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China's Belt Around Sri Lanka: An Impact Analysis From India's Perspective

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Bachelor Thesis



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From “A Tale of Two Cities”, by Rudyard Kipling (1887):

Once, two hundred years ago, the trader came
Meek and tame.
Where his timid foot first halted, there he stayed,
Till mere trade
Grew to Empire, and he sent his armies forth
South and North
Till the country from Peshawur to Ceylon
Was his own.
(17-24)

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1. Introduction

1.1. Two emerging superpowers

For some years now, Fukuyama's (1992) notion of a unipolar world and a liberal world order has become more and more contested. Many scholars (e.g. Mearsheimer, 2019) now believe we are moving towards a multipolar world, where different superpowers compete for (regional) hegemony. A fascinating time to live in, as in recent years great-power politics are characterized by fast changing dynamics and a struggle for power in many geopolitical hotspots. In this thesis, I have focused on one of these hotspots and the struggle for dominance at the place where the interests of two emerging superpowers perhaps most clearly collide.

Contrary to popular belief, between the year 1 and 1820 the world's two largest economies were based not in the West, but in the East. According to Mahbubani (2010), the rise of China and India is therefore not extraordinary, but rather a return to the historical norm. More and more scholars have recently argued that China's and India's aspiration for great power status will lead them to the seas (Raja Mohan, 2013). Kaplan (2011) reasons that, "while China seeks to expand its influence vertically, that is, reaching southward down to the warm waters of the Indian Ocean, India seeks to expand its influence horizontally, reaching eastward and westward to the borders of Victorian age British India, parallel to the Indian Ocean".

1.2. Sri Lanka: caught in the eye of the hurricane

Following Kaplan's reasoning, we must look to the Indian Ocean. At the heart of this ocean lies Sri Lanka, nicknamed the "teardrop of India". Sri Lanka is strategically located in an important sea lane but is also just off the coast of "big brother" India. It is one of the places where the ambitions and interests of India and China most clearly collide. Much to Sri Lankan fear, India strives to keep Sri Lanka in its sphere of influence: islands along key sea lines of communication can provide navies with the opportunity to project power. The Indian Navy therefore views islands as "primary areas of interests" and has in the past guaranteed Sri Lanka's security multiple times (Baruah, 2018; Baruah, 2022b).

China, on the other hand, also seeks to expand its influence on the island. In 2016, China overtook India as Sri Lanka's main trading partner and maintains a military presence in the port of Colombo. In this changing dynamic, the role of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) cannot be overlooked. Sri Lanka is consistently viewed as an indispensable link of the maritime branch of the BRI. While officially defined as an economic project, it is also argued that

economic development is not the only, or perhaps not even the main goal of the BRI. It is also increasingly seen as a tool to exert political influence beyond China's borders and to create economic dependence on Beijing (Attanayake & Ren, 2021).

1.3. Research question

For the two emerging superpowers, Sri Lanka is of vital strategic importance. According to Aryal (2021), regional hegemony is the main requirement for global power status. Seeing that, historically, Sri Lanka did not belong to the Chinese sphere of influence, one would expect that China's increasing presence on the island would prompt India to adequately respond to this. This thesis therefore aims to investigate the dynamic of great-power politics. This leads to the following research question:

How has China's Belt and Road Initiative changed India's strategy towards Sri Lanka?

In this strategic impact analysis, I have assessed India's foreign policy (the dependent variable) towards Sri Lanka before and after the launch of the BRI (the independent variable). The results will be viewed from both realist and liberal positions. In the previous era these theories were engaged with each other in the so-called 'Great Debate' (Heywood, 2014, pp. 13 + 56). This debate took place in light of the come and fall of world empires and during arms races, world wars and peace conferences.

1.4. Thesis outline

First I discuss the existing literature about China's Belt and Road Initiative in Sri Lanka and India's strategy towards Sri Lanka in a literature review, and how this research contributes to the existing body of research. I then turn to the theoretical explanatory frameworks for states' behavior in international relations, focusing on realism and liberalism. What expectations can be derived from these theories in order to answer the research question?

The following section is dedicated to the research design. This research consists of an in-depth single case study based on a literature review. This is followed by an impact analysis on India's foreign policy. I have assessed (perceived) changes in its policy since the implementation and development of the BRI with the help of three expectations. In the final section, I reflect upon my findings and on the limitations of the research conducted. I end by concluding and making recommendations for further research.

2. Literature review

The research addresses the following research question: *How has China's Belt and Road Initiative changed India's strategy towards Sri Lanka?* This chapter discusses what has already been researched for each variable, and it concludes with the literature gap.

2.1. China's Belt and Road Initiative in Sri Lanka

This paragraph outlines previous research on our independent variable: China's Belt and Road Initiative in Sri Lanka. The first part consists of an explanation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in a nutshell. This is followed by an explanation of the place that Sri Lanka occupies within this project.

2.1.1. Belt and Road Initiative in a nutshell

The BRI was launched in 2013 by Chinese President Xi Jinping and can be summarized as “a series of overland roads, pipelines, railways, and other infrastructure through Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East to Europe and a series of ports and maritime trade routes through the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean to the Middle East, the east coast of Africa, and onward to Europe” (Roy-Chaudhury, 2019, pp. 153-154).

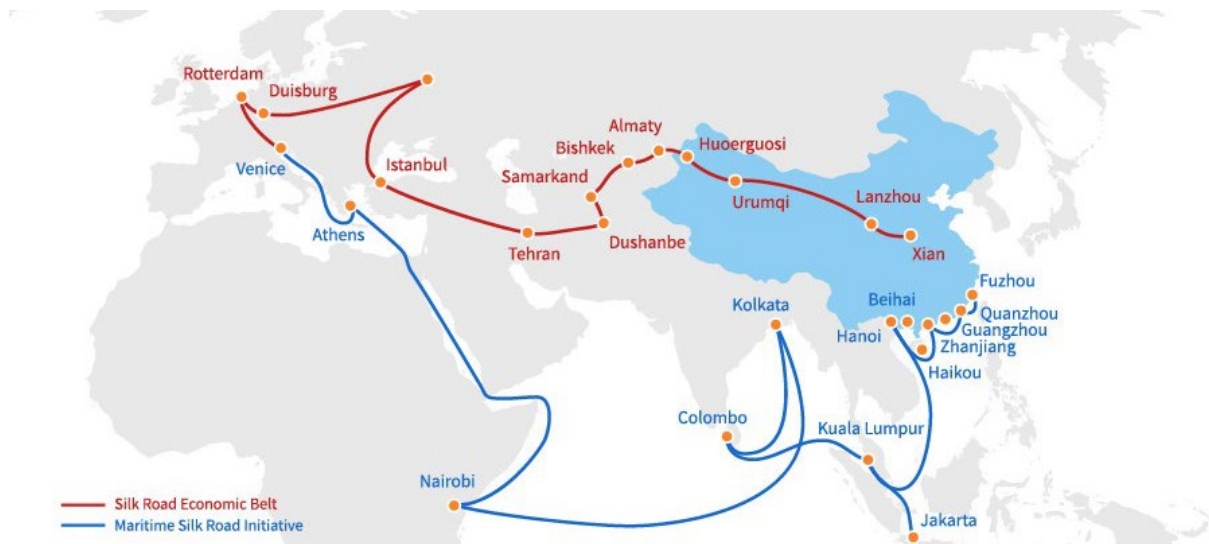


Figure 1: Belt and Road Initiative (Silk Road Briefing, 2022)

According to the World Bank, the official goal of the Belt and Road Initiative is “to improve connectivity and cooperation on a transcontinental scale”. Thanks to the BRI, trade could

increase by almost 10% and millions of people could be lifted out of extreme poverty. More than 70 countries participate in the BRI: together they account for 60% of the world's population and a third of world trade.

2.1.2. Projects in Sri Lanka

In their Research Handbook on the Belt and Road Initiative, Attanayake and Ren mention that defining BRI projects in Sri Lanka is a challenge. They identify the following projects: roads, ports and related projects, airports and energy infrastructure, including ongoing projects that were later brought under the BRI umbrella (Attanayake & Ren, 2021).

Mahinda Rajapaksa became president in 2005 with a promise to end the civil war. While the US and India distanced themselves from Colombo's policies, China stepped up arms supplies (Smith, 2016). In 2008, the civil war came to an end. Sri Lanka officially joined China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2014. In 2016, China overtook India as Sri Lanka's main trading partner (Attanayake & Ren, 2021). According to Maria Abi-Habib (2018), it was the civil war with the Tamil Tigers that drove Sri Lanka into the arms of China.

According to Attanayake and Ren (2021), Sri Lanka is crucial for the success of China's Maritime Silk Road (MSR), the maritime branch of the BRI. In the deep south, the town of Hambantota overlooks the sea lanes between major choke points such as Malacca, Hormuz and Bab-el-Mandeb. According to Roy-Chaudhury (2019), the implicit promise of Hambantota Port was that it would make Sri Lanka the Singapore or Dubai of South Asia. However, Hambantota is still in the shadow of the Port of Colombo. Under a huge debt burden, Sri Lanka was forced in 2015 to lease the port and surrounding area to the state-owned China Merchants Port for a period of 99 years (Abi-Habib, 2018).

The other flagship of the BRI in Sri Lanka is Colombo. Here, China Merchants is involved in the development of Colombo International Container Terminal. This is now South Asia's only deep-water terminal. Almost half of the container volume in the Port of Colombo goes through this terminal. Colombo Port City has been a BRI project from the start. At 1.4 billion dollar, this is the largest foreign investment in Sri Lanka's history. Sri Lanka has no sovereignty over this land off the coast of Colombo claimed by the state-owned company China Harbor. The appearance of a Chinese submarine in the port during a Japanese state visit in 2014 has been noticed throughout the region. China considers both Colombo terminals to be economic success stories (Abi-Habib, 2018; Attanayake & Ren, 2021).

BRI in Sri Lanka also consists of highways, airports and power plants. Since 2009, China has been responsible for the construction of nearly 70% of all highways. These

investments have reduced journey time in Sri Lanka dramatically. A second airport, Mattala International Airport, led to a similar story as the Port of Hambantota: unsuccessful and now owned by China Harbor. Since 2018, the China-made Norochcholai power plant has been supplying one third of Sri Lanka's energy need. However, it is impossible for Sri Lanka to run the power plant without Chinese help (Attanayake & Ren, 2021).

2.2. India's strategy towards Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is both a neighboring country and an island of strategic importance to India. Therefore, India's strategy towards Sri Lanka fits within two broader aspects of New Delhi's foreign policy: 'Neighborhood First' and India's role as Sri Lanka's first responder.

2.2.1. Sri Lanka within 'Neighborhood First'

Since gaining independence from the United Kingdom in 1950, India's foreign policy can be characterized as one of non-alignment. India's first Prime Minister, Nehru, was one of the pioneers of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) that refused to take sides in the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union (Kennedy, 2015). This movement mainly has members in the southern hemisphere, Asia, Africa and South America.

However, as non-aligned as India has behaved on the global stage, it has a long record of political and military interventions in the region. This has also affected Sri Lanka and stems from the Indian policy of 'Neighborhood First'.

Although a more proactive foreign policy towards neighboring countries is a common denominator among all interpreters of this concept, various Indian Prime Ministers have referred to this concept differently. Indira Ghandi, Prime Minister between 1966-1977 and 1980-1984, for example, was concerned with asserting India's dominance in the subcontinent, adhering to the principles of bilateralism and reciprocity.

This assertive attitude was especially true where it concerned Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka. In the case of Sri Lanka, one can point at the intervention in the 1980s to drive out the Tamil Tigers as an example of an interventionist foreign policy (Wu, 2020; Sharma, 2020; Haider, 2011).

A number of her successors however tried to keep the neighborhood close by adopting a more liberal approach, based on free trade and promoting peace and democracy. This is also called the Gujral doctrine, named after former prime minister and diplomat Inder Gujral. Some scholars therefore consider the 'Neighborhood First' policy half-hearted and inconsistent (Aryal, 2021; Raja Mohan, 2015; Destradi, 2014; Mitra, 2003). And they look at the same

intervention in the 1980s as double-minded, metaphorical for India's general lack of perseverance (Destradi, 2014). After its retreat from the Sri Lankan civil war, they even argue that India has withdrawn into its shell ever since (Xavier, 2018).

Both schools of thought however acknowledge that from Nehru to present prime minister Modi, India's priority has always been the subcontinent. During the Cold War, South Asia also acted as a "protective cocoon" for India: except for Pakistan, all the smaller neighboring countries fell within New Delhi's sphere of influence (Mansingh, 2015; Raja Mohan, 2007; Raja Mohan, 2015; Kennedy, 2015).

2.2.2. India as Sri Lanka's first responder

As a South Asian Island, Sri Lanka is not only a part of India's neighborhood, but a part of India's maritime strategy as well. The existing literature highlights Sri Lanka's strategic importance for India: it being an island on a strategic location.

Trade is crucial to the living standards of almost 1.4 billion Indians (Mukherjee, 2019, pp. 44-45). This makes New Delhi dependent on sea lanes and therefore on a secure and open Indian Ocean (Baruah, 2022b).

India is not the only country dependent on the Indian Ocean. More than two thirds of global oil and fifty percent of global container shipments sail on the tropical waters of the Indian Ocean every year (Arjun, 2020). A disruption of trade routes is felt all over the world (Baruah, 2021a). It is therefore not surprising that the Indian Navy is proud of its role as first responder to natural disasters in the Indian Ocean (Baruah, 2020b).

The importance of islands such as Sri Lanka is closely related to the importance of maritime choke points. These are narrow but busy straits, such as are the Strait of Malacca, Hormuz Strait, and Bab-el-Mandeb. Choke points are crucial for international trade. This also entails military-strategic interests. Islands play an important role in this: they are located as hubs on the route between choke points and important ports. Well-known examples in the Indian Ocean are Madagascar, Comoros, Seychelles, Maldives and Sri Lanka (Baruah & Duckworth, 2022; Carnegie Endowment, 2022).

While partnerships between major countries will determine the balance of power, according to Darshana Baruah (Baruah, 2018; Baruah, 2022b), islands create the framework for a security architecture. The strategic location of islands along key sea lines of communication (SLOCs) provides existing navies with the opportunity to project power. The Indian Navy therefore sees islands as "primary areas of interests".

New Delhi is a crucial security partner for Colombo as well (Baruah, 2020b; Baruah, 2022b). During the 2004 tsunami, the Indian Navy came to Sri Lanka's rescue within twelve hours (Lalwani, 2015; Baruah, 2017). This therefore gives India leverage over Sri Lanka.

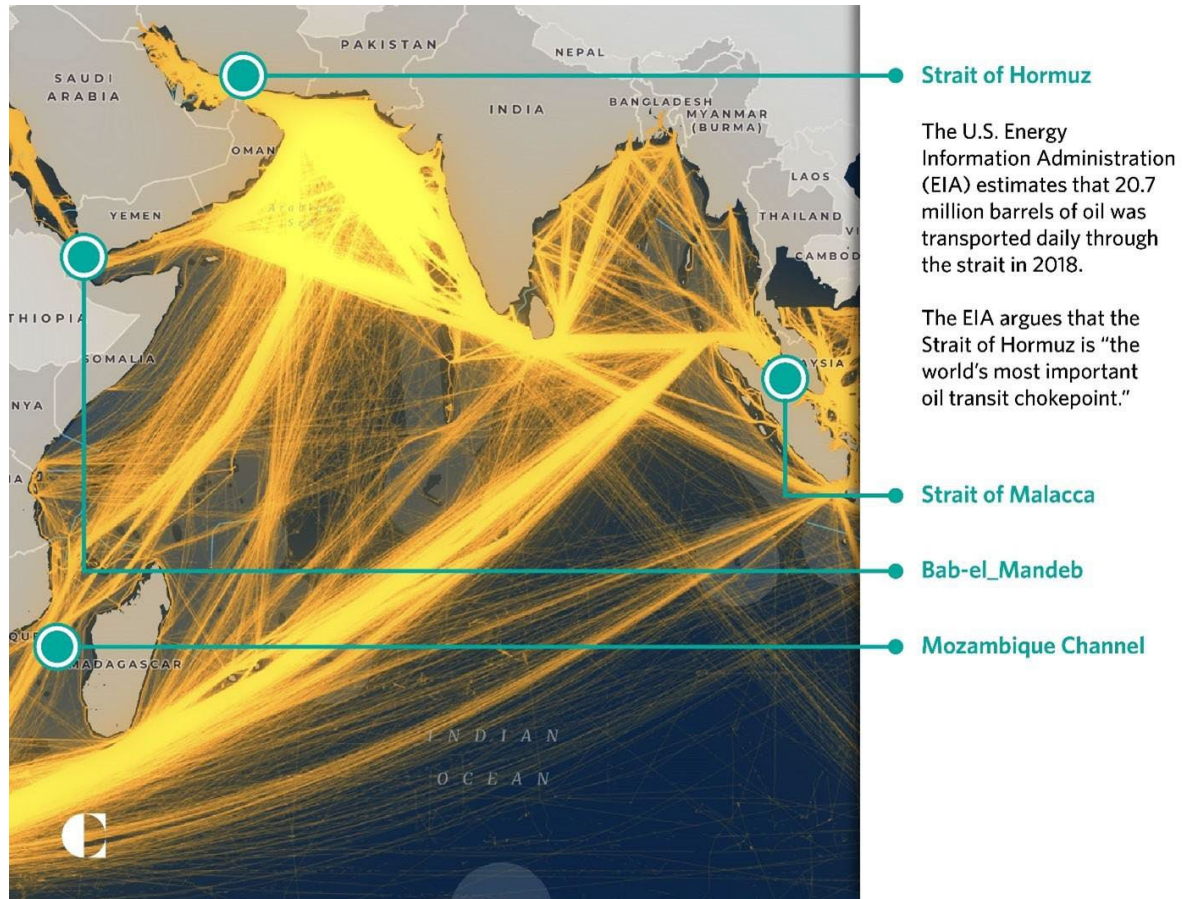


Figure 2: Choke points in the Indian Ocean region (Baruah, 2022b)

2.3. Literature gap

A lot has been written about China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) on the one hand and India's strategy towards Sri Lanka on the other. However, several aspects are worth looking into.

First of all, the existing analyses only zoom in on individual aspects or remain largely on the surface. Take for example the studies of Darshana Baruah and the study of Archana Atmakuri and Chulanee Attanayake. Baruah limits herself in her studies to the importance of islands in the Indian Ocean. However, the importance of Sri Lanka for India is not limited to being an island. The research of Atmakuri and Attanayake overlaps with this study. But where they look from Colombo's point of view, this research focuses on India's perspective (Atmakuri & Attanayake, 2021; Baruah, 2016).

There is also lack of consensus about the nature of India's policy: sometimes it acts as a dominant hegemon, and sometimes very reluctantly (Abi-Habib, 2018; Jaishankar & Madan, 2021). How can we account for these differences?

Both India and China are emerging as global superpowers along with the power politics that is associated with it. The competition between these two can best be interpreted through grand theories in international relations. That is why this study will make use of realism and liberalism as theoretical perspectives to study the change in these states' foreign policy.

All things considered there's need for a single case study, which does not focus on the viewpoint of Colombo or Beijing, but that of New Delhi.

3. Theoretical framework

This chapter formulates three expectations that are used to answer the research question. These expectations arise from the two most popular theoretical positions in international relations: realism and liberalism. The table below explains both theories in a nutshell. In the following paragraphs, expectations are formulated based on both theories.

3.1. Theoretical positions

	<i>Realism</i>	<i>Liberalism</i>
<i>The state</i>	The struggle for power and survival creates insecurity. That's why people create states and alliances.	The state comes into existence to avoid untamed competition in society and create order and prosperity for all. It is thus not only a necessary evil, but a goal in itself.
<i>International system</i>	States operate in a context of anarchy, and thus rely on self-help. Realists see anarchy as a world in which it is eat or be eaten, win or lose, dominate or submit.	Likewise on the international level, the liberal rules-based order is characterized by a clear set of international rules which protect the freedom and sovereignty of nations.
<i>Power and gains</i>	States care deeply about gains relative to those of other states.	Politics is not a zero-sum game: people and states are chasing absolute, not relative gains.
<i>World peace</i>	States are scared to go to war if the stakes are too high. The build-up of a strong army and military alliances could therefore foster world peace.	Perpetual peace can be accomplished through free trade, democratization and institutionalization. These will lead to economic

	Significant actors, the so-called poles or hegemons, shape the dynamics within the system.	interdependence, stable societies and trust.
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Figure 3: Realism and liberalism in a nutshell (Grieco et al., 2015; Heywood, 2014).

3.2. The Realist Position

Taking realism into account both India and China are striving towards the same goal: power. However only one of them can triumph; it is a zero-sum game as far as realism is concerned. This is a consequence of the relative gains that countries are pursuing. One country's victory is another one's defeat. So when China expands its sphere of influence, which at first glance seems to be the case, this automatically comes at the cost of India. In this paragraph the realist perspective provides two expectations.

After a ten year reign the Rajapaksas lost the election in 2015. Three years later however Mahinda Rajapaksa tried to replace Ranil Wickremesinghe as the Prime Minister. The Supreme Court declared this coup d'état to be illegal and reversed the move. Meanwhile, Rajapaksa had already made two infrastructure deals with Beijing and Beijing on its turn had unlawfully congratulated Rajapaksa with his return.

Beijing's preference for the Rajapaksas is thus not surprising, argues Constantino Xavier (2018). President Mahinda strongly strengthened economic and diplomatic ties with China during his time in office between 2005 and 2015. Even during the political chaos in 2018, Prime Minister Mahinda managed to secure two infrastructure deals with Beijing. Greater Beijing influence in Colombo however potentially means less influence for New Delhi, according to the realist concept of relative gains.

When considering this on a wider scale, further implications can be seen. For a long time India had been regarded to be the unipolar hegemon of South Asia (Frazier et al., 2010). As a South Asian country Sri Lanka was traditionally part of India's sphere of influence. When China's influence in Sri Lanka expands, South Asia can become a bipolar power block instead of an unipolar one. According to realism such a drastic change of the balance of power will lead to instability.

Expectation 1: In reaction to China's Belt and Road Initiative in Sri Lanka, India will behave more aggressively towards Sri Lanka.

Over the past decade, China's rise is increasingly seen as a threat. Some see China's BRI as an attempt to push countries into a "debt-trap" (Attanayake & Ren, 2021). This ties in well with the "string of pearls" theory, which claims that China is trying to encircle India in order to gain control of the Indian Ocean (Marantidou, 2014).

Except for serving as a "debt-trap", the aim of these projects could also be to bribe corrupt politicians. Lalwani refers to the fact that Hambantota is the political cradle of the Rajapaksa family (Lalwani, 2015). It can also be made more explicit: during the 2015 elections, money went directly from Chinese port companies to the campaign coffers of the Rajapaksa family (Abi-Habib, 2018).

Some even go so far as to argue that China is advocating a "New World Order" in which it is the central player. China would achieve this new order through the launch of "an alternative type of globalization based on a new set of ideas" (Attanayake & Ren, 2021, pp. 240-241).

According to some critics, China's projects have little to do with the real economy. Exports only go one way and instead of aid, trade and investment, China mainly offers loans, they reason. This has already led to much discontent in the past among the population. For this reason, Lalwani (2015) believes that economic threats from Beijing towards Colombo do not lead to heavy leverage.

Even when countries are not necessarily trying to increase their power, but are more or less driven by fear and paranoia instead, another problem reaches the surface: according to the security dilemma India and China will be drawn to an arms race. A doom scenario would be another Cuban Missile Crisis like the one of the 1960s, because both India and China are in possession of nuclear weapons. New Delhi also suspects that Beijing is only interested in Sri Lankan ports for military reasons (Roy-Chaudhury, 2019).

Expectation 2: In reaction to China's Belt and Road Initiative in Sri Lanka, India will try to enhance economic integration with Sri Lanka.

Realism would justify this move by pointing to the fact that Sri Lanka will become more dependent on India and not just on China. This will ensure that India's relative power in Sri Lanka does not diminish.

The literature review demonstrated that India's foreign policy consists of multiple building blocks. Being the first responder in the Indian Ocean is one of them. Having good relations with island states is a crucial part of this doctrine. The great economic interest of free passage across the Indian Ocean puts India into the arms of the United States and other countries

as a trading partner. Loss of control over Sri Lanka can have a huge impact on India's role as a superpower.

3.3. The Liberal Position

Liberals are much more optimistic about the motivations that drive our world. Countries are looking for absolute gains, rather than for relative gains. Even when China becomes the leading trading partner of Sri Lanka, that wouldn't be a problem as long as India's trade with both Sri Lanka and China increases. The thing to pay attention to in this case, is only whether India has absolute advantage with the current state of affairs. If yes, China's Belt and Road Initiative may even prove to be (partially) positive. This paragraph covers the two expectations that arise from liberal perspective.

This situation is exactly what liberals are enthusiastic about: trade leading to economic interdependence. If China, India and Sri Lanka are becoming more and more economically dependent on one another, this theory teaches that they will be less likely to go to war with each other. But what is true of the so-called "debt trap"?

Since the handshake of Nixon and Mao, the world has long been optimistic about the rise of China. A prominent interpreter of this narrative is Kishore Mahbubani. He points out that China's rise is a good thing for millions of people who are lifted out of poverty and enjoy more freedom than ever before (Mahbubani, 2008).

Expectation 2: In reaction to China's Belt and Road Initiative in Sri Lanka, India will try to enhance economic integration with Sri Lanka.

This expectation is also in line with liberalism, because it teaches that trade between Sri Lanka and India will lead to cooperation, trust and absolute gains.

Beijing's official narrative promotes the BRI mainly as a peaceful project (Attanayake & Ren, 2021, pp. 240–241). In defense of this reasoning, Chulanee Attanayake and Yuanzhe Ren argue that China would be unable to defend its "pearls" and that China's share of Sri Lanka's debt burden is relatively low: 10% (Japan and the World Bank each own more Sri Lankan debt paper). One could say: it is the recipient countries that shape their dependencies (Attanayake & Ren, 2021, pp. 240-249). China moreover emphasizes the importance of the rules-based order on the international stage (Jones, 2020). Among these liberal principles are territorial integrity and freedom of navigation (Grieco et al., 2015, pp. 360-361).

Like trade international cooperation also enhances a more peaceful world according to liberals. Because of the increase in mutual understanding, conflicts are more easily resolved or even prevented. On the one hand China is establishing new institutions where India and Sri Lanka are party to, like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). On the other hand these institutions are also being viewed as alternatives to for example the WTO and the World Bank and would therefore be more of an undermining of international cooperation.

Expectation 3: In reaction to China's Belt and Road Initiative in Sri Lanka, India will seek ways to enforce international law.

In its search for international support India will probably look for the United Nations given her tradition of non-alignment. After all, this tradition requires careful maneuvering amid the competition between China and the US in the Indo-Pacific. It is highly unlikely that India would align itself as “the largest democracy in the world” in the Western camp. The concept of strategic autonomy plays an important role in this policy position (Kumar, 2010; Sule, 2022).

4. Research design

This chapter is about the research design of this thesis. The first paragraph deals with both the choice of case study and case selection. This is followed by paragraphs explaining the methods of operationalization, data collection and data analysis.

4.1. Case selection

The literature review has shown that no study has yet been conducted into the impact of China's Belt and Road Initiative on India's foreign policy (over the full breadth). The theoretical framework showed that this could very well be analyzed from a realist and a liberal perspective.

In order to form a picture of the competition between India and China, this research employs a single case study (Bryman, 2016, p. 60). A study into this comprehensive question in its entirety is impossible in view of the time span. Besides limitations, there are also advantages to a case study. For example, a case study offers the opportunity to gain in-depth knowledge about a single case.

As a case, Sri Lanka fits into a bigger picture. Attention to the Indo-Pacific is increasing. Also, India is starting to claim a more prominent place on the world stage. Islands in the Indo-Pacific play a vital role in this process (Baruah, 2018).

Large parts of the Indo-Pacific have thus far been out of New Delhi's sight (Baruah, 2019). Sri Lanka on the other hand, is an early example of China's increasing and India's continuing influence for over twenty years, this island in the Indian Ocean has been the scene of a power play between the rivals India and China.

For this reason, there is more information available about this case than about Bangladesh or Myanmar for example. However, such an analysis has never been applied to the triangular situation of China, India and Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka is also a unique and extreme case: no island is as close to India geographically and culturally. Sri Lanka thus acts as a canary in the coal mine for India. This makes it easier to measure the impact of China's BRI on India's foreign policy in Sri Lanka.

4.2. Operationalization

This research seeks to explain the change in India's strategy towards Sri Lanka.

I single out two variables: the independent variable in this research is China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Sri Lanka. India's strategy towards Sri Lanka is the dependent variable.

This thesis aims at describing and explaining the impact of the independent variable on the dependent variable.

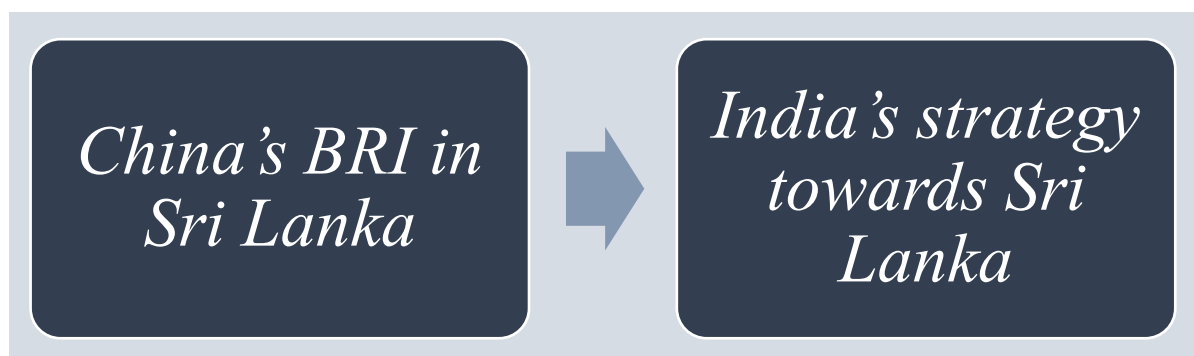


Figure 4: Impact from China's BRI on India's strategy towards Sri Lanka.

The independent variable zooms in on the impact of specific BRI-projects on Sri Lanka's dependence on China. The research is limited to projects in Sri Lanka, because this makes generalizing the results less complex.

The dependent variable on the other hand looks at the change in India's strategy towards Sri Lanka on the basis of three expectations. These expectations have been formulated from realist and liberal positions.

4.3. Data collection

The research strategy applied is qualitative in the sense that experiences and scientific observations, not necessarily numerical facts, are of primary importance. This research is deductive insofar as it uses existing theories (realism and liberalism) to explain the triangular relationship between India, China and Sri Lanka.

Although earlier research has discussed the role of China's BRI or Indian foreign policy, the triangular relationship with Sri Lanka has not yet been extensively researched. Moreover, because the situation is rapidly evolving, the research design is also exploratory. This research is mostly an extensive literature review where many different authors shed a new light on the complex situation in Sri Lanka (Bryman, 2016, pp. 32-33).

This research has primarily made use of literature available through the Leiden Search Assistant, which makes use of the Leiden University Libraries Catalogue, Web of Science, Google Scholar, WorldCat and Pubmed. I searched separately and in combination for keywords such as: China, India, Sri Lanka, Belt and Road Initiative and Indo-Pacific. In addition books on statistics and the theories of realism and liberalism have been used as well.

4.4. Data analysis

The observations that have been made, are analyzed through explaining-outcome process tracing (Bryman, 2016, pp. 395-397). This method is often used in case studies and entails zooming in on the specific conditions, events and patterns of a case. Only when all those features have been taken into consideration, they are analyzed by means of existing theories that best fit the model.

These theories however are not completely explanatory given the uniqueness of each case which is not being overlooked. In this case, Sri Lanka's connection to China and India is the subject of investigation through the lens of broader great power politics. Thus the best of both worlds is hopefully achieved through new insights in this area of expertise as well as the verification of well-known theories.

5. Impact Analysis From India's Perspective

In this chapter, we study the impact of the independent variable, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), on the dependent variable, India's strategy towards Sri Lanka. We study this on the basis of three expectations. All three zoom in on developments that India's strategy towards Sri Lanka has or has not undergone in the past twenty years or so.

5.1. Indian aggression

The first expectation of the theoretical framework was:

Expectation 1: In reaction to China's Belt and Road Initiative in Sri Lanka, India will behave more aggressively towards Sri Lanka.

The short assessment of this expectation is: not (yet been) reached.

China has invested heavily in political capital over the past two decades. Beijing helped President Mahinda Rajapaksa to win the civil war and to realize his dream: to convert his birthplace Hambantota into an important port city. Money from Chinese state-owned companies even ended up in the campaign coffers of the Rajapaksa family. It brought the Rajapaksas political prosperity and China expanding influence (Abi-Habib, 2018; Lalwani, 2015; Wipulasena, 2022; Xavier, 2018).

India's interests have therefore not been served by the Rajapaksa's. On the contrary, New Delhi's preference during the political crisis of 2018 in Colombo was a public secret: Wickremesinghe. He served as Prime Minister in the 1990s and early 2000s, he faced Mahinda Rajapaksa as leader of the opposition and is known for his "pro-India" stances (Wipulasena, 2022). From a realist perspective, one would expect India to actively interfere in this dispute due to China's growing influence.

After all, during the 1980s New Delhi did interfere in the internal affairs of Sri Lanka. This could be done through bribery, like China has sometimes done the last 20 years, through threats or even a military operation. In reality the contrary has turned out to be the case: India has become more reluctant to react to the internal affairs of Sri Lanka. It seems New Delhi is afraid to push Colombo further into the arms of Beijing. However, India does invest in bilateral relations with Sri Lanka.

Although India and Sri Lanka are close neighbors, Modi was the first Indian Prime Minister to pay a serious bilateral visit to Sri Lanka in nearly 40 years. According to Xavier (2018), this is a direct result of the challenges Beijing has posed in New Delhi. While Beijing clearly took sides in the conflict between Rajapaksa and Wickremesinghe, New Delhi tried to remain on speaking terms with both despite its preference. India is therefore clearly more reserved than during the Sri Lankan civil war, while at the same time reaching out in an open and neutral way.

Sri Lanka's bond with India seems to be deeper than that with China. This appears to be one of the explanations for the fact that India has not yet shown any aggressive behavior towards Sri Lanka. Two examples can be given:

First example: the "dethroning" of the Rajapaksa's in 2015 and again in 2022 shows that democracy in Sri Lanka is resilient. It also shows just how fragile the Chinese influence on Colombo is (Abi-Habib, 2018; Lalwani, 2015; Wipulasena, 2022; Xavier, 2018). Second example: since the end of the Sri Lankan civil war in 2009, India and Sri Lanka have been organizing joint military trainings. According to Lalwani, this is an intimate form of cooperation that China can only dream of (Lalwani, 2015; Baruah, 2017).

5.2. Trade as a lifebuoy

The second expectation of the theoretical framework was:

Expectation 2: In reaction to China's Belt and Road Initiative in Sri Lanka, India will try to enhance economic integration with Sri Lanka.

The short assessment of this expectation is: this is correct.

This expectation stems from both the liberal and realist position. Liberalism would expect this to be the case, because trade will lead to cooperation, trust and wealth. Realists on the other hand reach the same conclusion, since this would ensure that Sri Lanka becomes economically dependent on India.

It is not surprising for Chinese activities to take place in Sri Lanka: Sri Lanka is a crucial hub on sea lanes across the Indian Ocean. More than two thirds of global oil and fifty percent of global container shipments sail on the waters of the Indian Ocean every year. Islands such as Sri Lanka are of equal importance as well-known choke points like for example Bab-el-Mandab and the Straits of Hormuz and Malacca (Baruah, 2022a).

New is India's presence in Colombo Port: it prevents Sri Lanka's complete dependence on Beijing. In 2021, the Indian Adani Group took a 51% stake in the Colombo West International Container Terminal (CWICT): a strategic game changer according to Chulanee Attanayake. Moreover, one year later, it was announced that India is going to build a hybrid power plant in the far north of Sri Lanka (Attanayake, 2021; Francis, 2022). However, China's possession of South Asia's only deep-water terminal is putting New Delhi at a disadvantage (Arjun, 2020; Attanayake, 2021; Attanayake & Ren, 2021, pp. 245-246; Baruah, 2021a). According to Sumit Ganguly, Modi's "Neighborhood First" policy has not yet been able to turn the tide (Ganguly, 2018).

Also new is a free trade agreement between India and Sri Lanka. It reduced trade imbalances between India and Sri Lanka. As a result, India imports four times as much from Sri Lanka as China does. Almost three quarters of the transshipment in Colombo Port are related to the Indian market (Attanayake, 2021).

5.3. International assistance

The third expectation of the theoretical framework was:

Expectation 3: In reaction to China's Belt and Road Initiative in Sri Lanka, India will seek ways to enforce international law.

The short assessment of this expectation is: this is partially correct.

Liberalism would expect India to try to enhance international cooperation in order to enforce international law. This is especially true for the UN because of India's policy of non-alignment. In reality however, India is carefully distancing itself from her previous non-aligned position. This is most clearly visible in her membership of the QUAD.

Trade by sea accounts for 95% of the volume and 68% of the value of India's total trade. Trade is crucial to the living standards of almost 1.4 billion Indians (Mukherjee, 2019, pp. 44-45). This makes New Delhi dependent on sea lanes and therefore on a secure and open Indian Ocean. That is also why Modi spoke out in his keynote address for liberal principles such as the rule of law, territorial integrity and freedom of navigation (Ayres, 2018).

According to Baruah (2021a), the arrival of new players in the Indian Ocean such as China is forcing India to rethink its maritime security. Two points of India's foreign policy could no longer be sustained.

First: India prioritizing its presence in the eastern Indian Ocean (Baruah, 2020b; Baruah, 2022b). With the entry of China in the Indian Ocean and the power play around the South China Sea India has had to broaden its scope like the United States. Both countries now speak of 'Indo-Pacific'. Washington describes the Indo-Pacific as the world's center of gravity, "home to more than half of the world's people, nearly two-thirds of the world's economy, and seven of the world's largest militaries".

During his keynote address at the 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue, Prime Minister Modi took the Indo-Pacific even wider, placing India at the heart of a region stretching "from the shores of Africa to that of the Americas." In short, in this map the Indo-Pacific consists of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, as well as the countries that border them (Ayres, 2018; Brewster, 2014; Detsch, 2021; White House, 2022). We can therefore conclude that India, like the US, has felt compelled by China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to develop a strategy for the Indo-Pacific.

Secondly, a more dramatic change in India's foreign policy is its membership in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (in short: the QUAD).

The QUAD was first founded in 2007 in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean at the initiative of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzō Abe. Members are US, Japan, Australia and India. Since 2017, there have been joint exercises in the Bay of Bengal and the South China Sea. A radical break with India's policy of non-alignment. Some even call it a "NATO" for the Indian Ocean (Abe, 2007; Mukherjee, 2019, p. 49; Jaishankar & Madan, 2021).

New Delhi therefore does everything it can to trivialize the QUAD. The QUAD says it stands for "free, open and inclusive". The latter, "inclusive", being a handout from India to China. According to various experts, the comparison with NATO is going too far. However, it seems doubtful to say the least whether India would also have joined the QUAD during the heyday of the Cold War, when India, like China, tried to maintain a neutral position amid the great-power competition between East and West (Ayres, 2018; Mukherjee, 2019).

Last but not least: while the major countries are engaged in a power game, the islands are particularly concerned about the effects of climate change and overfishing. India has entered several partnerships on these issues. For example, the India-Australia Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative Partnership is committed to maritime ecology and disaster risk deduction (Baruah, 2022a). From a realist standpoint this gives India leverage over the island nations and is in line with her policy as being the first responder in the region.

6. Discussion and conclusion

This thesis has investigated the research question: *How has China's Belt and Road Initiative changed India's strategy towards Sri Lanka?* The research has been conducted a realist and a liberal position and with the help of three expectations. This chapter discusses the outcomes and limitations and concludes with the answer to the research question.

6.1. Discussion

Like every research, there are limitations to the conclusions and findings. Because of the sole focus on China's Belt and Road Initiative, other factors in the analysis of the change in India's foreign policy have not been taken into account.

For example, domestic political motives and strategies in New Delhi could also explain such a change, especially given the growth of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) since 2014. It is likely that a more proactive and expansionist foreign policy has been part of their party platform, including a more aggressive stance towards China. These conclusions invite more in-depth research.

Moreover, India's foreign policy has not been very consistent since its independence in the 1950s (Wu, 2020; Sharma, 2020; Haider, 2011). At times her 'Neighborhood First' policy has been interventionist, whereas at other times it has been non-interventionist. This makes it more difficult to interpret the results of this analysis.

Sri Lanka's domestic affairs were not included as a factor in this research, but they could just as well have triggered foreign policy changes. This is especially relevant given the inner turmoil in the country the last few years as a consequence of the economic crisis.

Another point of discussion that arises from the operationalization is whether the impact of China's Belt and Road Initiative had to be narrowed down to the impact of the projects in Sri Lanka. This was done on purpose, but it would also be possible to investigate a wider impact. And likewise, this thesis has tested three specific expectations which also could have been different.

Another thing to notice is the generalizability of this case study. The question remains whether Sri Lanka is an unique case within Sino-Indian power politics or that this case reveals the broader modus operandi of these great powers.

Moreover, in this research only two mainstream theories of foreign policy have been taken into account. Other theories have been left unaddressed. For example, political scientist

Carina van de Wetering, has written on India's rise to power from a social constructivist point of view (Van de Wetering, 2020). These extra theories could shed a new light on the observed power play and could therefore strengthen further research in this area.

6.2. Conclusion

Back to the research question: *How has China's Belt and Road Initiative changed India's strategy towards Sri Lanka?*

The conclusion of this thesis has been that India does not exhibit more aggressive behavior towards Sri Lanka. In fact, there seems to be a more cautious approach. However, it could be established that India is committed to economic integration as a means of tying Sri Lanka more firmly to itself.

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) related projects in Sri Lanka seem to have triggered India. After Washington, Moscow and Beijing, New Delhi now also has a strategy for the Indo-Pacific. India is committed to existing international agreements. India does not rely on the liberal institutions like the UN for compliance but is putting pressure on its non-aligned position through membership of multilateral coalitions such as the QUAD.

In other words: given New Delhi's 'Neighborhood First' policy and her role as first responder on the Indian Ocean, China's presence in Sri Lanka is a threat to India's vital interests. As a result, India has emerged from its South Asian cocoon and is now overlooking the entire Indo-Pacific.

It is undeniable that China has grown in influence in Sri Lanka over the past twenty years. Although China has taken hold of crucial infrastructure in Sri Lanka which allows Beijing to deter and blackmail Colombo. However, China's grip depends partially on the Rajapaksa dynasty. The question remains how dependent China still is on the Rajapaksas thanks to its long-term lease contracts.

The disappearance of the Rajapaksas could work out in New Delhi's favor. India and Sri Lanka have a much deeper bond; not only economically, but also politically and culturally. Unfortunately, a crystal ball to answer that question does not exist. What can be stated with certainty is that 135 years after Rudyard Kipling wrote his poem "A Tale of Two Cities", a new trader is sailing the Indian Ocean.

7. Literature list

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