

THE SMALL ISLAND STATES IN THE INDIAN OCEAN: PERCEPTIONS, CONCERNS AND INTERESTS

*Chulanee Attanayake**
Amit Ranjan

Institute of South Asian Studies,
National University of Singapore, 119620, Singapore

*Corresponding author: chulanee@nus.edu.sg

Abstract

With the emergence of China as a major economic power, the economic growth is shifting from the West to the East. China is also challenging the global power status quo. Consequently, there is a rapid change in the Indo-Pacific region where several regional and extra-regional powers are contesting and competing to attain strategic influence over the others. In such a situation, small states of the Indo-Pacific region have gained importance. While existing scholarly resources explore how the great power struggle is played in the Indian Ocean and how this impacts island states, little focus is given on how the island states perceive this change. Amidst this backdrop, this paper explores how small Indian Ocean island states perceive the Indo-Pacific. The article views the contestation and cooperation in the Indo-Pacific and explores small island states' concerns and interests regarding the emerging Indo-Pacific Order. The paper uses four cases as examples, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Seychelles and Mauritius.

Keywords: Island States, Indian Ocean, Indo-Pacific Region, Mauritius, Maldives, Seychelles, Sri Lanka

Introduction

The shift in the centre of gravity in world politics and economics from the Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific region has turned the latter into a theatre of power struggle. The first two decades of the 21st century have seen several developments: the growth shift from the West to the East, China's emergence as a rising power followed by its increasing assertiveness in the region, and changing rhetoric of China's relationship with other significant players in the region, have contributed to this new development. This growing Chinese aggressiveness in the Indo-Pacific region is resisted by the regional powers by their own or with a support from the extra-regional powers. Hence, to say that a fundamental and unprecedented transition is underway in the Indo-Pacific region is not an exaggeration.

Asia is predicted to account for more than half of the global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and about 40 per cent of global consumption by 2040. Between 2000 and 2017, Asia's global share of real GDP in purchasing-power-parity rose from 32 per cent to 42 per cent, consumption share from 23 to 28 per cent, and the share of the world's middle classes from 23 to 40 per cent (Tonby et al., 2019). These numbers are expected to increase further because of exponential economic growth in China, India, and Japan. An increase will also aid

the Asian growth in connectivity between countries such as Vietnam, South Korea, etc. Moreover, global flows of trade, capital, people, knowledge, transport, culture, resources and the environment are further expected to shift towards Asia in the coming decades.

China's emergence as a rising power is challenging Asia's existing status quo. Its economy expanded three-fold between 1990 and 2016. The GDP grew by US\$ 10.1 trillion between 2000 and 2015, resulting from the economic reforms in the late 1970s. China's growth is more than the combined development achieved by India, France, Italy, Russia, and Iran (Smith, 2018). As the second-largest economy globally since 2015, and the largest in terms of Purchasing Power Parity (PPP), Beijing is the world's factory and the largest consumer market. Beijing's rapid industrialisation, military modernisation and its place in global politics have prompted a debate about whether China will replace the US as the global hegemon? (Pillsbury, 2016; Spalding & Kaufman, 2019). Following its political ambition, Beijing is taking steps to broaden its influence. These steps pose challenges to the US's global hegemony and pushed it on the path of rivalry with Washington. Beijing introduced the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013 to enhance infrastructure connectivity, trade liberalisation, and global financial integration (Ly, 2020). China's efforts were viewed as hegemonic and expansive (Flint & Zhu, 2019; Li, 2019; Clarke, 2017; Mahapatra, 2018). The BRI has escalated Beijing's tensions with the Western countries and its Asian rivals such as India and Japan. To check China's assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific region, Japan, Australia and India have partnered up among themselves and with the US (Medcalf, 2021). The emergence of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific concept, which later developed into the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or the Quad, results from this development.

With China's BRI and the rapidly emerging Quad, the Indo-Pacific region has become crowded with multiple extra-regional powers playing against one another to gain influence. While the American and Japanese warships sail in the South China Sea, the Chinese have partnered with Russia, Iran and South Africa for military exercises in the Indian Ocean. As a member of Quad group, India also has vital naval presence in the region.

In this new geopolitical game, the small island states have gained immense importance due to their strategic positioning. They are more connected and contested than ever. While there are emerging scholarly resources on how the great power struggle is played in the Indian Ocean and how they contest and compete to gain influence in small island states, few resources are available on the perspective of small island states on this development. This paper explores how small Indian Ocean island states perceive Indo-Pacific and their concerns and interests about the emerging Indo-Pacific Order. The paper uses four cases as examples, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Seychelles and Mauritius.

The small Island States in the Western Indian Ocean

As the Indian and the Pacific oceans are getting connected and contested, no island can stay alone, unaffected and unimportant (Medcalf, 2021). Yet, small island states are less discussed in academia, though the number of articles and monograph on the theme are gradually increasing. Although small island states are not a homogeneous group, they share many common features that serve to increase their vulnerability to the projected impacts of the great power struggle. They are small in physical size and surrounded by a large expanse of ocean. Compared to the great powers, they have limited military capabilities and are prone to external shocks. Small island states have less capacity and capabilities to face a military conflict with poorly developed military infrastructure and limited funds for military modernisations. Situated in the middle of the Pacific or the Indian Ocean, frequent visits of warships and submarines crowd their immediate neighbourhood and immediate borders.

However, some of the physically and demographically small states such as Singapore are global economic power.

The following section focuses on four island nations in the Western Indian Ocean. These island nations differ in size, demographic composition, and economic status. Yet, they are bound together by several characteristics. Firstly, all four islands share common colonial history. The demographic, economic, social and political changes they experienced during colonial and early post-colonial years still haunt their destiny. They are modern-day multiparty democracies with a complex ethnic situation. Most importantly, all these island states are strategically located, making them theatres of power play in the Indo-Pacific power struggle.

Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is strategically positioned in the middle of the Indian Ocean sea lanes of communication. Although it does not fall within the same category of the small island states as the rest of the cases discussed below, it is defined as a small island state due to its smallness compared to its big neighbour India, and due to domestic and external perception of a state's role in the international hierarchy and external behaviour (Attanayake & Atmakuri, 2021). The majority of Sri Lankan people are Sinhalese, practising Theravada Buddhism. The country is also a house to minority Tamil Hindus, and a sizeable number of Muslims and Christians.

Like any other small island nation, Sri Lanka is abundant in natural beauty but has limited natural resources required to boost its economic development. As a result, the country is heavily dependent on agriculture, plantation industry, and tourism.

The island's strategic position has often attracted the great powers wanting to dominate the Indian Ocean region. For instance, Colombo is a subject of China and India's great power competition in the Indian Ocean. Historically, Colombo has maintained a cordial relationship with both the countries. India is Sri Lanka's closest neighbour and shares a legacy of cultural, linguistic, intellectual, and religious interactions. Despite New Delhi's constant involvement in the island's domestic politics (Biswas, 2006; Babu, 1998; Chalmers & Miglani, 2015), in post-civil war (2006-2009) years, India and Sri Lanka have maintained relatively close ties.

Sri Lanka's relations with China dates back to the ancient silk road period when the island nation was one of the key stopovers in the ancient trading network. While the relationship was a setback during the colonial period as Sri Lanka was under British rule and China was going through its own political turmoil, the relationship revived following the 21st century. Since the early 2000s, China has gradually increased its trade and development partnership with Sri Lanka. Today, China is the second-largest trading partner and the main development partner of Sri Lanka. China's foray into Sri Lanka has extended into investment in ports, roads and railways, energy, and real estate. This development has added to New Delhi's concerns regarding the growing Chinese presence in its neighbourhood. As such, India has increased its development assistance and investment in the country in order to secure its influence in Sri Lanka (Attanayake & Atmakuri, 2021; Press Trust of India, 2022).

Competition between India and China impacts Sri Lanka's economy. Sri Lanka has gained an economic advantage, as both countries flex their economic muscle to gain influence on the island. For instance, with China's growing investments in Sri Lanka's port industry, India is showing keen interest in doing the same and recently invested in the western terminal of the Colombo Port. India showed no interest in investing in Sri Lanka's port industry before China's investments in the Colombo International Container Terminal (CICT) in the Colombo

Port or Hambantota Port. However, most of Sri Lanka's transshipments are to or from India. Thus, Sri Lanka mostly enjoys and benefits from the growing competition. However, as the competition and conflict are intensifying, there is a concern for Sri Lanka, as it fears that it will be forced to make an unwanted choice between the two Asian players.

Amidst the Sino-Indian strategic competition in Sri Lanka, in 2022, the island state plunged to an economic crisis. Most of the analysts attribute the economic crisis is due to the Chinese debt trap, even though the current economic crisis is a result of long-term twin deficit problem. Statistically, China accounts for only 10 per cent or less of Sri Lanka's external debt (Zhou 2022). To deal with the economic crisis, in March/ April 2022, Colombo has asked Beijing to provide US \$ 1 billion loan to meet repayments and US 1.5 billion credit line to buy Chinese goods. The request is under consideration (Ng and Zhou 2022) . On the other hand, between January and April India has extended an assistance of about US \$ 2.5 billion including credit facilities for fuel and food (The Times of India 2022).

The Maldives

The Maldives is another South Asian island state subjected to the constant competition between India and China. Compared to Sri Lanka, the Maldives is relatively homogenous , with most people adhering to sunni form of Islam. Located 250 miles southwest of India, it has extended security, cultural and economic ties bringing the island state into India's orbit.

Despite having a non-aligned foreign policy during the Cold War (1948-1990) period, since the late 1980s or 1990s, it calibrated a "strategic relationship" with India as its de facto port of the first call for security and defence purposes. This was later developed into an "India First" foreign policy (Zahir, 2021). India has been the main provider of military training and equipment for Maldivian defence forces. Since 2013, the Maldives along with India and Sri Lanka is a part of the Trilateral Maritime Security Corporation agreement.

During his tenure, President Mohamed Nasheed (2008-2012) cultivated economic relations that have given China entry into the island nation. The island state became closer to China during the presidential tenure of Abdulla Yameen (2013-2018), distancing itself from India, its traditional friend. India regained its lost position after Ibrahim Mohamed Solih was elected as the President of the Maldives in 2018. Solih's government is chiefly pursuing the 'India-First' policy. Since 2018, India has been helping the Maldives develop its civic infrastructure. New Delhi had also aided when Malé needed it most. For instance, soon after Solih was elected, India announced US\$1.4 billion in aid amid the then newly formed government's worries over Chinese debt (Ranjan 2022). Despite such a crucial role, the opposition parties under the leadership of Yameen have started the "India Out" campaign in the Maldives. The campaigners accuse Solih's government of compromising the country's sovereignty. However, the government has refuted all such charges and raised questions about the political motives of the campaigners.

Although not favoured, China remains an important actor in the Maldives. In early January 2022, the Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi landed in Male as a part of his five-nation trip to Eritrea, Kenya, Comoros, the Maldives and Sri Lanka. During the visit, Male and Beijing signed agreements on Mutual Visa Exemption, Economic and Technical Cooperation, Management and Maintenance of China-Maldives Friendship Bridge, and China Aided Micro-Grid Sea-water Desalination Project (Ranjan 2022).

Strategic contests in the Maldivian waters have further escalated with the entry of the USA. In September 2020, the US and the Maldives signed a defence pact. In 2013, the two countries were set to sign such a pact but did not move ahead as Male did not receive a favourable signal from New Delhi. The 2020 defence pact is perceived as a bid to check China in the Maldivian waters (See Ranjan 2020).

Seychelles

Seychelles is an African island nation with colonial history and political, social and demographic characteristics similar to the South Asian Island states discussed above. Seychelles' demography is racially mixed, predominantly of African descent Creole population who follow Catholicism and Christianity. It also has Franco Seychellois and Chinese influence; it also has an interesting Indian element in its predominantly African Creole population (McDougall & Taneja, 2019; Lintner, 2019). As a result, the country has a significant Indian affinity in its foreign relationships. Like all the other island states discussed in this paper, Seychelles has become a frontline state in the India-China rivalry in the Indian Ocean (Lintner, 2019). Interestingly, its strategic location between the Indian subcontinent, Africa, and British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT) with the American base at Diego Garcia towards its East has made it attractive to all major players in the Indo Pacific region.

India's position as a leading power in geostrategic terms in the Indian Ocean Region has allowed New Delhi to maintain a leading role as a benign security guarantor. As with the Maldives, India has played a significant role in Seychelle's defence sector by providing military training for its forces, building Seychelles Defense Academy, providing naval patrol vessels and maritime surveillance aircraft and coastal surveillance radar system (Brewster, 2014; McDougall & Taneja, 2019; Ministry of External Affairs, India, n.d.). In 2003, India signed a defence corporation agreement with Seychelles and provided defence consultations to the President (Pant, 2018; Das, 2019). In 2014, Seychelles was included in the India-led Trilateral Maritime Security Cooperation Arrangement wi

th the Maldives and Sri Lanka. In response to growing Chinese interest in Seychelles, New Delhi signed an agreement in January 2018 allowing the establishment of an Indian naval base and an airstrip (Lintner, 2019). However, it has not materialised as of now.

Compared to India, China has a low profile in Seychelles. Beijing had modest economic link with the island state, but it developed more substantial cooperation since 2012 (Cabestan, 2021). In October 2017, China and Seychelles signed a new economic and technological cooperation agreement. That year, China was among the major sources of imports for Seychelles, even though it has not reciprocated similarly as an export destination (McDougall & Taneja, 2019). Seychelles has also seen an increasing number of Chinese nationals visiting the island as tourists. According to statistics, Chinese tourists to Seychelles have grown from a mere 500 in 2011 to nearly 15,000 in 2016 (Lintner, 2019). China has undertaken a number of projects in Seychelles. Among them is the construction of the National Assembly and Supreme Court buildings and the expansion of the Anse Royale Hospital. Before building its first naval base in Djibouti, Beijing established a port in Seychelles or facilitated the Chinese Navy getting assistance during anti-piracy patrols on the Somalian coast (Lintner, 2019; Brewster, 2015).

Defence cooperation between Victoria and Beijing has progressively increased since the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding in October 2004 (African Business 2004) . In

2016, China explored the possibilities for enhancing defence cooperation, including training, equipment supplies, and high-level exchange with Victoria, raising concerns and worries in India. Amidst speculations of renewed ambitions for military base, Beijing continues to strengthen more substantial military and defense cooperation. For instance, in April 2019, Chinese government donated a fleet of military vehicles along with fifteen troop carriers and eleven trucks to the Seychelles People's Defence Forces (Cabestan, 2021).

Mauritius

Mauritius is also an African island state located 800km from Madagascar and further away from the African mainland. With two-thirds of the population of Indian origin and a sizeable minority of Chinese descent, it has a closer cultural identity with Asia despite its geographic closeness to Africa. It is a transit point of trade between South Africa and other countries.

Due to its cultural affinity, Mauritius has had a long-term political alignment with India since its independence in 1968. The Indian descent of two-thirds of its population and the cultural links have given New Delhi a considerable soft power, reinforcing trade and economic links. India is a leading source of imports for Mauritius, and it ranks 22nd for Mauritian exports (McDougall & Taneja, 2019). It is also a conduit for investment for Indian investors (Houlder, 2017). Mauritius has a defence cooperation agreement with India since 1974, and in 2014, it joined the India-led TMSM mechanism (Scott, 2015, Mohan, 2013). Moreover, India also provides national security advice to Mauritius, making the small island country willingly subordinate to New Delhi (Brewster, 2015).

Mauritius' ties with China focuses primarily on economic and trade relations. China sees Mauritius as significant in its BRI and the island state as its gateway to Africa (Lintner, 2019). Mauritius values expansion of trade and investment with Beijing as advantageous for its economic development (Ancharaz, 2009; Cotterill, 2017; Lintner, 2019; Ancharaz & Tandrayen-Ragoobur, 2013). In 2017, China was Mauritius's second-largest destination source and 13th market for export (McDougall & Taneja, 2019; Lintner 2019). China has expressed its interest in playing the main role in Mauritius's strategy of setting up special economic zones in targeted countries like Ghana, Senegal and Madagascar (Lintner, 2019). Like in all other countries discussed in this paper, Chinese tourists visit to Mauritius has increased significantly in recent years.

The Mauritian government actively supports alignment with India, yet it also wants to take an advantage of growing ties with China. Hence, its strategy has been to encourage the involvement of both powers in ways that are seen as advantageous to Mauritius.

Perceptions, Concerns and Interests in the Indo-Pacific Region

Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Seychelles, and Mauritius share the same concerns over freedom of navigation and securitisation and militarisation of the Indo-Pacific region. However, their way of engaging with the Indo-Pacific concept differs. Yet, they see the economic advantage of the great power competition in the area and how each power wants to court them for strategic purposes.

Perception of the Indo-Pacific

Among the island states discussed in this paper, Sri Lanka is the only country that has officially endorsed the Indo-Pacific concept. In a joint statement issued with the US at the second US-Sri Lanka Partnership Dialogue in 2017, the then-Sri Lankan administration

informed that the two governments resolved to work together toward a free and open Indo-Pacific region and for greater peace and stability around the world (US Indo-Pacific Command, 2017). However, under President Gotabaya Rajapakse's leadership, the official rhetoric has been to maintain neutrality and refrain from undermining Indian strategic concerns (Strat News Global, 2020). Moreover, the Foreign Secretary, Admiral (Professor) Jayanath Colombage noted once that Sri Lanka is concerned with the Indo-Pacific emerging as a military alliance and that Colombo does not want to be a part of a military alliance. At the same time, it is open to collaborating on economic grounds (Seetharam, 2020).

Mauritius has not put out a clear foreign policy statement or strategic document on the Indo-Pacific. Mauritian government rarely uses the term Indo-Pacific in its official documents. Mauritius has participated at multiple events organised by other countries related to Indo-Pacific, including the *Unis dans l'espace Indo Pacifique* (United in the Indo-Pacific Space) conference organised by France in October 2019, the first Indo-Pacific Business Summit organised by the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) in partnership with the Ministry of External Affairs of India in 2021 and the Ministerial Forum for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region held in France in February 2022. Yet, the official Mauritian political rhetoric still largely goes with "the Indian Ocean" and "Africa".

Seychelles believes that its national interests are best defended through bilateral and multilateral approaches. It requires integrating with international partners for the integrity and protection of its territorial waters. Like Mauritius, it has participated in international events related to Indo-Pacific discourse, such as the Ministerial Forum for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific held in France in February 2022. Yet, the use of Indo-Pacific in its official political rhetoric is missing in the latest policy documents such as the Foreign Affairs Department Newsletter and the Executive Summary of Seychelles Foreign Policy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Tourism, n.d.; Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Tourism, 2021).

The Maldives has not issued an official strategic document on Indo-Pacific; however, given Solhi's "pro-Indian" foreign policy, it is evident that Male perceives the concept positively. Male emphasises the impact of the geopolitical developments in the Indo-Pacific and its critical significance to the Maldives and stresses that the peace and stability in the region are intrinsic to the peace and stability of the island state (Carnegie Endowment, 2021).

The island states have complicated relations with the leading players in the Indo-Pacific region. They attempt to stay away from getting in the middle of the power struggle. For this purpose, perhaps they view that not having an exclusive policy or strategy on the emerging Indo-Pacific concept supports their emphasis on their neutrality.

Perceptions on Freedom of Navigation and Sovereignty

While acknowledging that the strategic competition with China and the rest has reached an unprecedented breadth, small island states call for stability and norms across the Indo Pacific region. They do not want the major powers to interfere with their sovereign rights in their immediate maritime environment. Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Mauritius have claimed that they have the right to regulate not only economic activities but also foreign military activities in their respective Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) for military activities, thereby rejecting the US interpretation of UNCLOS that would permit military activities in EEZs (Congressional Research Service, 2021; Samaranayake, 2020).

Sri Lanka, for instance, has supported the idea of a free and open Indo-Pacific region through the promotion of a maritime order in the region. In support of advocating for normative regional values, Sri Lanka organised the Track 1.5 'Indian Ocean: Defining Our

Future' conference in Colombo in 2018. This provided an international forum to discuss strengthening the implementation of UNCLOS and clarify any misunderstandings on key principles such as freedom of navigation and maritime crime (Gunawardana, 2020).

In 2020, the spokesperson of the Maldivian President shared a similar vision when he claimed that Male shares the idea of keeping a free and open Indo Pacific so that legitimate and unhindered commercial activities across this geographic space can bring prosperity for all communities (Sibal, 2020). Mauritius, which is in battle with the UK over sovereignty of the Chagos archipelago, called the US to begin its concept of free and open Indo Pacific by withdrawing its support for the UK over the sovereignty of the island chain (Harris, 2021).

Great Power Struggle, the emergence of the Quad and Its impact

The island states believe that they have no say in the emerging great power struggle in the Indo-Pacific region, but they are the most affected. Sri Lanka's Foreign Secretary Admiral Jayanath Colombage mentioned in 2020 that Colombo has no say in what the major powers in the region decide on. Yet, it would prefer an inclusive environment for small nations like Sri Lanka (Asian Confluence, 2020). Colombo emphasises that it does not want to get involved in the power struggle in the region, especially since it is at the crossroad of China's BRI and the Quad, led by the US and India's coalition. Sri Lanka believes that the Quad is a natural product of the emergence of a multipolar world. It is observing how the Quad coalition is shaping up and if it is an exclusive military partnership.

Sri Lanka's position on the Great Power struggle and the Quad should be understood within the Rajapaksa administration's foreign policy framework. The Rajapaksa administration is traditionally perceived to have a pro-China inclination in its foreign policy. However, when they came to power in 2020, the new government explained that it intends to reconcile the competing interests of China and India. The government emphasised that it would not compromise India's strategic security interests (Bandara, 2020).

In contrast to Sri Lanka's concerns over the emergence of the Quad as a competitive strategy with China's BRI, the Maldives have expressed their support and active engagement with the initiative. Male endorsed the US-led Indo-Pacific strategy, and in September 2020, the Maldives signed a defence agreement with the US to the delight of India (Rej, 2020; Zahir, 2021). The Maldivian Foreign Minister, Abdulla Shahid, during his visit to India in April 2021, mentioned that the Quad provides stability to the Indo Pacific region (NDTV, 2021). These new developments are attributed to the current Maldivian government's "pro-Indian" foreign policy.

Common to the four islands discussed in this paper is how they seek to take advantage of the growing power struggle to realise their economic interests. Sri Lanka has experienced how China, India and the US show greater interest in investing and providing economic aid to influence the island nation. While India and China's competition for economic engagement have increased over the years, the US also offered a grant under the Millennium Challenge Cooperation (MCC) in 2016 to Sri Lanka (Attanayake & Atmakuri, 2021; Abeysinghe & Wijesinghe, 2021).

Having courted both India and China for economic engagement from time to time, the Maldives have also turned to Japan. In November 2020, the Maldives and Japan signed an agreement for a Japanese grant of US\$ 7.6 million to be extended to the Maldives coast guard and the Maritime Rescue and Coordination Center. Abdulla Shahid, spoke about the country's close relations with Japan and the need for coordinated action in combating piracy,

countering violent extremism, and narco-trafficking, and 'to ensure a free and open Indian ocean that would bring about peace and prosperity to the region' (Srinivasan, 2020).

Mauritius, for instance, signed a Free Trade Agreement with China in February 2021. It also has a Comprehensive Economic Cooperation and Partnership agreement under discussion with India. On the other hand, Seychelles viewed the Blue economy and marine protection as key policy priorities and used the power struggle to bolster its Blue Economic and sustainable development capacities.

Impact of Militarisation and Securitisation of the Indo-Pacific Region

The island states of Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Mauritius, and Seychelles have raised concerns over the growing securitisation and militarisation of the Indo-Pacific region due to the competition among the great powers. Sri Lanka, in particular, has expressed its concern that the emergence of the Quad and the BRI as competitive strategies may lead to a new Cold War (Asian Confluence, 2020). Historically, Sri Lanka has promoted a peaceful Indian Ocean region. During the Cold War, Sri Lanka took the initiative in the 1970s to declare the Indian Ocean Zone of Peace to main the security and stability of the region. This is a momentous initiative of the small island state in defining the regional geopolitics of the time. Hence, Sri Lanka has discussed the relevance of this concept regarding the current context of the growing militarisation in the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea (Sultana, 2021).

Given Sri Lanka's geostrategic positioning, the Quad countries' view is important to bring the small island nation into its partnership for military exercises. In February 2022 Sri Lanka participated at the naval exercise called Milan on invitation by New Delhi (Ministry of Defense Sri Lanka, 2022). Sri Lanka was among the four countries that participated in the first iteration of the exercise (The Hindu, 2022), and its rejoining proves how Sri Lanka wants to maintain a balance partnership with the Quad countries. Mauritius has willingly been a part of growing military and security engagements, especially with the Quad member countries.

Conclusion

The island states of Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Seychelles and Mauritius acknowledge the emerging trends and developments in the Indo-Pacific. Given their geographical positionings, they are at the centre of these changes and developments. They perceive the construct of the Indo-Pacific as an essential phenomenon for their international role. While they may not be able to play a defining role in the overarching Indo-Pacific strategy, they are aware that the changes would, directly and indirectly, impact realising their interests. When the major players like the United States, India, and Australia seek to decouple from China, other small countries attempt to hedge between the players in order to realise their interests. These developments and the strains on the international order are prompting states to prioritise the pursuit of their national interest.

The common modus operandi of the island states discussed in this paper is to maintain close ties with all major powers involved in the Indo-Pacific region. Their engagement includes cooperation in infrastructure development, trade, security and people-to-people contacts. Given the growing centrality of the roles played by China and India in this part of the Indo Pacific region, it can be seen how these countries hedge between the two Asian powers to realise their economic, security and foreign policy objectives.

The island states seemingly have a common perception of the Indo-Pacific construct, yet their responses are seemingly different. Their primary concerns are associated with the freedom of navigation and securitisation of the ocean sphere. They acknowledge the developments and don't want to define the parameters to avoid being seen as a partner of one group over the others. Yet only Sri Lanka has been vocal of revisiting the Indian Ocean Zone of Peace. Given its alignment with India, the Maldives is seemingly interested in joining the Quad initiative as a partner. These small island states are yet to gather as a grouping on their own to explore what Indo-Pacific means for their strategic interests. Hence, it is perhaps an important strategic initiative for the island states to assemble as a grouping to discuss their common perceptions and concerns independently, without bandwagoning or taking side of the major powers. Such a context may help them to identify the strategic responses they can initiate to the common challenges they face as island states within the changing Indo-Pacific region's environment.

References

- Abeysinghe, C., & Wijesinghe, H. (2021). Political-Economic impact of growing rivalry between china and the Quad Alliance on Small states in Asia: Special Reference to Sri Lanka. *Technium Social Sciences Journal*, 19, 545–562.
- African Business (2016, November 22). Seychelles to Boost Military Cooperation with China. <https://african.business/2016/11/finance-services/seychelles-to-boost-military-cooperation-with-china/>
- Ancharaz, V. (2009). David V. Goliath: Mauritius Facing Up to China. *The European Journal of Development Research*, 21(4), 622–643. <https://doi.org/10.1057/ejdr.2009.26>
- Ancharaz, V., & Tandrayen-Ragoobur, V. (2013). Red dragon China and small Mauritius' trade links: an in-depth analysis. *Journal of Chinese Economic and Foreign Trade Studies*, 6(3), 119–144. <https://doi.org/10.1108/jcefts-10-2012-0018>
- Asian Confluence. (2020, October 29). Deepening India Sri Lanka Ties in the New World Order. Retrieved November 15, 2021, from Facebook website: <https://www.facebook.com/AsianConfluence/videos/383066709710683/>
- Attanayake, C., & Atmakuri, A. (2021). Navigating the Sino-Indian power struggle in the Indian Ocean: the case of Sri Lanka. *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, 17(01), 114–133. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2021.1878587>
- Babu, B. R. (1998). Indian Intervention In Sri Lanka: ANATOMY OF A FAILURE. *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues*, 2(3), 132–145. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45064546>
- Bandara, K. (2020, August 26). Time ripe for deviation from Western-oriented foreign policy - Hard talk | Daily Mirror. Retrieved November 15, 2021, from Daily Mirror [Sri Lanka] website: <https://www.dailymirror.lk/opinion/Time-ripe-for-deviation-from-Western-oriented-foreign-policy/231-194504>
- Biswas, B. (2006). The Challenges of Conflict Management: A Case Study of Sri Lanka. *Civil Wars*, 8(1), 46–65. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698240600886057>
- Brewster, D. (2015). *Indias ocean - the story of indias bid for regional leadership*. Taylor & Francis Ltd.
- Cabestan, J.-P. (2021). Seychelles: How a Small Island State is Navigating Through the Emerging Competition Between India and China. *Seychelles Research Journal*, 03(01).

- Carnegie Endowment. (2021, September 20). Keynote Address – Ahmed Khaleel, Maldives Minister of State for Foreign Affairs. Retrieved March 21, 2022, from [www.youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B98I3pP11Xw&feature=youtu.be) website: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B98I3pP11Xw&feature=youtu.be>
- Chalmers, J., & Miglani, S. (2015, January 18). Indian spy's role alleged in Sri Lankan President's election defeat. *Reuters*. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sri-lanka-election-india-insight-idUSKBN0KR03020150118>
- Clarke, M. (2017). The Belt and Road Initiative: China's New Grand Strategy? *Asia Policy*, 24(1), 71–79. <https://doi.org/10.1353/asp.2017.0023>
- Congressional Research Service. (2021). *U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas: Background and Issues for Congress*. Retrieved from <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/R42784.pdf>
- Cotterill, J. (2017, October 5). Is Mauritius big enough for China and India? *Financial Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.ft.com/content/bb658580-8434-11e7-94e2-c5b903247afd>
- Das, C. (2019). India's Maritime Diplomacy in South West Indian Ocean: Evaluating strategic partnerships. *Journal of Strategic Security*, 12(2), 42–59. <https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.12.2.1726>
- Flint, C., & Zhu, C. (2019). The geopolitics of connectivity, cooperation, and hegemonic competition: The Belt and Road Initiative. *Geoforum*, 99, 95–101. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2018.12.008>
- Gunawardana, N. (2020, January 8). A Sri Lankan Perspective on the Indo-Pacific Concept. Retrieved from The Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute website: <https://lki.lk/publication/a-sri-lankan-perspective-on-the-indo-pacific-concept/>
- Harris, P. (2021, January 8). Want a Rules-Based Order for the Indo-Pacific? Start With Diego Garcia. Retrieved November 15, 2021, from The Diplomat website: <https://thediplomat.com/2021/01/want-a-rules-based-order-for-the-indo-pacific-start-with-diego-garcia/>
- Li, X. (2019). Understanding the Multiple Facets of China's "One Belt One Road" Initiative. In *Mapping China's "One Belt One Road" Initiative* (pp. 29–56). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lintner, B. (2019). *The Costliest Pearl: China's Struggle for India's Ocean*. London: Hurst & Company.
- Mahapatra, C. (2018). "One Belt, One Road": China, US and the Emerging Hegemonic Struggle in Asia. In *China's Global Rebalancing and the New Silk Road* (pp. 181–190). Springer.
- McDougall, D., & Taneja, P. (2019). Sino-Indian competition in the Indian Ocean island countries: the scope for small state agency. *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, 16(02), 124–145. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2020.1704987>
- Medcalf, R. (2021). *INDO-PACIFIC EMPIRE: china, america and the contest for the world's pivotal region*. SL: Manchester Univ Press.
- Ministry of Defense Sri Lanka. (2022, March 7). *Ministry of Defence - Sri Lanka*. Ministry of Defense Sri Lanka. [https://www.defence.lk/Article/view_article/4430#:~:text=Sri%20Lanka%20Navy%20Ship%20\(SLNS](https://www.defence.lk/Article/view_article/4430#:~:text=Sri%20Lanka%20Navy%20Ship%20(SLNS)
- Ministry of External Affairs, India. (n.d.). *India-Seychelles Relations -Political Relations*. Retrieved from https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/sey_dec.pdf
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Tourism. (2021). *Leko Diplomatiik*. Foreign Affairs Department.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Tourism. (n.d.). Executive Summary of the Seychelles Foreign Policy 2021-2025. Retrieved from Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Tourism website: <https://www.mfa.gov.sc/foreign-policy>

- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. (2016, August 27). Address by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at the Opening Session of TICAD VI. Retrieved November 8, 2021, from Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan website: https://www.mofa.go.jp/afr/af2/page4e_000496.html
- Mohan, C. R. (2013). *Samudra Manthan: Sino-Indian rivalry in the Indo-Pacific*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- NDTV. (2021, April 16). Quad Provides Stability In Indian Ocean, Pacific Region: Maldives. Retrieved November 15, 2021, from NDTV.com website: <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/quad-provides-stability-in-indian-ocean-pacific-region-maldives-2415372>
- Ng, T and Laura, Z (2022, April 15) Crisis-hit Sri Lanka looks to China for help, but will it step in?. *South China Morning Post* <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3174326/crisis-hit-sri-lanka-looks-china-help-will-it-step>
- Pant, H. V. (2018, June 27). Making No Assumptions: India's Seychelles Conundrum. Retrieved November 9, 2021, from [thediplomat.com](https://thediplomat.com/2018/06/making-no-assumptions-indias-seychelles-conundrum/) website: <https://thediplomat.com/2018/06/making-no-assumptions-indias-seychelles-conundrum/>
- Pillsbury, M. (2016). *The hundred-year marathon: China's secret strategy to replace America as the global superpower*. New York St. Martin's Griffin.
- Press Trust of India. (2022, January 24). India grants financial assistance of over USD 900 million to Sri Lanka to overcome forex crisis. *The Economic Times*. Retrieved from <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/india-grants-financial-assistance-of-over-usd-900-million-to-sri-lanka-to-overcome-forex-crisis/articleshow/88893963.cms?from=mdr>
- Rej, A. (2020, September 15). India Welcomes US-Maldives Defense Cooperation Agreement in a Sign of Times. Retrieved November 15, 2021, from The Diplomat website: <https://thediplomat.com/2020/09/india-welcomes-us-maldives-defense-cooperation-agreement-in-a-sign-of-times/>
- Samaranayake, N. (2020). The Indian Ocean's Key Role in the Indo-Pacific Rules-based International Order. In *Indo-Pacific Perspectives*. Retrieved from Journal of Indo Pacific Affairs website: <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Dec/06/2002546901/-1/-1/1/DECEMBER%202020.PDF>
- Scott, D. (2015). *The Indian Ocean as India's Ocean* (D. M. Malone, C. R. Mohan, & S. Raghavan, Eds.). Oxford University Press.
- Seetharam, R. (2020, June 30). MCC, BRI and a balanced foreign policy: Maintain sovereignty while encouraging foreign investment – Prof. Colombage. Retrieved from CeylonToday website: <https://ceylontoday.lk/news/mcc-bri-and-a-balanced-foreign-policy-maintain-sovereignty-while-encouraging-foreign-investment-prof-colombage>
- Sibal, S. (2020, November 24). Indo-Pacific engagement should benefit development priorities: Maldives President Spokesperson. Retrieved November 15, 2021, from WION website: <https://www.wionews.com/india-news/indo-pacific-engagement-should-benefit-development-priorities-maldives-president-spokesperson-344978>
- Siddiqi, H. (2021, October 13). Ex-Milan scheduled for February 2022; QUAD countries will participate. Retrieved November 15, 2021, from The Financial Express website: <https://www.financialexpress.com/defence/ex-milan-scheduled-for-february-2022-quad-countries-will-participate/2349349/>
- Smith, J. M. (Ed.). (2018). *Asia's quest for balance: China's rise and balancing in the Indo-Pacific*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Spalding, R. S., & Kaufman, S. (2019). *Stealth war: how China took over while America's elite slept*. New York: Portfolio/Penguin.

- Srinivasan, M. (2020, November 22). Maldives to receive Japanese grant to strengthen Coast Guard. *The Hindu*. Retrieved from <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/maldives-to-receive-japanese-grant-to-strengthen-coastguard/article33155784.ece>
- StratNews Global. (2020, January 6). We Won't Do Anything That Will Harm India's Interests: Gotabaya. Retrieved March 21, 2022, from www.youtube.com website: <https://youtu.be/uMEzDVeJ4VE>
- Sultana, G. (2021, October 3). Quandary over AUKUS? Need to bolster India-Sri Lanka ties. Retrieved November 15, 2021, from The Financial Express website: <https://www.financialexpress.com/defence/quandary-over-aukus-need-to-bolster-india-sri-lanka-ties/2342750/>
- The Hindu. (2022, March 5). Naval exercise MILAN concludes in Visakhapatnam. *The Hindu*. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/multilateral-naval-exercise-milan-concludes-in-visakhapatnam/article65193406.ece>
- The Times of India (2022, April 15). Explained: What India is doing to help Sri Lanka in crisis. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/business/india-business/explained-what-india-is-doing-to-help-sri-lanka-in-crisis/articleshow/90864193.cms>
- Tonby, O., Woetzel, J., Choi, W., Eloit, K., Dhawan, R., Seong, J., & Wang, P. (2019). *The future of Asia Asian flows and networks are defining the next phase of globalisation*. Retrieved from McKinsey & Company website: <https://www.mckinsey.com/~media/McKinsey/Featured%20Insights/Asia%20Pacific/The%20future%20of%20Asia%20Asian%20flows%20and%20networks%20are%20defining%20the%20next%20phase%20of%20globalization/MGI-Future-of-Asia-Flows-and-Trade-Discussion-paper-Sep-2019.pdf>
- US Indo-Pacific Command. (2017, November 6). Joint Statement from the US Department of State and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of S. Retrieved March 21, 2022, from US Indo-Pacific Command website: <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/1364170/joint-statement-from-the-us-department-of-state-and-the-ministry-of-foreign-aff/>
- Zahir, A. (2021). India–China rivalry in the Indian Ocean: emergence of a new Indo-Maldives strategic dynamic. *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, 17(01), 78–95. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2021.1878584>
- Zhou, L. (2022, April 9). Sri Lanka not caught in a China debt trap, says ambassador to Beijing, as turmoil persists at home. *South China Morning Post*. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3173637/sri-lanka-not-caught-china-debt-trap-says-ambassador-beijing>.