 December 2022
Interviewee 17	Former Diplomat; Executive Member	India International Centre (IIC)	New Delhi, India	14 December 2022
Interviewee 18	Researcher	Observer Research Foundation (ORF)	New Delhi, India	14 December 2022

Interviewee's Code Name	Profession/ Background	Affiliation	Place	Date
Interviewee 19	Former Diplomat; Research Fellow	Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP)	New Delhi, India	17 December 2022
Interviewee 20	Former Diplomat; Former politician	Affiliated to the Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM)	Male, Maldives	24 May 2023
Interviewee 21	Scholar	Affiliated to the PPM	Male, Maldives	8 June 2023
Interviewee 22	Former Diplomat; Former politician	N/A	Male, Maldives	11 June 2023
Interviewee 23	Former politician	N/A	Male, Maldives	12 June 2023
Interviewee 24	Journalist	Journalist Association of the Maldives	Male, Maldives	13 June 2023
Interviewee 25	Former politician	Academy of Dhivehi Language	Male, Maldives	7 June 2023
Interviewee 26 (Dr. Passang Dorji)	Former politician; Bhutanese scholar	N/A	Thimphu, Bhutan	19 January 2024

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