

POLICY BRIEF

International Relations in South Asia: Russia's and Sri Lanka's views

ALEXEY KUPRIYANOV,

Ph.D. in History, Senior Research Fellow, Primakov Institute of World Economy and International Relations of RAS, RIAC Expert

KULANI WIJAYABAHU,

Transitional – Senior Lecturer, Department of International Relations, University of Colombo (Sri Lanka)

SHAKTHI DE SILVA,

Temporary – Assistant Lecturer, Department of International Relations, University of Colombo (Sri Lanka)

RUSSIAN INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS COUNCIL

BOARD OF TRUSTEES

Sergey Lavrov – Chairman
of the Board of Trustees
Herman Gref
Aleksandr Dzasokhov
Leonid Drachevsky
Aleksandr Dynkin
Mikhail Komissar
Konstantin Kosachev

Mikhail Margelov
Yury Osipov
Sergey Prikhodko
Anatoly Torkunov
Andrey Fursenko
Aleksandr Shokhin
Igor Yurgens

PRESIDIUM

Petr Aven
Igor Ivanov – President
Andrey Kortunov – Director General
Fyodor Lukyanov
Igor Morgulov
Dmitry Peskov

Editors:

Ivan Timofeev, Ph.D. in Political Science
Elena Karpinskaya
Ksenia Kuzmina
Alevtina Larionova
Daria Terkina

Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) is a membership-based non-profit Russian organization. RIAC's activities are aimed at strengthening peace, friendship and solidarity between peoples, preventing international conflicts and promoting crisis resolution. The Council was founded in accordance with Russian Presidential Order No. 59-rp "On the Creation of the Russian International Affairs Council non-profit partnership," dated February 2, 2010.

FOUNDERS



Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation



Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation



Russian Academy of Sciences



Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs



Interfax News Agency

RIAC MISSION

The mission of RIAC is to promote Russia's prosperity by integrating it into the global world. RIAC operates as a link between the state, scholarly community, business and civil society in an effort to find solutions to foreign policy issues.

The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect those of RIAC.

THE PATHFINDER FOUNDATION

The Pathfinder Foundation (PF) is a non-profit, non-partisan research & advocacy think-tank which has played a direct and catalytic role in promoting economic policy reforms in Sri Lanka. Registered in 2008 the Institution's focus is on promoting market oriented economic reforms and public private partnerships together with building foreign partnerships to promote people-to-people relations.

The Foundation houses four Centres: China – Sri Lanka Cooperation Studies Center, Centre for Indo-Lanka Initiatives, Centre for Law of the Sea and Hafez Centre for Cultural Understanding (HCCU). The PF also has an extensive network of think tanks and academic institutions in China, India, Iran, Israel, Japan, Norway, Singapore, The Russian Federation (Russian International Affairs Council) and the USA.

International Relations in South Asia: Russia's and Sri Lanka's views

Russia and South Asia: Prospects for Interaction in a Changing World

There was a time that South Asia was one of the most economically developed regions in the world. That was before the European colonists arrived. Now the region is gradually regaining its former status. It is no coincidence that the 21st century has been dubbed the "Asian Century," with the centre of economic and political life in the world once again shifting to where it was half a millennium ago. China is an increasingly convincing candidate for the role of superpower, and India does not want to be left behind. The Indian Ocean is turning into one of the most significant water areas of the planet, with the most important trade routes passing through it, and its security determines the success of the growth strategies of China, Japan, India and the ASEAN countries.

This economic and political shift does not come at the best time for Russia, which has still not fully recovered following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the loss of its global stature. Moreover, its resources are limited, and the challenges are so numerous and varied that it cannot give the regions of the Indian Ocean and South Asia the attention they deserve. This means that Russia needs to pursue a balanced and cautious policy to help it regain as many of its former positions as possible which at the same time would not require excessive resources. Consequently, Russia's policy in the region will have to rely on relations with those South Asian countries that are interested in this cooperation. They include Sri Lanka, which occupies an advantageous strategic position and harbours ambitions to be a significant player in regional politics.

THE LONG ROAD TO SOUTH ASIA

Historically, Russia for a long period of time has maintained close economic ties with South Asia without promoting any political interests there.

The earliest trade contacts between the Eastern Slavs and the inhabitants of Hindustan supposedly date back to the 9th–10th centuries. They used the so-called Volga–Caspian trade route through the mediation of the Persians and Arabs. On occasion, Russians would dispense with the intermediaries, reaching Hindustan by themselves. Afanasy Nikitin made this journey in the 15th century, followed by Leonty Yudin and Semyon Malenkoy in the 16th century. At the beginning of the 17th century, a permanent trade route was established through Astrakhan, where Indian merchants lived.

Russia did not gain a political presence in South Asia until long after it had established trade links with the region. Although Emperor Babur's envoy, Khoja Hussein, visited Moscow in 1532 with a letter and an offer of friendship and brotherhood, a political alliance between Moscow and the Indian sovereigns did not develop either then or later.¹ There were good reasons for that: Russia was a land-locked state and consequently could not use the method typically employed by European states of entering the region by sea. It was only under Peter the Great when Russia gained access to sea and established its own navy that the political projects related to the Indian Ocean first emerged. The most famous of these was the "Madagascar Project," which involved sending a sea expedition to the Indian Ocean to establish ties with a mythical pirate kingdom.² After the death of Peter the Great, all projects of this kind were put on ice: Russia strived to establish its dominance in the Baltic and Black seas. Getting into South Asia by land was hindered by both geographical obstacles and the presence of hostile powers located between Russia and Hindustan.

It was not until the second half of the 19th century that Russia saw its first real opportunity of gain-

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Alexey Kupriyanov, Ph.D. in History, Research Fellow of the Primakov Institute of the World Economy and International Relations of RAS, RIAC Expert

¹ Zimin, A. *Russia on the Threshold of Modern Times (Essays on the Political History of Russia in the First Third of the 16th Century)* // WikiReading. URL: <https://history.wikireading.ru/194083> (In Russian)

² Kiselev, E. *How Peter the Great wanted to subdue Madagascar* // NVO, July 1, 2005. URL: http://nvo.ng.ru/history/2005-07-01/5_petr.html (in Russian)

ing a foothold in South Asia, but by that time the European colonial powers had already divided the previously independent principalities and kingdoms among themselves. The British Empire was concerned that Russia might interfere in regional affairs and thus launched the Great Game in an attempt to stop the latter on the northern borders of Afghanistan and prevent it from establishing bases in the Indian Ocean. Ultimately, it was Great Britain who took the upper hand, as the resulting Anglo–Russian Convention ensured that all of South Asia remained in its sphere of influence.

However, a decade later, the October Revolution radically changed the very essence of Russia's policy towards South Asia. Russia abandoned the fight against the imperialist powers for the colonies and instead staked on their destruction in the hope that independent and friendly states would rise from the ashes of the former colonies. The strategy ultimately panned out, as most of the states that appeared after the collapse of the British Empire were generally well disposed towards the Soviet Union, seeing it as a promising partner and a role model. And this was true of all the countries of South Asia.

Initially, the Soviet Union tried to build a multi-vector system of relations, assisting both India and Pakistan in the creation of heavy industry. It was important for Moscow that friendly forces come to power in the two countries. In 1966, the USSR acted as a mediator in the peace negotiations between New Delhi and Islamabad after the Second Indo–Pakistani War of 1965. A peace treaty was subsequently signed by the two countries in the capital of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic, Tashkent. As time went by, however, the Soviet Union gradually drew closer to India. The Indo–Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation was signed in 1971, thus marking a new stage in the Soviet Union's policy in South Asia. From that moment on, Moscow tended to view events in the region primarily through the prism of its relations with New Delhi – a fact that also affected the Soviet Union's relations with the smaller countries in the region, including Sri Lanka. The Soviet Union would go on to render assistance to Sri Lanka, signing an agreement on economic and technical cooperation with the country in 1958. Under the agreement, the Soviet Union provided assistance in building a

steel plant and enterprises for the production of tyres and construction materials. It is particularly telling that when the Marxist People's Liberation Front launched an armed uprising against the government of Ceylon in 1971, the Soviet Union followed India's lead and pledged its support for the country's authorities.

Formally speaking, India was, and is, one of the leaders of the Non-Aligned Movement. But this did not stop it from pursuing a friendly policy towards Moscow. Its interest in rapprochement with the Soviet Union stemmed from economic and security reasons, as both Moscow and New Delhi were wary of China's hegemonic ambitions. Consequently, the Soviet Union limited its role in the region to supporting India and demonstrating its force there on a very limited scale (for example, the 8th Operational Squadron was deployed in the Indian Ocean to ensure the safety of Soviet merchant ships).

The collapse of the USSR led to another change in Russian politics in the region. The new Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Andrey Kozyrev proclaimed an equation policy meaning³ that India was no longer a priority partner for the country and that from that moment on Moscow would focus on building equally good relations with all the states of South Asia. This led to a significant deterioration in relations with India, although it did help to establish a dialogue with Pakistan. By the beginning of the 21st century, however, Russia had again started to move closer towards India. The two countries entered into a strategic partnership agreement, which was later expanded to a special privileged strategic partnership.

THE CURRENT SITUATION

The current situation in South Asia and the world is quite different from the one that prevailed during the Cold War. Russia is no longer a superpower trying to build a new model of international relations that might challenge the traditional Western-centric paradigm. Instead, Russia has settled into its new role as a great power with global interests. Even so, Russia's resources are quite limited, which means that it cannot further these interests as much as it would like. This notwithstanding, Moscow is trying to restore its status in those countries that once belonged to

³ Results of Kozyrev's visit to Pakistan // Kommersant, April 9, 1993.
URL: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/44589?fbclid=IwAR1x25wFUEIBH5vqZ7cUVt774YMPP3LiM8y1XOSSkXMMYRNoKt9Qfz28> (In Russian)

its sphere of influence, as well as to establish relations with states that were on the other side of the Iron Curtain during the Cold War.

Having lost a powerful ally after the collapse of the Soviet Union, India was forced to radically revise its economic strategy and foreign policy. Over the past few decades, the country has managed to transform itself into a great power with a rapidly growing economy. This is due in part to its policy of "strategic autonomy," which involves prioritizing its own interests and avoiding budding up with other centres of power.

China, which USSR and India perceived as a threat since 1960s, is actively transforming itself into a new superpower. And while Russia is rapidly developing its relations with China today, the same cannot be said of India. Despite the growth in trade between China and India, bilateral relations remain rather tense. India is suspicious of China's economic and infrastructure projects, believing that the country is trying to undermine its influence on the region's smaller states.

Russia maintains friendly relations with both China and India, and this has a big influence on how it perceives the processes taking place in the region. Moscow is trying to mitigate the contradictions between New Delhi and Beijing as much as possible, as it is in Russia's interests for China and India to at least get along with each other. On the whole, this position also benefits the states of Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean region, especially Sri Lanka. New Delhi has been voicing its concerns recently about China's increasing influence on the island. In particular, the Indian military are worried that Hambantota Port, which is currently leased by China, could become a base for the Chinese Navy in the future. The presence of Russia, which enjoys friendly relations with both India and China, and its participation in infrastructure projects, could help relieve tensions.

RUSSIA AND THE REGIONAL ORDER

An important aspect of Russia's foreign policy strategy is to position itself as a Eurasian power, a key player in Greater Eurasia, which it sees as a future zone of peace, stability and mutually beneficial cooperation between different countries and cultures. Russia's pursuit of this goal means that its strategy in Eurasia is quite predictable. As far as Russia is concerned, South Asia is part of Greater Eurasia. All the features we have already mentioned, as well as the features of Russia's

strategy, are fully applicable to any action that Russia may take in South Asia.

The key features of Russia's strategy are:

1. Any conflict in the Eurasian space is seen as an absolute evil that violates the emerging architecture of security and cooperation. Thus, Russia primarily seeks to maintain the status quo, intervening only when destabilization is a distinct possibility or when its interests are in jeopardy. A prime example is the conflict in Syria, where Moscow sided with the state government, its goal being to prevent the collapse of the country and its transformation into a zone of chaos and refuge for militants.
2. The formation of a zone of peace, stability and mutually beneficial cooperation in Eurasia is ultimately beneficial to all countries and peoples living on the continent. External players are a destabilizing element. Chief among these is the United States, which has no interest in the economic recovery of the Eurasian powers, as they may challenge its dominance in the world. This is why Russia tends to view the military and political actions of the United States in a negative light.
3. The creation of military blocs and alliances serves only to split Eurasia into groups and contributes to the growth of conflict potential. Russia advocates the creation of a comprehensive security architecture whereby countries can resolve their problems peacefully without interference from external actors.

Russia is trying to achieve these goals both through bilateral dialogue and through the creation of organizations and concepts that would help build trusting relations and create an atmosphere of partnership among the countries of Greater Eurasia. Examples of such organizations include the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), whose activities are of priority interest for Moscow.

Russia applies a similar approach to any association and integration initiative. As far as Moscow is concerned, any initiative that does not have the potential for conflict and does not try to split Greater Eurasia is acceptable and compatible with its ideas. One example is Russia's attitude towards China's Belt and Road Initiative, which, thanks to the diligent work of politicians and experts, is being linked with the EAEU, the most successful economic integration project in the former

Soviet space. Russia has mixed feelings about the concept of the Indo–Pacific Region, seeing it as a kind of double-edged sword: Moscow has no problem with the Indo–Pacific Region as a format for economic and cultural cooperation, but it disagrees strongly with American attempts to turn it into a conceptual format for the Quad.

RUSSIA AND SOUTH ASIA: PROSPECTS FOR COOPERATION

Russia does not have any vital interests in South Asia that it would be ready to defend with the use of force. This also means that Moscow does not have any conflicts of interest with the region's powers. Russia acts as an external player in the subregion that nevertheless wants to establish peace and cooperation there.

We should not lose sight of the fact that at present Russia mainly focuses on the development of its domestic infrastructure and the exploration of the northern seas, where large mineral reserves and an alternative sea route from Asia to Europe are located. This means that Moscow will not have the resources to be a major player in the South for the foreseeable future and will have to rely on cooperation with local actors.

These factors shape the contours of Russia's future policies in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region. Moscow has no intention of choosing between China and India, as it is counting on cooperation with both Beijing and New Delhi. In South Asia, Russia is focused on developing relations with India as a major player in the region, a country with a booming economy and a potential pillar of the Eurasian security system. At the same time, it continues to develop ties with the smaller and medium-sized countries in the region, trying to entice them with its vision of Greater Eurasia.

This opens up interesting prospects for cooperation between Russia and Sri Lanka.

1. Russia is interested in maintaining the status quo in the mega-region of Greater Eurasia, which means that it also wants to see stability in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region. Moscow is ready to help all interested states in their respective fights against terrorism and extremism at home in order to prevent them from becoming terrorist enclaves. This help may come in the form of consultations and arms transfers.

2. The predictability of Russia's policy in the region offers great opportunities for Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka has repeatedly put forward regional initiatives, in particular, the concept of the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace (IOZOP).⁴ If the country proposes new initiatives that are compatible with Russia's vision of the further development of Greater Eurasia, then Moscow will support them.

3. Russia will continue to step up its presence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region in a non-aggressive manner, restoring positions that it lost after the collapse of the Soviet Union. This will make it possible for Sri Lanka, if it so desires, to become one of Russia's most important partners in the region in terms of economic and political cooperation and security.

Russia is in a unique position because it enjoys friendly relations with both India and China. Unlike the United States, Russia's presence in the region is welcomed by all players. This is because Russia gives these countries room to breathe and does not force them to make the difficult decision between China and India or China and the United States. Russia does not have enough resources to become a major investor, but it can become a supplier of security and stability in the region.

⁴ Declaration of the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace // United Nations, December 16, 1971.
URL: https://www.un.org/ru/documents/decl_conv/declarations/indian_ocean.shtml

Geo-Economics, Regional Orders and South Asia

The South Asian region encompasses eight countries – Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. It ranks as one of the most economically dynamic regions in the world and according to the World Bank has a total population of 1.81 billion people⁵ (in 2018) and an economic growth rate of 7.1 per cent over the last decade.⁶ The region is also close to vital sea lanes in the Indian Ocean. Sri Lanka, for example, sits on the key shipping route between the Malacca Straits and the Suez Canal, which is used by about 36,000 ships – including 4,500 oil tankers – every year.⁷ In this policy brief, we succinctly examine the security and economic configurations which regional and extra regional powers aspire to establish in South Asia.

International Relations scholars have often used a geopolitical analysis to explain aspects of the international arena. In his 1990 article *From Geo-Politics to Geo-Economics*, Luttwak emphasizes the importance of utilizing economic tools to define power capabilities instead of limiting to traditional military factors.⁸ In a more recent text, Blackwill and Harris contend that China and Russia use geo-economic tools to advance their foreign policy goals in Asia. According to their perspective, geo-economics entails the “use of economic instruments to promote and defend national interests, and to produce beneficial geopolitical results; and the effects of other nations’ economic actions on a country’s geopolitical goals.”⁹ Some also argue that economic considerations, in the present context, weigh more heavily on policymakers’ minds than political and security aspects. This school of thought adds that, when engaging in international relations, policymakers calculate in advance the strategic payoff through a geo-economic lens.

As a result of its geographical salience, prospects of economic growth and a rising population, some have advanced the notion that Asia, and in particular South Asia, will play a large role in a future international order. Others contend that regional and/or extra regional powers will attempt to establish their hegemony in South Asia and limit the autonomy of small South Asian states. They point to the Belt and Road Initiative of China, India’s SAGAR policy and the United States’ Indo-Pacific Strategy as geo-economic and geopolitical initiatives which may have a significant bearing on the South Asian regional order. The second and third parts of this paper explore the nature of these regional blueprints as well as Russia’s strategic objectives in the region and the policy options available to Sri Lanka in this context.

REGIONAL ORDERS IN SOUTH ASIA

The Indo-Pacific Strategy¹⁰

The Indo-Pacific Strategy, promoted by the United States is one of the most heavily discussed blueprints of regional configuration since the end of the Cold War. The strategy, chiefly driven by U.S. security and geopolitical concerns, was first outlined by President Trump in his 2017 speech at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Summit in Vietnam.¹¹ According to Washington, the Indo-Pacific Strategy is said to promote good governance and fundamental liberties at the state level as well as ensure sustainable growth and a peaceful and stable maritime order in the Indo-Pacific region. On the economic front, the strategy is expected to enhance fair and reciprocal trade, open investment environments and transparent agreements between nations.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS:

Kulani Wijayabahu, Transitional – Senior Lecturer, Department of International Relations, University of Colombo (Sri Lanka)

Shakthi De Silva, Temporary – Assistant Lecturer, Department of International Relations, University of Colombo (Sri Lanka)

⁵ South Asia // The World Bank.

URL: <https://data.worldbank.org/region/south-asia>

⁶ The World Bank in South Asia // The World Bank, April 5, 2019.

URL: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/sar/overview>

⁷ Hambantota Port // Sri Lanka Institution of Civil Engineers, February 21, 2010.

URL: <https://www.ice.org.uk/what-is-civil-engineering/what-do-civil-engineers-do/hambantota-port-sri-lanka>

⁸ Luttwak, E.N. From Geopolitics to Geo-Economics: Logic of Conflict, Grammar of Commerce. The National Interest 20, 1990, pp. 17-23.

⁹ Blackwill, R.D., Harris, J.M. War by other means: geo-economics and statecraft. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2016, p. 20.

¹⁰ Japan, United States, India and Australia appear to have divergent views on the geographical space of the ‘Indo-Pacific’ and what the strategy entails. Some view the initiative as a means to stifle the rise of a Pax Sinica world order while others characterize the initiative as more inclusive and less strategically motivated. The authors selected the U.S.’s Indo-Pacific vision.

¹¹ Remarks by President Trump at APEC CEO Summit // The White House, November 10, 2017.

URL: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-apec-ceo-summit-da-nang-vietnam>

Some, however, perceive the strategy as a response to a resurgent People's Republic of China (PRC). The decision to describe the PRC as a 'Revisionist' power in the 2017 *National Security Strategy* as well as in the 2018 *National Defense Strategy*, gives credence to this view. Rhetoric from Washington on the topic of the Indo-Pacific has in the past few years also revolved around the following claims:

- China is eroding the values and principles of the rules-based order,
- The PRC is 'destabilizing' the South China Sea by 'militarizing' the region and
- China seeks to expand its influence into the Indo-Pacific at the expense of the United States.

The 99-year lease of the Hambantota Port to a Chinese company continues to be the poster-child for the Western assertion that China is utilizing its economic clout to undermine state sovereignty. As a consequence of these and other developments, the US has pushed through geo-economic initiatives such as the Better Utilization of Investments Leading to Development Act or the BUILD Act, which President Trump signed into law in October 2018.¹² The U.S. has also deployed more than 2,000 aircrafts; 200 ships and submarines; and more than 370,000 Soldiers, Sailors, Marines, Airmen and Department of Defence civilians under the United States Indo-Pacific Command.¹³ Some reports suggest that the Indo-Pacific Strategy could merge with a 'Quad' between Australia, India, Japan and the U.S. In the event that the Quad comes to fruition, it will most likely be perceived by Beijing as an anti-China initiative.¹⁴ President Trump has also endeavoured to enhance security ties with South Asian states. The United States' first ever bilateral Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) Exercise with Sri Lankan forces is an example of the intensifying U.S. engagement in the region.¹⁵

India and SAGAR

In 2015, Indian Prime Minister Modi went public with his Security and Growth for All in the Region

(SAGAR) strategy, making it the cornerstone of his engagement with the Indian Ocean rim. The SAGAR regional order which India aims to promote entails the following core elements:

1. India "will do everything to safeguard" its territory and defend its interests;
2. India will deepen its "economic and security cooperation" with maritime neighbours and island states;
3. Advocate for collective action and cooperation to advance peace and security in the maritime region;
4. Build an "integrated and cooperative future in the region that enhances the prospects for sustainable development for all";
5. Engage with other major powers so that India can collaboratively create a "climate of trust and transparency; respect for international maritime rules and norms; and increase maritime cooperation."¹⁶

Although the SAGAR is India's strategic vision for the region, given the growing alignment between the United States and India, some scholars are of the view that the SAGAR's policy goals will be fused into the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and South Asia

The BRI is designed to create linkages among 65 countries across the Asian, African and European continents via land and sea routes. Ambitious in its scope, the BRI is focused on developing infrastructure and modes of connectivity to ensure win-win outcomes and promote convergent developmental strategies with states along the routes. The BRI has two main components – a Silk Road Economic Belt over land and a 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. South Asia is recognized as a BRI priority zone due to the strategic and economic importance of the region. Most Western and Indian analysts identify this initiative chiefly through a geopolitical and geo-economic lens, seeing it as Beijing's attempt to gain political and economic leverage over Asian states.

¹² A New Era in U.S. Development Finance // Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC).
URL: <https://www.opic.gov/build-act/overview>

¹³ Indo-Pacific Strategy Report // The Department of Defense, June 1, 2019.
URL: https://media.defense.gov/2019/May/31/2002139210/-1/-1/1/DOD_INDO_PACIFIC_STRATEGY_REPORT_JUNE_2019.PDF

¹⁴ Berkofsky, A. Encircling China? Japan, the Quad and the Indians // Italian Institute for International Political Studies, April 16, 2019.
URL: <https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/encircling-china-japan-quad-and-indians-22853>

¹⁵ Forsythe, A. U.S., Sri Lanka Navy Partnership Strong During CARAT 2019 // Defense Visual Information Distribution Service, April 24, 2019.
URL: <https://www.dvidshub.net/news/322938/us-sri-lanka-navy-partnership-strong-during-carat-2019>

¹⁶ Prime Minister's Remarks at the Commissioning of Offshore Patrol Vessel (OPV) Barracuda in Mauritius // Ministry of External Affairs, March 12, 2015.
URL: <https://www.mea.gov.in/outgoing-visit-detail.htm?24912/Prime+Ministers+Remarks+at+the+Commissioning+of+Offshore+Patrol+Vessel+OPV+Barracuda+in+Mauritius+March+12+2015>

Discussing Chinese designs in South Asia, Singh notes that “Given South Asia’s strategic location at the intersection point of the China-proposed Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, Chinese policymakers are of the opinion that having a foothold in South Asia or securing economic integration with the region is not only crucial to consolidate China’s strategic presence in the Eurasian hinterland but also to thwart any future attempt by its adversaries to confine China in East Asia.”¹⁷

The BRI is expected to address China’s domestic concerns. Developing under-developed parts of China and addressing the country’s chronic excess capacity are some of the problems Beijing aims to tackle through the BRI. All the same, the BRI is also driven by geopolitical and geo-economic aims. Some of China’s actions, such as the creation of a military base in Djibouti and the establishment of ports in South Asian littoral states, are consistent with such a characterization.

China’s economic engagement with South Asia also witnessed rapid growth in the past few years. The \$45 million Chinese Foreign Direct Investment in South Asia in 2003 increased to \$4 billion by 2012 – an increase of almost 100-fold. In addition, the trade volume between China and South Asian countries increased by 14.8 percent to \$110 billion in 2016, following the implementation of Chinese projects in the region.¹⁸

Barring Bhutan, all of India’s neighbours joined the BRI. The BRI is viewed by most South Asian countries as an effective developmental strategy to finance the infrastructure needs of the region. Although China’s deep pockets have provided a new lease of life to many South Asian infrastructure initiatives, India continues to view China’s presence as a threat to its position in the region. This is manifest from New Delhi’s protests against the CPEC and their unwillingness to join the initiative or BRI forums.

Russia’s role in South Asia

Between 1945 and 1991, the Soviet Union’s attention on South Asia peaked mainly during the time of Nikita Khrushchev (1953–1964). Even

then, the Soviet Union focused primarily on strengthening its ties with India. After the Soviet Union deployed troops to Afghanistan, its role was no longer seen as that of a benign actor. With the end of the Cold War and the fragmentation of the Soviet Union, some argue that Russia has placed less attention on South Asia. This is however, not to say that Russia has no interests in the region. Indeed, Raza makes the case that “Russia’s foreign policy interests in South Asia have (at present) revolved around three important aspects: 1) energy routes passing through this region, 2) security apprehensions related to terrorism, particularly in Afghanistan, and 3) access to the Arabian Sea and the oil-rich Middle East.”¹⁹ Kuzmina adds that “given its ample defense capacities, Russia could also serve as a security provider in the region with regard to anti-piracy, anti-terrorism and anti-trafficking and assist regional states in developing their own capacities in these areas.”²⁰

Western critics have argued that Russia may in future utilize the presence of the Islamic State in the region as an opportunity to increase its influence through military and economic assistance. Others portend that China’s BRI may create favourable conditions for Russia to exploit regional structural weaknesses to its advantage and attenuate any alignment between South Asian countries and the West through a geopolitical toolkit. The strengthening of security ties between Islamabad and Moscow have often been cited as a manifestation of this.

Sri Lanka, in particular, faces a gamut of traditional and non-traditional security threats. Highest on the list of non-traditional threats is terrorism. Understanding the island’s main priorities, the Chief of the Russian General Staff, Valery Gerasimov, commented that Russia desires to develop military cooperation with Sri Lanka and collaborate in the fight against international terrorism in the region.²¹ In future, one can expect Russia to build closer ties with Pakistan and other South Asian small states, particularly owing to India’s strengthening alignment with the US.

¹⁷ Singh, A.G. China’s Vision for the Belt and Road in South Asia // *The Diplomat*, March 2, 2019.
URL: <https://thediplomat.com/2019/03/chinas-vision-for-the-belt-and-road-in-south-asia>

¹⁸ Scobell, A., Lin, B., Shatz, H., Johnson, M., Hanauer, L., Chase, M., Cevallos, A.S., Rasmussen, I., Chan, A., Strong, A., Warner, E., Ma, L. *At the Dawn of Belt and Road: China in the Developing World* / Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018, pp. 128-133.

¹⁹ Raza, F. Russia in South Asia: Balancing United States and China // *South Asian Voices*, March 14, 2017.
URL: <https://southasianvoices.org/russia-south-asia-balancing-united-states-china>

²⁰ Kuzmina, K. Russia and the Indian Ocean Security and Governance // *Russian International Affairs Council*, March 22, 2019.
URL: https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/russia-and-the-indian-ocean-security-and-governance/?sphrase_id=31503749

²¹ *Russia Keen to Develop Military Ties with SL* // *Daily Mirror*, June 30, 2019.
URL: http://www.dailymirror.lk/breaking_news/Russia-keen-to-develop-military-ties-with-SL/108-170255

Sri Lanka also needs to be aware of a worst-case scenario where it might have to choose between joining either the

- Japan – India – US – Australia camp or
- the China – Pakistan – Russia camp.

Such a power configuration will be detrimental to the furthering of Sri Lanka's national interest and jeopardize the peace and stability in the region. Thus, this cursory analysis of the BRI, Indo-Pacific Strategy, SAGAR strategy as well as Russian strategic objectives in the region, exhibit the complex regional environment Sri Lanka has to face. What should Sri Lanka's strategy be in this context?

Sri Lanka's options?

Local scholars have posited different policy postures which Sri Lanka could adopt. Some recommend the island's policymakers to align with China. Their choice is chiefly predicated on China's 'non-interventionist policy' and deep pockets. Others such as Moonesinghe, contend that Sri Lanka should adopt a hedging foreign policy by expanding commercial relations with the PRC whilst strengthening defence cooperation with the United States.²² This argument hints that Sri Lanka will align more closely with the Indo-Pacific Strategy in the future.

The Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute of International Relations and Strategic Studies (the Foreign Policy Think Tank of the Sri Lankan Ministry of Foreign Affairs) has, of late, supported a 'rules-based order' for the Indian Ocean Region. This idea, first introduced by Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinghe, obtained traction among some policy circles. Sri Lanka's history of advocating for a 'rules-based order', beginning with Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike's advocacy for an Indian Ocean Peace Zone, has spurred considerable discussion. However, critics point out that this policy could, over time, dovetail Sri Lanka unreservedly into the Indo-Pacific Strategy.

Since 2015, Sri Lankan policymakers have advocated for a balanced foreign policy.²³ This was viewed by the incumbent administration to be the most utilitarian policy to adopt in the prevailing tumultuous regional environment.²⁴ Some within the Government have also proposed the possibility of drafting a Foreign Policy White Paper (FPWP). A balanced foreign policy grounded on a FPWP could help Sri Lanka establish a stable and utilitarian external policy, particularly towards India and China.²⁵ However, establishing a bipartisan balanced foreign policy and composing a FPWP could prove to be too formidable for a temporized administration.²⁶

Another school of thought backs the 'Concentric Circles based hierarchical approach' of establishing friendly external relations. In this sense, closer neighbours such as India and littoral states, would be Sri Lanka's main focus in foreign policy formulation (Circle A in the Image 1), with a decreasing importance ascribed to more distant countries, as the circles get larger (Circles B and C).

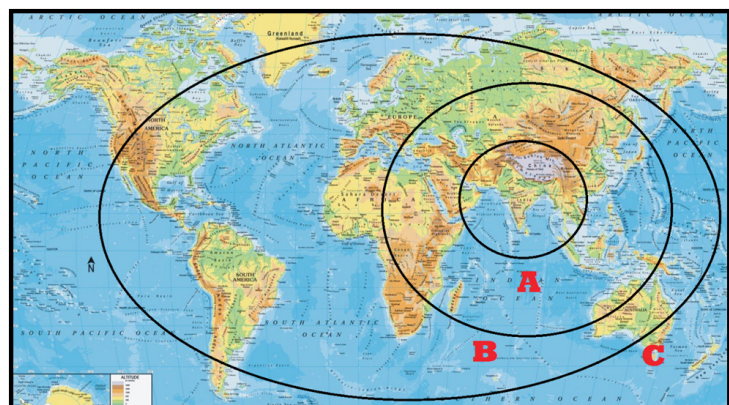


IMAGE 1. FOREIGN POLICY – CENTRIC CIRCLES APPROACH (SOURCE: AUTHORS)

Whether Sri Lankan policymakers will adopt any of the above policy options or instead link with India's SAGAR and/or the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy remains to be seen. What cannot be overlooked when Sri Lanka makes its decision, however, is that the final outcome should always be in line with the country's national interests.

²² Moonesinghe, P. Playing both Sides of the Fence: Sri Lanka's Approach to the BRI // South Asian Voices, May 9, 2019. URL: <https://southasianvoices.org/both-sides-of-the-coin-sri-lankas-approach-to-bri>

²³ De Silva, S. Decrypting Sri Lanka's 'Black Box' amidst an Indo-China 'Great Game'. Journal of the Indian Ocean Region, 2019, pp. 1-20.

²⁴ De Silva, S. Configuring Foreign Policies for Small States: A Case Study of Sri Lanka // Synergy – the Journal of Contemporary Asian Studies, April 16, 2018. URL: <http://utsynergyjournal.org/2018/04/16/configuring-foreign-policies-for-small-states-a-case-study-of-sri-lanka>

²⁵ De Silva, S. Will Sri Lanka Manage to Perform the Balancing Act between China and India? // London School of Economics – South Asia Blog, January 19, 2019. URL: <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2018/01/19/will-sri-lanka-manage-to-perform-the-balancing-act-between-china-and-india>

²⁶ For more insight on the pros and cons of instituting a FPWP refer: De Silva, S. Foreign Policy White Papers: Indispensable or Cosmetic? // The Prospector, May 28, 2019. URL: <https://www.lki.lk/blog/foreign-policy-white-papers-indispensable-or-cosmetic>



[facebook.com/
russiancouncil](https://facebook.com/russiancouncil)



[twitter.com/
Russian_Council](https://twitter.com/Russian_Council)



[vk.com/
russian_council](https://vk.com/russian_council)



[russiancouncil.
livejournal.com](https://russiancouncil.livejournal.com)



[flickr.com/photos/
russiancouncil](https://flickr.com/photos/russiancouncil)



[youtube.com/
russiancouncilvideo](https://youtube.com/russiancouncilvideo)



[slideshare.net/
RussianCouncil](https://slideshare.net/RussianCouncil)



linkedin.com/company/russian-international-affairs-council/
linkedin.com/groups/Russian-International-Affairs-Council-4473529

Tel.: +7 (495) 225 6283
Fax: +7 (495) 225 6284
E-mail: welcome@russiancouncil.ru
8, 4th Dobryninsky Pereulok, 119049, Moscow, Russia

www.russiancouncil.ru