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SRI LANKA: STRATEGIC NEGLECT AND THE COST OF POWER VACUUMS U.S. POLICY, GEOPOLITICAL COMPETITION, AND THE MAKING OF INSTABILITY IN THE INDIAN OCEAN

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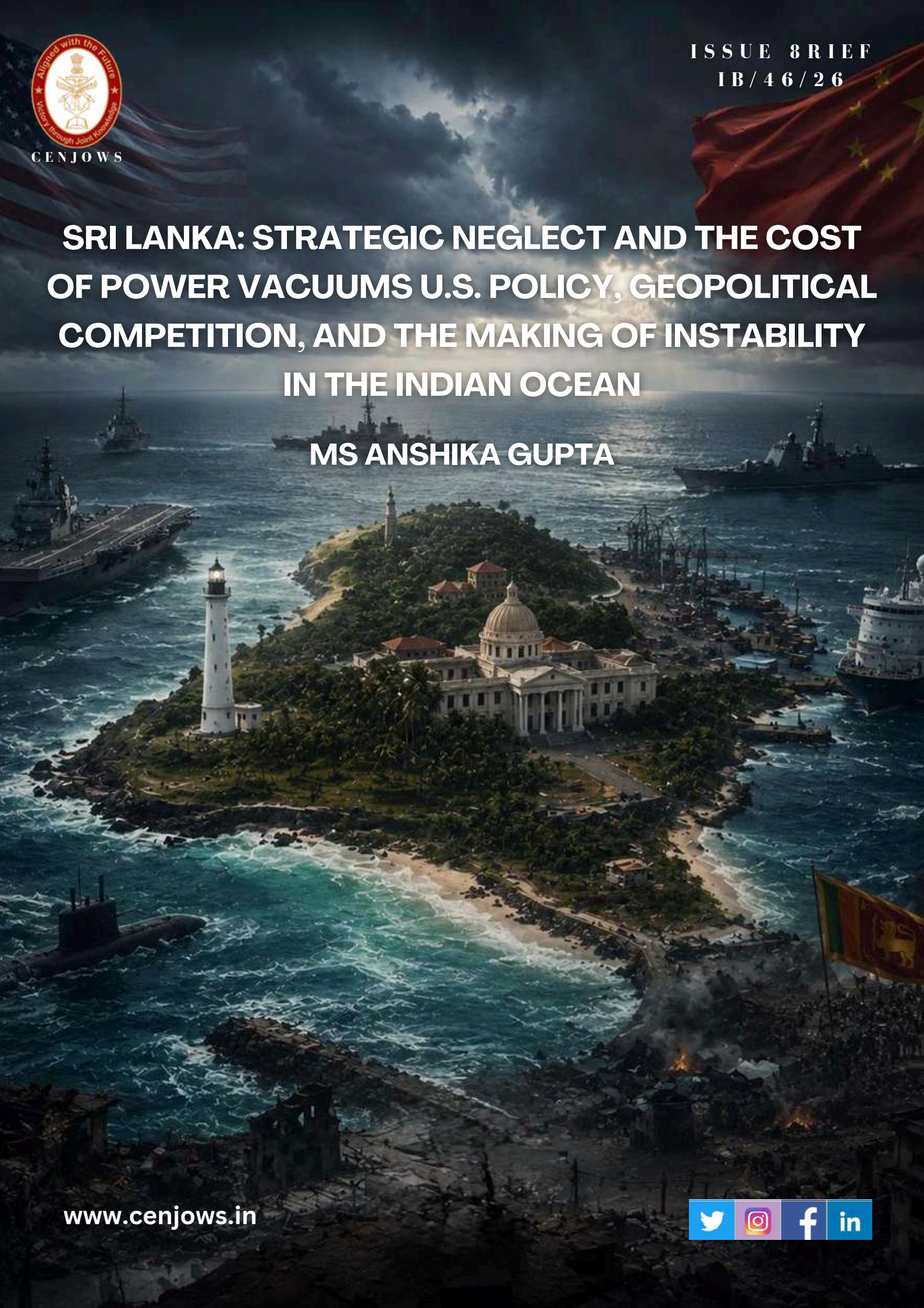

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Sri Lanka: Strategic Neglect and the Cost of Power Vacuums U.S. Policy, Geopolitical Competition, and the Making of Instability in the Indian Ocean

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Abstract

Sri Lanka's post-civil war trajectory, involving the end of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) insurgency in 2009 through the catastrophic economic collapse of 2022, offers a compelling and underexamined case study in how strategic neglect, geopolitical competition, and external policy pressures combine to exploit power vacuums. The paper argues that U.S. foreign policy toward Sri Lanka, which was pursued along the twin tracks of human rights conditionality and counterterrorism integration under the Global War on Terror (GWOT) framework, had structural repercussions that neither Washington nor its regional allies fully anticipated. U.S. pressure forced Sri Lanka to strengthen its financial and geopolitical ties with the People's Republic of China by diplomatically isolating Colombo during the crucial post-war era. The 2019 Easter Sunday bombings were the result of transnational extremist networks that eventually made their way to Sri Lanka due to the wider ideological spillovers of U.S.-led actions in the Middle East. The anatomy of Sri Lanka's strategic vacuum, the direct and indirect contributions of U.S. policy to its expansion, India's inability to compensate with intelligence and diplomatic resources, infrastructure, and

the ensuing geopolitical rearrangement are all examined in this paper. Finally, it offers structural insights for the Indian Ocean Region's (IOR) regional security architecture.

Keywords: Sri Lanka, Global War on Terror, Indian Ocean, power vacuum, U.S. foreign policy, China Belt and Road Initiative, India’s Neighbourhood First Policy

Introduction: The Strategic Significance of Sri Lanka

In the Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka holds a location of exceptional strategic importance. As Admiral Harry Harris, former Commander of the United States Indo-Pacific Command, observed, one cannot traverse from the Strait of Hormuz to the Strait of Malacca without passing near Sri Lanka, a nation through whose exclusive economic zone approximately 30,000 commercial ships, 45,000 aircrafts, and 4,500 oil tankers transit annually.[1] This geographic reality has drawn the sustained attention of regional and extra-regional powers, transforming the island into a contested theatre of geopolitical competition that far exceeds its modest territorial and demographic dimensions.

For India, Sri Lanka is a civilisational partner, a historically proximate buffer, and a critical element of the strategic architecture of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The two countries share deep cultural, religious, and people-to-people ties, and Sri Lanka's Northern coastline lies barely 31 kilometres from the Indian mainland at the Palk Strait. Any destabilisation, whether political, economic, or through hostile external military alignment, carries direct implications for Indian maritime security.[2]

The end of Sri Lanka's twenty-six-year civil war in May 2009, with the military defeat of the LTTE, was a watershed moment. It presented the international community with a fundamental question: who would shape post-war reconstruction, and how would the legitimate grievances of Sri Lanka's Tamil minority be addressed? The answers to these questions were shaped not only by Colombo's domestic political dynamics but also by the choices and deliberate non-choices of external actors. Chief among them was the United States of America. The paper argues that U.S. foreign policy toward Sri Lanka, while grounded in legitimate human rights concerns, generated structural geopolitical consequences that contributed directly and indirectly to the destabilisation

of the island, enabled Chinese strategic penetration, and created the conditions in which transnational extremist violence eventually erupted.

The U.S. Role: Direct and Indirect Pathways to Instability.

- **Accountability Pressure and the Geopolitics of Isolation**

  In the immediate aftermath of the LTTE's military defeat, the United States, the European Union, and several Western governments responded not with reconstruction engagement but with sustained diplomatic pressure over alleged war crimes committed during the conflict's final stages, particularly the Vanni offensive, in which tens of thousands of Tamil civilians were killed. The European Union suspended Sri Lanka's Generalised System of Preferences Plus (GSP+) trade concessions in August 2010. The United States led or co-sponsored multiple resolutions at the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) targeting Sri Lanka's wartime conduct.

  This conditionality-laden approach had a predictable geopolitical consequence: it drove the Rajapaksa government into the arms of China, the one major power willing to provide unconditional political cover, military equipment, and development financing. The U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee's own 2009 report, authored under Senators Kerry and Lugar, acknowledged Sri Lanka's strategic importance and the risks of ceding influence to China, noting that Chinese economic assistance to Sri Lanka in 2008 alone approached $1 billion, alongside billions more in infrastructure financing commitments.[3] The same report documented China's provision of lethal military equipment, including six F-7 fighter jets, to the Sri Lanka Air Force and its systematic shielding of Colombo from United Nations Security Council resolutions during the war's final stages. Yet despite this awareness, the subsequent U.S. diplomatic trajectory continued to privilege accountability pressure over strategic engagement, effectively rewarding Beijing's opportunism.

  The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace has documented how China's willingness to provide large sums quickly not only insulated the Rajapaksa government from international pressure linked to the war's conduct but crucially enabled the former president to advance his domestic political agenda by transforming his home district of Hambantota into a putative

commercial hub.[4] The irony is stark: U.S. pressure intended to promote accountability mechanisms was, in practice, undermining the political conditions under which it might have been pursued by making Colombo strategically dependent on a patron for whom the same was irrelevant.

- **The GWOT Architecture and Transnational Ideological Spillovers**

  The second, and arguably more consequential, pathway through which U.S. policy contributed to Sri Lanka's instability was indirect: the systemic effects of the Global War on Terror on the transnational ideological landscape. U.S.-led military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, while targeting Al-Qaeda and later the Ba'athist state, generated profound unintended consequences. The power vacuum created in Iraq following the 2003 invasion, and the subsequent breakdown of governance across the Levant, provided the incubating conditions for the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). By the mid-2010s, ISIS had evolved beyond a territorial actor in the Middle East into a globally networked ideological franchise, recruiting operatives and inspiring autonomous cells across South, Southeast, and Central Asia.

  Sri Lanka was not immune to these currents. The National Thowheeth Jama'ath (NTJ), an indigenous extremist group that would carry out the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks, drew directly on ISIS ideology and sought and reportedly received operational inspiration from the broader global network that U.S. interventions had inadvertently consolidated. While the NTJ was not a product of American policy in any direct causal sense, the structural conditions enabling its radicalisation were inseparable from the post-GWOT ideological ecosystem. India's Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW) and other intelligence channels had acquired specific, timely warnings about the impending attacks, including names of operatives, potential targets, and methodologies, and communicated these to Sri Lankan counterparts multiple times, with the final alert sent just hours before the first detonation.[5] The failure to act upon this intelligence reflects not only Sri Lanka's institutional dysfunction but also the broader consequences of security fragmentation in a state whose governance was being simultaneously destabilised by competing external pressures.

- **The Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA), and Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) Controversy: Sovereignty and Political Paralysis.**

  A third dimension of U.S. policy impact operated through attempts to integrate Sri Lanka into Washington's Indo-Pacific security architecture. The ACSA, renewed in 2017 to facilitate logistics sharing between the U.S. military and Sri Lankan armed forces; the proposed SOFA; and the MCC Compact, a proposed $480 million grant targeting land and transportation reforms, were collectively perceived within Sri Lanka's domestic political arena as instruments of foreign military penetration and sovereignty compromise.[6]

  The resulting domestic political friction was severe. These agreements became flashpoints pitting the pro-Western Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe against President Maithripala Sirisena, producing institutional paralysis within the executive branch.[7] The President deliberately excluded the Prime Minister from National Security Council briefings, creating a critical gap in the chain of command precisely when intelligence warnings about imminent terrorist attacks were circulating. As the Research Institute for European and American Studies documented, Sri Lanka's intelligence community, composed of the State Intelligence Service (SIS), the Directorate of Military Intelligence (DMI), and the Terrorism Investigation Department (TID), operated without a centralised database or effective command structure.[8] The coordinating authority of the Chief of National Intelligence lacked constitutional power to mandate operations or ensure cross-agency dissemination of sensitive information.[9]

  This executive dysfunction, itself a product of the political polarisation exacerbated by the SOFA and MCC controversies, ensured that highly detailed intelligence from a primary regional partner, India, was not effectively distributed or utilised by Sri Lanka's decision-makers. The 2019 Easter Sunday bombings, which killed over 250 individuals across churches and luxury hotels in Colombo and beyond, were the direct consequence.

- **China's Strategic Penetration: Filling the Vacuum Washington Left**

  China's engagement with post-war Sri Lanka was neither accidental nor improvised. Beijing had systematically cultivated the Rajapaksa administrations

through military supply, diplomatic protection at the UN, and infrastructure financing well before the civil war's conclusion. The construction of Hambantota Port, the project that has come to symbolise China's infrastructure diplomacy globally, was itself initiated not by Chinese planners but by President Mahinda Rajapaksa's administration as a developmental project for his home district, with Beijing providing financing that Colombo could not obtain under Western conditionality.[10]

The financial structure of these arrangements warrants careful examination. The Hambantota Port's first phase, costing USD 361 million with 85 percent financed through an EXIM Bank of China loan at 6.3 percent interest, represented a commercially questionable investment given that the port was economically redundant as a competing transshipment hub relative to Colombo Port's established capacity.[11] The port's strategic value, however, far exceeded its commercial viability. Positioned on sea lanes through which one-third of the world's bulk cargo and two-thirds of global petroleum supplies pass, Hambantota's geographic significance was self-evident.[12] A Chinese nuclear submarine's docking at Colombo in 2014, the year President Xi Jinping became the first Chinese head of state to visit Sri Lanka, made plain the military dimensions of China's growing maritime footprint.

By 2017, Sri Lanka's inability to service its accumulated debt obligations led to the signing of a 99-year lease agreement with China Merchants Port Holdings Limited, granting the Chinese state-linked company a controlling 70 percent equity stake in Hambantota Port operations in exchange for a USD 1.1 billion payment used to reduce other debt burdens.[13] While careful analysis has since demonstrated that China's bilateral lending amounted to approximately 6.7 percent of Sri Lanka's total external debt, substantially less than the "debt trap" narrative implies, the geopolitical optics of a Chinese state-linked company controlling a critical Indian Ocean port for 99 years were deeply alarming for Indian strategic planners and for any power with maritime interests in the IOR.[14]

China's economic penetration extended beyond Hambantota. Beijing holds 85 percent stake in the Colombo International Container Terminal and has financed the ambitious Colombo Port City project, a reclaimed land

development involving 269 hectares. By 2021, Chinese bilateral credit to Sri Lanka's central government through the EXIM Bank of China alone had surpassed USD 4.3 billion. India witnessed a neighbour inside its traditionally recognised area of influence, shift sharply in favour of a strategic rival during the Rajapaksa era. The diplomatic void that U.S. conditionality had created, played a significant role in creating the favourable conditions for this change.

India's Historical Entanglements and Intelligence Architecture Failures

- **The IPKF Intervention and Its Bitter Legacy**

The complicated and tragic history of the 1987 Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) operation must serve as foundation for any evaluation of India's post-2009 strategic stance in Sri Lanka. Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and President J.R. Jayawardene signed the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord on July 29, 1987, marking India's most significant attempt to actively influence the end of the ethnic conflict. In accordance with the agreement, India agreed to send peacekeeping forces to supervise the devolutionary arrangements outlined in the Thirteenth Amendment to the Sri Lankan Constitution as well as the disarmament of Tamil militant groups.

A strategic catastrophe followed the incidence. As documented in the American Academy of Arts and Sciences' authoritative analysis, India's political leadership and notably its intelligence services had failed to recognise that the LTTE was entirely unreconciled to the terms of the accord; its members refused to disarm and swiftly turned against the IPKF.[15] A peacekeeping mission metamorphosed into a full-scale counter-insurgency campaign, with the IPKF deploying at peak strength nearly 80,000 troops across four divisions.

The intelligence failures were structural as well as operational. As the Journal of Defence Studies documented, Military Intelligence had hitherto been focused primarily on Pakistan, and Operation Brass Tacks had concluded only two months before troops were dispatched to Sri Lanka.[16] Throughout the IPKF operation, critical intelligence sharing from Tamil Nadu's Q Branch and the Intelligence Bureau's Chennai directorate was systematically withheld owing to state-level political opposition. The 32-month IPKF presence resulted in the

deaths of approximately 1,200 Indian soldiers and over 5,000 Sri Lankans at a financial cost exceeding Rs. 10.3 billion.[17]

The Sri Lanka Guardian's retrospective analysis documents how R&AW, which had previously equipped and trained the LTTE and other Tamil militant groups, lacked the operational framework to transition its intelligence networks to support a counter-insurgency mission against those same groups.[18] The complex overlap between R&AW's political intelligence mandate, the Intelligence Bureau's internal security focus, and Tamil Nadu state political interests created a coordination vacuum that adversely impacted military decision-making throughout the IPKF period. Manoharan's systematic analysis identifies a recurring pattern: at every stage of the intervention, the national security decision-making structure was found wanting.[19]

- **Post-IPKF Disengagement and the 2009 Window of Opportunity**

The aftermath of the IPKF's withdrawal was characterised by significant Indian strategic retrenchment from active engagement in Sri Lanka's ethnic quagmire. The LTTE suicide bomber who killed Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in May 1991 further solidified New Delhi's stance. The Government of India pursued a policy of cautious distance from the LTTE, classifying it as a terrorist organisation in 1992, but the Tamil Nadu state government maintained close political and cultural ties with Sri Lankan Tamils.

Due to this withdrawal, India was essentially a supporting player during the crucial stages of the peace process in the early 2000s, when Norway was the main mediator and the 2002 Ceasefire Agreement provided a real window for settlement. India was unable to decisively impact events in its immediate neighbourhood, in part because it lacked the trust of the Sinhalese political establishment and Tamil parties, required in order to act as a credible broker.

India's position was naturally limited when the war concluded in 2009. India was unable to clearly support Colombo's military campaign due to domestic political pressures, especially the influence of Tamil Nadu's political parties on coalition governments in New Delhi. However, by participating in Western-led accountability campaigns that Colombo saw as threats to its sovereignty, India could not afford to be perceived as relinquishing its strategic assets in Sri

Lanka. The result was a studied ambiguity that satisfied neither Sri Lanka nor the Tamil diaspora, while allowing China's more decisive and unconditional presence to fill the strategic space.[20]

- **The Thirteenth Amendment and the Limits of Normative Engagement**

  India's most consistent form of policy engagement with post-war Sri Lanka has been its advocacy for the full implementation of the Thirteenth Amendment, the devolutionary framework established through the 1987 Accord creating a provincial council system intended to devolve meaningful powers to the Tamil-majority north and east. Successive Indian governments have maintained that meaningful power devolution is a prerequisite for durable reconciliation and contributes directly to Sri Lanka's long-term stability.

  This advocacy, however, has operated at the level of diplomatic statement rather than strategic leverage. As the Indian Council of World Affairs' analysis of post-war reconciliation documents show, ambiguity regarding the amendment's full implementation, particularly the non-convening of provincial elections in the Northern Province until 2013, represented a bottleneck that successive governments allowed to persist without decisive Indian pressure.[21] The domestic Tamil Nadu political constraint is real; however, it has at times been used to justify a level of strategic passivity that served neither India's long-term interests nor those of Sri Lanka's Tamil communities. The 2021 UNHRC session at which India expressed concern about the "lack of measurable progress" on the Thirteenth Amendment illustrated this paradox: principled advocacy without strategic follow-through.

The 2022 Economic Crisis: Collapse, Intervention, and Incomplete Recalibration

The 2022 Sri Lankan economic crisis, the worst since independence, represented both a humanitarian catastrophe and a geopolitical inflection point. By April 2022, Sri Lanka's foreign exchange reserves had fallen to USD 1.6 billion, barely sufficient to cover one month of imports. The country announced the suspension of payments on its USD 51 billion external debt, triggering Sri Lanka's first sovereign default in its post-independence history.[22] Inflation exceeded 50 percent, essential commodity shortages became acute, and mass protests forced President Gotabaya Rajapaksa to flee the country in July 2022.

India's response, guided by the Neighbourhood First Policy (NFP), formally articulated under Prime Minister Modi since 2014 as a framework centred on Samvridhi (economic growth), Suraksha (security), and Swabhimaan (self-respect),[23] was swift and substantial. India committed a total support package of approximately USD 4 billion, comprising a USD 400 million currency swap through the Reserve Bank of India's SAARC facility, deferral of approximately USD 510 million in Asian Clearing Union trade liabilities, a USD 500 million petroleum credit line, a USD 1 billion State Bank of India credit line for essential commodities, and a USD 55 million Exim Bank credit line for fertiliser imports.[24]

In 2022, India's share of foreign debt disbursements to the Sri Lankan central government surged to 38 percent compared to a historical average below 10 percent, while China's share collapsed to approximately 3 percent, underscoring the stark difference in crisis-response capacity and political will between the two competitors.[25] The qualitative composition of Indian assistance, heavily weighted toward essential food and fuel imports rather than infrastructure investment goods, also reflected a responsiveness to Sri Lanka's immediate humanitarian needs that Chinese credit facilities did not match.

The SAIS Review's analysis of the 2022 default notes, however, showed that Sri Lanka's debt composition was broadly spread between domestic and external lenders, with Chinese bilateral lending at approximately 6.7 percent and international bonds playing a far larger role, suggesting that structural governance failures and Sri Lanka's own policy misjudgements, including the disastrous 2021 fertiliser ban, were as responsible for the crisis as any external actor's lending practices.[26] This nuance matters for policy: the "debt trap" narrative, however politically resonant, does not fully explain the crisis and therefore cannot fully explain the structural remedies required.

Notwithstanding the impressive scale of India's intervention, the episode highlighted persistent vulnerabilities in India's neighbourhood engagement architecture. The crisis itself was partly a product of years during which Indian economic connectivity with Sri Lanka had not kept pace with Chinese investment, leaving Sri Lanka exposed to Chinese debt dynamics and dependent on external financing that India could not have provided proactively. The post-crisis trajectory has been encouraging: President Anura Kumara Dissanayake's visit to India in December 2024 and Prime Minister

Modi's reciprocal visit to Colombo in April 2025 reinforced bilateral commitments across digital infrastructure, maritime security, and energy connectivity.[27] President Dissanayake's assurance that Sri Lankan territory would not be used in ways inimical to Indian security interests, an implicit reference to concerns raised by Chinese vessel visits, signalled a degree of strategic alignment that had been absent during the Gotabaya years.

Strategic Implications for Indian Ocean Security Architecture

The strategic developments in post-war Sri Lanka offer critical insights for the broader South Asian and Indian Ocean security architecture. They demonstrate that in an interconnected global environment, the security of a region cannot be isolated from extra-regional developments. U.S. counter-terrorism interventions in distant theatres can generate ideological shifts that alter the threat matrix across South Asia, requiring regional powers like India to adapt their security doctrines accordingly.

The post-2019 period prompted a significant shift in India's engagement strategy. New Delhi recognised that security assistance could no longer rely solely on traditional bureaucratic channels; it required institutionalised, multilateral frameworks designed to withstand domestic political fluctuations in partner states. India led the revitalisation of the Colombo Security Conclave (CSC), expanding its scope from a trilateral maritime security dialogue comprising India, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives into a comprehensive regional security architecture that includes Mauritius, with observers from Bangladesh and the Seychelles. The CSC focuses on five pillars: maritime security and safety; countering terrorism and radicalisation; combating transnational organised crime and cyber security; protection of critical infrastructure; and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.[28]

The lessons of the 2009-2022 period are instructive for all external powers with interests in the IOR. The Sri Lanka case yields several discrete structural lessons for the Indian Ocean security architecture that merit explicit elaboration. First, the absence of a unified, treaty-backed multilateral security institution in the IOR which is distinct from the broader, consensus-driven Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) has left the region ill-equipped to respond collectively to the convergence of ideological, financial, and geopolitical threats that Sri Lanka experienced simultaneously. As the Observer Research Foundation has noted, the IOR lacks a single, unified maritime security

architecture; the existing mosaic of bilateral and multilateral mechanisms, while valuable, does not constitute a region-wide deliberative forum capable of integrating security, economic, and governance dimensions.[29]

Second, the Sri Lanka experience reveals that intelligence-sharing architecture must be institutionalised, not episodic. The failure of Sri Lanka's security apparatus to act upon India's pre-Easter Sunday warnings was not merely a product of institutional dysfunction internal to Colombo; it reflected the absence of a legally binding, operationalised intelligence-sharing compact between IOR states with standing protocols for escalation and mandatory dissemination. The CSC's 2024 Founding Documents represent a meaningful first step towards formalisation, but the conclave's effectiveness ultimately hinges on whether participating states are willing to subordinate political sensitivities to shared operational requirements.[30]

Third, the economic dimension of IOR security must be structurally integrated into any credible security architecture. The 2022 collapse demonstrated that fiscal fragility in small island and littoral states can rapidly produce geopolitical vacuums, with consequences extending well beyond sovereign default into the domains of political stability, counter-terrorism, and external military access. India's SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) framework, now elevated to the MAHASAGAR (Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions) vision in 2025, explicitly recognises this nexus, positioning development-led security cooperation, including lines of credit, capacity-building, and renewable energy connectivity, as foundational to a durable IOR order.[31]

Fourth, the IOR requires a shared normative framework for evaluating external infrastructure investment. The Hambantota Port lease serves as an enduring structural warning: the absence of regional standards governing foreign investment in dual-use infrastructure like ports, submarine cable landing stations, and airfields, creates a regulatory vacuum that economically distressed governments are likely to fill on terms dictated by the investor rather than the host state's strategic interests or those of its neighbours. Regional powers, led by India and in coordination with established mechanisms such as the IORA Working Group on Maritime Safety and Security and the IFC-IOR, should develop and institutionalise transparency norms for strategic

infrastructure investments in IOR littoral states, providing a rules-based alternative to opaque bilateral financing arrangements.[32]

Conclusion: The Cost of Inattention

The post-war history of Sri Lanka serves as an example of the significant strategic costs associated with political fragmentation, institutional neglect, and security vacuums. Both direct and indirect external factors increased the island's vulnerabilities: the intricate regional repercussions of U.S. counterterrorism frameworks and international policies, as well as Chinese extra-regional economic initiatives under the Belt and Road framework. The 2019 Easter Sunday catastrophe and, eventually, the 2022 economic collapse were the result of these forces coming together to create an environment where transnational threats could emerge.

Managing these difficulties has been a major test of India's Neighbourhood First Policy. New Delhi's regional strategy has been significantly upgraded as a result of the lessons learnt from intelligence-sharing gaps and changing geopolitical realities. India has attempted to counter external leverage and stabilise its maritime periphery by moving towards institutionalised security partnerships like the CSC and implementing targeted economic support.

The Sri Lanka case exemplifies a recurring tension in the US foreign policy: the pursuit of legitimate normative objectives, accountability, human rights, and the rule of law through mechanisms that have unintended geopolitical consequences. Washington's accountability pressure, however principled, expedited Colombo's affiliation with Beijing and fostered political conditions that rendered Sri Lanka more open to extremist ideological currents. This is not an argument against accountability; rather, it is an argument for a more sophisticated strategic approach to its promotion.

Recommendations for India

Drawing on the foregoing analysis, the following policy recommendations are advanced for India as the principal regional security provider in the IOR. First, India must institutionalise proactive economic engagement as a strategic instrument rather than a crisis-response mechanism. The 2022 crisis demonstrated that reactive aid, however decisive, comes too late to prevent the geopolitical consequences of sovereign distress. India should establish a standing bilateral economic rapid-

response facility, analogous to the Reserve Bank of India's SAARC currency swap arrangement but with a broader mandate and higher capitalisation, available to IOR partner governments facing early-stage fiscal stress, conditional on transparency in debt disclosure and alignment with India's strategic equities. The ORF has noted that India's 2022 intervention demonstrated decisive first-responder capacity; this capacity must be pre-positioned, not improvised.[33]

Second, India should formalise and resource the CSC as a treaty-based institution with a permanent secretariat, dedicated budget, and legally binding intelligence-sharing protocols. The 7th NSA-level CSC summit in November 2025, at which Seychelles acceded as a full member and Malaysia participated as a guest state, demonstrates the conclave's expanding legitimacy. New Delhi should leverage this momentum to transition the CSC from a political consultation forum into an operationalised security institution equipped with standing joint maritime patrol protocols, a shared early-warning communication system, and mandatory dissemination obligations for counterterrorism intelligence. Institutionalising the CSC in this manner directly addresses the command-and-control vacuum that enabled the 2019 Easter Sunday failures.[34]

Third, India must deepen its connectivity infrastructure investments in Sri Lanka, with particular urgency around the energy and digital domains. The joint commitments on renewable energy grids, power interconnection, and digital public infrastructure agreed during Prime Minister Modi's April 2025 visit to Colombo must be operationalised at speed. Connectivity-led interdependence is not merely economically beneficial; it creates structural incentives for Sri Lanka to maintain strategic alignment with India that transcend the electoral cycles of any particular government in Colombo. India should prioritise completing the Trincomalee oil tank farm rehabilitation and advancing the power grid interconnection project as tangible demonstrations of Neighbourhood First commitments, while ensuring that project timelines and implementation quality can sustain comparison with competing Chinese infrastructure offerings.[35]

Fourth, India should use its chairmanship of IORA, assumed in late 2025, to advance a regional framework on strategic infrastructure transparency. Building on the IORA Action Plan (2022-2027) and the Working Group on Maritime Safety and Security's

institutional momentum, India should champion binding disclosure norms for foreign investment in dual-use infrastructure across IOR littoral states. Such a framework would provide smaller states with normative cover to resist opaque bilateral arrangements, reduce the risk of future Hambantota-type scenarios, and position India as a rule-setter rather than merely a rule-taker in the evolving IOR order.[36]

Fifth, India must resolve the structural tension between Tamil Nadu's domestic political imperatives and the national interest requirement of full engagement with Sri Lanka's reconciliation process. India's advocacy for the Thirteenth Amendment has been principled but strategically passive. The Indian Parliament's Standing Committee on External Affairs recommended in 2023 that India should engage regional and multilateral organisations more actively on Sri Lanka's ethnic reconciliation while ensuring that the domestic political constraint does not veto national security policy. Sustained engagement, including support for fiscal transfers to Northern Provincial Councils, capacity-building for provincial governance institutions, and track-two dialogue facilitation would both advance reconciliation and deepen Indian strategic influence in Sri Lanka's north and east, precisely the areas where India's presence is most geopolitically consequential.[37]

Proactive partnerships, institutional depth, and persistent vigilance will be necessary to ensure regional stability in the Indian Ocean. It necessitates, above all, the realisation that power vacuums in geopolitically contested territories are never vacant for long, and that the penalty of inattention is always borne by the populations of the states where those vacuums exist.

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