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Working Paper Series: No.5

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Small States and Great Powers: The Role of Sri Lanka and India-China Competition in the Indian Ocean

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September 2019

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Abstract

International Relations literature often views smaller states with great power neighbours as being of strategic value to other great powers seeking to expand their influence in the regional power's backyard, or as seeking to balance against this larger neighbour. However, recent theoretical developments suggest that smaller states employ a tactic of 'strategic hedging' where they diversify their defence partnerships while maintaining a relatively stronger link with the neighbouring power. Such smaller states can be used by extra-regional powers against the regional power in a viable manner, only when they possess an overwhelming military advantage over the latter. Using these insights, this *Working Paper* examines Sri Lanka's security strategy and situation against the backdrop of India-China competition in the Indian Ocean. It argues that Sri Lanka, in keeping with the literature, employs a 'strategic hedging' tactic whereby it has a stronger defence relationship with India, while still maintaining good defence ties with China. It also demonstrates that, given China's lack of an overwhelming naval advantage over India in the Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka would likely not be of strategic value to China in seeking to strategically 'encircle' India.

Keywords: Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka, China, India, Security and Defence Strategy, Strategic Hedging

Contents

Abbreviations

A2/AD	Anti-Access/Area Denial
AIS	Automatic Identification System
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
EEZ	External Economic Zone
EU	European Union
FTA	Free Trade Agreement
INS	Indian Navy Ship
IONS	Indian Ocean Naval Symposium
IORA	Indian Ocean Rim Association
LRIT	Long Range Identification and Tracking
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
MDA	Maritime Domain Awareness
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NAM	Non-Aligned Movement
OPVs	Offshore Patrol Vessels
PLAN	People's Liberation Army Navy
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
SLINEX	Sri Lanka India Naval Exercise
SLNS	Sri Lankan Navy Ship
SIPRI	Stockholm Peace Research Institute
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
UN	United Nations

1. Introduction

The Indo-Lanka relationship dates back over two millennia and is perhaps the single most important bilateral relationship in Sri Lankan history. Both of Sri Lanka's major communities – the Sinhalese and the Tamils – trace their ethnic and religious roots to India. (De Silva 2005, 6-8;13-14) Intermittent waves of migration and invasion from India, as well as extensive trade and cultural contacts with various Indian polities, have indelibly shaped Sri Lanka's political and economic development over the centuries.

As with most cases of great power relations with smaller neighbouring states, the Indo-Lanka relationship has followed a complex 'love-hate' dynamic. (Suryanarayan 2015, 412-13) This is a trend that has been repeatedly noted in analyses of Indo-Lanka relations, particularly regarding the modern phase of bilateral relations that began in 1948. While Sri Lanka continues to maintain close diplomatic relations with New Delhi – with India additionally being one of only three countries with which Sri Lanka has a bilateral free trade agreement (FTA) (Asian Regional Integration enter 2018) – mistrust continues to dominate discussions over issues such as Sri Lanka's treatment of its Tamil minority (Suryanarayan 2015, 417-19), and Sri Lanka's intensifying economic relationship with China (Pethiyagoda 2015).

Speculation has been rife that the Sri Lanka-China relationship could evolve into a broader defence alignment against India (Brewster 2014). Several developments in this regard, such as Sri Lanka's heavy dependence on Chinese arms imports for its war against the separatist Tamil Tigers (Lindberg et al. 2011, 45-46), the visit of a Chinese submarine to the Colombo Port in 2014, and the Chinese purchase of a majority stake in the strategically important Hambantota Port (Stacey 2017), have been interpreted as signs of Sri Lanka's growing strategic engagement with China to balance against India. Alternatively, they have been interpreted as signs of a reluctant Sri Lanka being compelled through 'debt-trap diplomacy' (Chellaney 2017) to side with China's strategic agenda vis-à-vis India.

Given this context, this paper will attempt to answer two inter-related questions: (i) is Sri Lanka relying on China to strategically balance against India, and (ii) is it likely that Beijing would use Sri Lanka to pose a strategic challenge to India in the Indian Ocean? Following a literature review, it will undertake two analytical tasks. First, it will conduct a comparison of Sri Lanka-India and Sri Lanka-China defence ties to determine which of these two countries Sri Lanka has a stronger defence partnership with. Second, it will compare Chinese and Indian naval power in the Indian Ocean to determine whether Sri Lanka would be useful to Beijing in posing a strategic challenge to India under conditions of conventional military conflict. It will conclude with a discussion of the implications for Sri Lanka (and other smaller states, in general) in the context of growing Chinese and Indian military expansion and competition in the Indian Ocean region.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Smaller States' Security Strategy

The security behaviour of small states is a relatively under-studied area in International Relations literature. This is arguably because of the difficulties in applying traditional concepts such as power balancing and bandwagoning to the behaviour of small states (Bailes et al. 2016, 13). There has, therefore, been an attempt in recent years to conceptualise small states as unique actors, with fundamentally different strategies for achieving security. However, at the same time, it should be acknowledged that the very concept of a 'small state' is difficult to define and is perhaps best understood as a relative term (Vaicekauskaitė 2017, 9); hence, this paper will refer to 'smaller' states and 'larger' states.

The literature demonstrates that smaller states' security is best ensured by advocating for rules-based order in the international system. For example, Bailes et al. (2016), in a comparative study of the foreign policy of Singapore, Armenia, and Cuba, asserted that small states seek 'shelter' with a variety of actors, and that engaging with international multilateral organisations – which articulate and uphold international norms – was invariably beneficial for smaller states. Thorhallsson and Bailes (2017) also advance this argument in the case of a potentially independent Scotland, pointing out that Scottish interests would be best served by engaging with a multiplicity of actors such as NATO, the EU, the remnant UK, and the US.

Beyond the theoretical literature, the policy statements and legislation of smaller states demonstrate such commitment to upholding rules-based order. For example, Singapore, in its first address to the UN General Assembly, argued that supporting key principles of the UN Charter was the only way in which smaller states could seek to ensure their security (National Archives of Singapore 2017). New Zealand, meanwhile, took up a bold normative stance by declaring its territorial waters, land and airspace nuclear-free zones through the New Zealand Nuclear Free Zone, Disarmament, and Arms Control Act 1987 (Parliamentary Counsel Office of New Zealand 2013), in accordance with its commitments to the global nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament regime.

However, given that smaller states often lack the capacity to enforce such norms themselves, they may need to partner with other states to advocate for rules-based order. Such partnerships are developed with multiple actors, given smaller states' reluctance to become solely dependent on one major partner. For example, Cuba, a country that is considered to have been overwhelmingly dependent on the Soviet Union during the Cold War, was nevertheless active in developing its own diplomatic ties during that period through active involvement in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) (Narayanan 1981). Such engagement was geared towards upholding a normative order that protected post-colonial countries from former colonial, i.e. Western powers' intrusion. Other smaller states, such as Singapore, pursued clearer strategies of multi-actor engagement, aligning with the US for their defence needs (Ngoei 2017) and achieving economic security through advocating for greater regional integration (Dent 2001).

Such engagement aimed to secure support for a liberal economic order marked by freedom of trade and navigation – which were essential to Singapore's survival.

2.2. Strategic Hedging – A Response to the 'Larger Neighbour' Issue

It is, therefore, clear that smaller states have relied on multi-actor engagement to build support for rules-based order within the international system. However, such engagement can run into difficulties where smaller states must contend with a larger and more powerful neighbour. While traditional theories tend to argue that smaller states would seek to balance *against* a larger neighbour (Vaicekauskaitė 2017, 10), it can be argued that smaller states' security interests have been served better where they maintained a policy of multi-actor engagement *without marginalising a larger neighbour*. Such a policy is termed 'strategic hedging', and the preference of smaller states for this option is corroborated by the literature.

For example, three case studies on the security strategies of the Baltic states (Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia) agreed that all three countries sought to balance against their larger neighbour, Russia, by integrating into Euro-Atlantic institutions, i.e. the EU and NATO, while *simultaneously establishing* a stable modus vivendi with Russia (Rublovskis et al. 2013). Lee (2017) and Kuik (2008) argue the same regarding the Southeast Asian nations, which developed links with both China (the larger neighbour) and the US, without using the US to overtly balance against China. In addition, Kuik (2008) identifies five sub-types of strategic hedging: *indirect balancing*, where states upgrade their own military capabilities without belonging to any alliance; *dominance denial*, which uses regional political balance to prevent a dominant country emerging; *economic pragmatism*, which prioritises economic cooperation with great powers regardless of their mutual political tensions; *binding engagement*, based on a binding reciprocal relationship with one or more parties; and *limited bandwagoning*, involving selective cooperation with great powers.

Though the preferences of smaller states for strategic hedging seem clear in the literature, the consequences for smaller states that opt for pure balancing instead of strategic hedging are less clearly indicated. However, some empirical examples will indicate that the consequences of such action are often negative. For example, Cuba placed itself in a precarious position by attempting to balance against its larger neighbour (the US) through reliance on a geographically distant power (the Soviet Union). This strategy led to the Cuban Missile Crisis and damaging economic sanctions on Cuba by the US (Bailes et.al 2016, 18). In more recent times, the Ukraine has suffered similar (perhaps worse) consequences because of its gravitation towards NATO and the US, which provoked Russian military intervention and the annexation of Crimea (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Russia 2018).

The literature has so far indicated that strategic hedging where a larger neighbour is concerned seems to proceed from a minimax principle, where a smaller state seeks to minimise any negative reaction from the larger neighbour regarding its defence ties with other states. However, the relationship with a larger neighbour need not be necessarily cast in this 'minimisation of harm' framework. For example, Bak (2018) argues that the deterrence value

of defence alliances is greater when such alliances exist between geographic neighbours. Therefore, there is sufficient ground for arguing that smaller states could seek to build a more positive defence relationship with their larger neighbour, while simultaneously diversifying their defence partnerships.

Having explored the general security strategy of smaller states and the more specific strategy of 'strategic hedging' used by smaller states with larger neighbours, it is worth briefly considering the literature on Sri Lanka's security strategy as a small state, before embarking on the comparative analysis sections of this paper.

2.3. Sri Lanka's Security Strategy

Sri Lanka's security strategy fits well into the frameworks brought out in the earlier sections of this literature review. Its vision of normative order, inspired by principles of non-alignment, was somewhat similar to Cuba's, and led to its eschewing formal defence alliances with a major power, as well as resisting any attempt by extra-regional powers to establish themselves within the Indian Ocean. The latter impulse was demonstrated in its tabling a proposal at the UN General Assembly in 1971 to declare the Indian Ocean a 'Zone of Peace' (UN in Sri Lanka 2018), an action motivated by the US establishment of a naval logistics base in the British Indian Ocean Territory (Diego Garcia). While some analysts (Kodikara 1980) see the Zone of Peace Proposal as having been directed at India as much as at the US and the Soviet Union, it is worth noting that such behaviour did not constitute an anti-India tilt towards one of the two superpowers, but indicated a preference to being equidistant from both the superpowers as well as the regional power. In other words, Sri Lanka's behaviour in this instance was an example of the 'dominance denial' form of strategic hedging.

Despite prompting what might seem like a 'negative' form of strategic behaviour, Sri Lanka's non-aligned foreign policy also had a positive aspect in terms of engagement with a variety of regional and extra-regional states. Such engagement led to Sri Lanka punching above its weight in relation to regional power dynamics, as was evident in Sri Lankan Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike being trusted by the leaders of both China and India to mediate between the two regional powers in their 1962 border conflict. More importantly, Sri Lanka's 'non-aligned' policy of multi-actor engagement led to its security needs being effectively met by its various partners. A clear example of this would be the international response to the 1971 youth insurrection in Sri Lanka, where the country received military assistance from both India and Pakistan (in a year when both countries were at war over East Pakistan/Bangladesh), as well as the Soviet Union (Halliday 1971).

However, despite its long-standing adherence to non-alignment, Sri Lanka too experienced a serious threat to its security due to the Indian military intervention of 1987-1991, which was prompted (among other factors) by Indian perceptions that Sri Lanka was gravitating towards the US at a time when India was strongly opposed to Western powers regaining a foothold in the region (Ghosh 1999, 50-53). This pro-US tilt is confirmed by a statement made by Sri Lankan President J.R. Jayawardene: 'I don't know if we want the Americans to get out of the

Indian Ocean. If there is a change in India and there is some threat to Ceylon [i.e. Sri Lanka] we might need Diego Garcia' (Manor and Segal 1985, 1179). As such, Sri Lanka arguably flirted with balancing against India; this approach, like Cuba's outreach towards the Soviet Union, ended badly for the smaller state.

Given this historical context and the new emerging context of great power rivalry between India and China in the Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka's deepening economic relationship with China is causing concern in New Delhi, which views this relationship as another balancing attempt against India. This concern was vividly echoed by former Indian National Security Advisor Shivshankar Menon (2016, 143) when he called Sri Lanka 'an aircraft carrier parked fourteen miles off the Indian coast'. The question that this paper will now seek to answer is: is Sri Lanka indeed such an aircraft carrier, or more specifically, China's aircraft carrier? It will do so by firstly undertaking an analytical comparison of Sri Lanka-India and Sri Lanka-China defence ties.

2.4. Weapons Trade

When comparing Sri Lanka-India defence ties to those it has with China, it must of course first be conceded that, as far as arms sales are concerned, China has indeed been ahead of India. However, it must be noted that much of the arms imports from China were for land-based weaponry that was used against the Tamil Tigers during the civil war. India, due to domestic political compulsions arising from sympathy for the Tamil Tigers among some politicians in Tamil Nadu, held back from supplying offensive land-based weaponry for the Sri Lankan armed forces (Lindberg et al. 2011, 47). Nevertheless, India did supply key non-offensive equipment (such as the Indra Air Search Radar) to the Sri Lankan armed forces, and provided crucial intelligence that facilitated the destruction of the Tamil Tigers' floating arms warehouses in international waters (Lindberg et al. 2011, 44-45). More importantly, when considering maritime defence, India emerges as a key partner for Sri Lanka, having recently built two Advanced Offshore Patrol Vessels (OPVs) of the Saryu class for the Sri Lankan Navy (Rahmat 2018). India has also gifted a Sukanya-class (Lindberg et al. 2011, 44) and Vikram-class OPV (Rahmat 2017) (SLNS Sayura and SLNS Sagara, respectively) to the Sri Lankan Navy. China is also an important maritime defence partner, from whom Sri Lanka has purchased several Type 062 Fast Gun Boats, as well as a Submarine Chaser Vessel and two amphibious vessels (Colombage 2018). While China leads the tally in terms of the total number of vessels supplied (around 14-15 vessels to India's 4), it bears noting that the four ships sourced from India are the largest and most advanced vessels in the Sri Lankan Navy's fleet.

Meanwhile, Sri Lanka's Colombo Dockyard PLC has built around eight commercial vessels (two Anchor Handling Tug Supply vessels, two passenger vessels, two passenger-cum-cargo vessels, and two multipurpose platform supply vessels), with a collective worth of around USD 179 million, for Indian clients; these orders accounted for nearly half of Colombo Dockyard's shipbuilding activity in the period 2005/06 to 2012/13 (Lye 2018). Despite their primarily commercial function (DailyFT 2011), the vessels built by Colombo Dockyard could serve important auxiliary functions (for example, as troop transports) in conflict situations. In

addition, with India currently facing heavy demand for commercial vessels (as much as USD 1.1 billion for the Indian government-owned Cochin Shipyard), and Indian shipyards being unable to meet this demand due to existing backlog and lack of technical expertise, Sri Lankan players such as Colombo Dockyard stand poised to organically fill a critical gap in the Indian shipbuilding sector, if current protectionist laws in India (notably the 'Make in India' policy) are withdrawn (Lye 2018). Therefore, Sri Lanka and India's defence ties in the supply of naval vessels appears strong and focused on specific sectors (India supplying OPVs to Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka supplying transport and cargo vessels to India), as opposed to the quantitatively larger, yet more general naval vessel trade with China.

While India failed to become a pre-eminent arms supplier to Sri Lanka due to the compulsions of its domestic politics, it must be noted that Sri Lanka continuously attempted to persuade India to provide more concrete military support (Destradi 2012, 81-83), turning to China (and Pakistan) only once India refused to supply offensive weaponry. Therefore, as far as foreign policy behaviour is concerned, Sri Lanka's actions have been consistent with the basic premise advanced by this paper, i.e. that smaller states would *prefer* to maintain strong defence relations with their larger neighbours, given that the neighbour itself is willing to reciprocate. Further proof of Sri Lanka's readiness to recognise Indian strategic interests came from the cancellation of an arms deal worth around USD 200 million with China and Pakistan following the end of the civil war (Lindberg et al. 2011, 47) – this indicates that Sri Lanka was not turning to China and Pakistan in a bid to undermine India.

In addition, India's arms trade with Sri Lanka has been concentrated in the sector of the Sri Lankan armed forces that will prove most vital to its future security needs, i.e. the navy. The vessels that India has supplied to the Sri Lankan Navy are the most advanced vessels in the Sri Lankan Navy fleet. Given Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's vision of the Sri Lankan Navy playing a blue-water role in patrolling the Indian Ocean sea lanes between Sri Lanka and the Straits of Malacca (Sathiya Moorthy 2016), Sri Lanka will require vessels that are capable of patrolling in international waters. The OPVs in the Sri Lankan Navy are currently the only vessels capable of carrying out such activities. India's role as an arms supplier to Sri Lanka therefore is more effective in helping Sri Lanka pursue its vision of being a more proactive player in regional maritime security initiatives. It can also be seen that China's role as an arms supplier to Sri Lanka has relatively diminished following the end of the civil war, while India's role as an arms supplier has begun to pick up. Given the additional synergies emerging through Sri Lankan shipbuilders supplying Indian clients, it can be seen that Sri Lanka-India defence cooperation in the domain of arms trade is more focused and reciprocal compared to the Sri Lanka-China relationship in the same domain.

2.5. Dialogues and Consultation Mechanisms

When looking at defence relations beyond the issue of weapons trade, it becomes quite clear that Sri Lanka's defence links with India are stronger than those it has with China. Indeed, the arms trade with China could be described as purely a transactional relationship brought about to a large extent by India's own reluctance to provide weaponry to Sri Lanka. Similar

transactional relationships exist for Sri Lanka with countries such as Israel, Ukraine, and Russia (Lindberg et al. 2011, 48-51); however, such relationships have not transformed into any sort of deeper relationship involving regular communication and cooperation with the militaries of these countries.

By contrast, with India, Sri Lanka has developed strong military-to-military links that facilitate dialogue on security issues of mutual interest and ensure that regular communication channels are maintained to update each country's military on relevant security developments. For example, Sri Lanka and India established an annual Defence Dialogue in 2012 that has continued uninterrupted to the present; the Dialogue is attended by high-level officials on both sides, including the Secretaries of Defence and high-ranking officers from all three branches of the military (Ministry of Defence Sri Lanka 2018). However, no such mechanism exists for regular communication between the Sri Lankan and Chinese militaries.

In addition to such military-to-military contacts, informal political consultation mechanisms existed regarding mutually significant security issues at certain points in the bilateral relationship. For example, during the height of the Sri Lankan civil war, an informal 'troika' – consisting of former Minister of Economic Development Basil Rajapaksa, former Presidential Secretary Lalith Weeratunga, and former Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa – held regular meetings with a corresponding Indian troika consisting of National Security Adviser N.K. Narayanan, Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon, and Defence Secretary Vijay Singh, to provide updates on the progress of the war against the LTTE, and to obtain India's views on the same (Menon 2016, 139-40).

Besides such ad hoc consultation mechanisms, Sri Lanka and India also have a tacit defence agreement in the executive letters that preceded the Indo-Lanka Accord of 1987. In these letters, Sri Lanka agreed to not let its ports be used in a manner that would be detrimental to Indian interests (South Asia Terrorism Portal 2001). Various Sri Lankan governments – including the Rajapaksa administration, which was seen as strongly pro-China – reiterated this commitment to the Indian government (Menon 2016, 150). While misunderstandings have indeed arisen over interpretation of this commitment (such as over the visit of a Chinese submarine to the Colombo Port in 2014), Sri Lanka has generally strived to demonstrate its commitment to respect Indian security interests. For example, when China acquired a majority stake in the Hambantota Port on a 99-year lease agreement, Sri Lanka was quick to clarify to India that Sri Lanka was to retain control of any military operations at the port (Balachandran 2017).

2.6. Joint Military Exercises and Training

Besides the annual Defence Dialogue, Sri Lanka and India have conducted annual joint military exercises known as 'Mitra Shakti' since 2012 (Sri Lanka Army 2017). The latest exercises that were held in 2017 focused on counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism operations (Sri Lanka Army 2017), signifying a shift towards a shared understanding of these threats between the two countries. This is quite a positive development, given the divergent political understandings of

terrorism that prevailed during the early years of the Sri Lankan civil war. Besides developing a shared understanding of security threats, the exercises also focused on improving compatibility and inter-operability between the two militaries (Sri Lanka Army 2017) – this hints at the possibility of developing coordinated military responses to shared security threats. Finally, the exercises also focused on developing the capabilities of both militaries to participate in UN peacekeeping missions, to which they significantly contribute.

In addition to the Mitra Shakti exercises, the Sri Lankan and Indian navies have also held four rounds of the SLINEX joint naval exercises since 2005, with plans afoot to make the exercise an annual one (Ministry of Defence Sri Lanka 2017). The SLINEX exercises also focus on improving the inter-operability of the two navies, particularly in anti-piracy operations. By contrast, Sri Lanka has only conducted one two-stage military exercise with China – 'Operation Silk Route 2015' (News.lk 2015) – and has held no joint naval exercises with the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). When considering cooperation and regular communication between the two navies, the issue of port visits comes to the fore. In this regard, it bears noting that of the 399 foreign naval visits that Sri Lanka hosted between 2009 and 2017, 82 – the largest number for any single country – were for Indian Navy vessels (Colombage 2018). This is a clear indicator of the power of geographic proximity in influencing the space for cooperation and communication between a smaller state and a larger power.

India is also Sri Lanka's pre-eminent partner in providing training for Sri Lankan military officers, with nearly 80% of Sri Lanka's officer corps completing part of their training in India; for example, out of 889 training vacancies reserved by the Indian Air Force for Friendly Foreign Countries in 2015-16, Sri Lankans filled 367 (Wagner 2018, 23). Basil Rajapaksa, former Sri Lankan Minister of Economic Development and brother of former President Mahinda Rajapaksa, stated in an interview in 2012 that India had been fulfilling Sri Lanka's military training needs ever since Sri Lanka relinquished its formal defence ties with Britain shortly after independence (NDTV 2012). He further stated that India was the first 'stop' for training Sri Lankan military officers, prior to sending them for training in other countries such as the USA (NDTV 2012). Again, the contrast with China is evident – while Sri Lanka does have some of its officer corps trained in China, a former Commander of the Sri Lanka Army attested that the number of officers being trained in China is very low compared to those receiving training in India (Ratnayake 2018). In addition to having a higher number of officers trained in India, military-to-military relations are further strengthened through emphasis on shared cultural heritage, as was demonstrated when India facilitated the visit of 80 Sri Lankan military officers and their families to the Buddhist holy site of Bodh Gaya in June 2018 (High Commission of India in Sri Lanka 2018).

2.7. Engagement in Regional Security Mechanisms

Finally, if one considers engagement in minilateral security mechanisms and regional security forums, Sri Lanka's synergies with India are greater than those it has with China. Sri Lanka is already party to a trilateral maritime security cooperation initiative with India and the Maldives (Saberwal 2016). While this initiative has remained somewhat dormant since 2014, some of

the areas identified in the roadmap for maritime security cooperation between the three countries includes important issues such as sharing of Automatic Identification System (AIS) and Long Range Identification and Tracking (LRIT) data (Saberwal 2016) – both of which would enhance maritime domain awareness (MDA) among the three countries. Enhancing MDA is an increasingly pressing maritime security priority for many countries in the Indian Ocean region, having also been recognised as a security priority by the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Indonesia 2017). Besides such minilateral security cooperation with India, Sri Lanka has also been a member of the India-led Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) from its inception in 2008 (Indian Navy 2012). By contrast, Sri Lanka's engagement with Chinese-led security initiatives is lukewarm. It is still only a Dialogue Partner of the Chinese and Russian-led Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation 2018); in addition, the SCO's continued focus on security threats in Central Asia (even from its new South Asian members India and Pakistan) (Piekos and Economy 2015) leaves little room for engagement for Indian Ocean states such as Sri Lanka.

2.8. 'Quality Over Quantity'

It therefore seems clear that the Sri Lanka-India defence relationship is built on something of a 'quality over quantity' dynamic. While China has supplied more arms to Sri Lanka than India has, Indian military aid and supplies have been more focused and in line with Sri Lanka's evolving defence needs (such as the drive to build up a blue-water capable navy). Sri Lanka's sale of vessels to India also indicates a more reciprocal relationship in weapons trade compared to the wholly one-sided relationship Sri Lanka has with China. In other aspects of defence relations such as military dialogues, joint exercises, and engagement in multilateral defence forums, Sri Lanka's cooperation with India is significantly stronger than that with China. Regular communication and improved inter-operability of the two militaries deepens their relationship on a qualitative basis – in other words, India has stronger military 'soft power' with Sri Lanka.

This paper demonstrated in its literature review that a smaller state with a larger neighbour would seek to avoid building defence ties with an extra-regional power at the expense of the larger neighbour. This has been demonstrated through a close empirical examination of Sri Lanka-India defence ties vis-à-vis Sri Lankan defence ties with China. In fact, the evidence shows that Sri Lanka's defence ties with India are overall stronger than those it has with China. As such, Sri Lanka's defence relationship with India fits within what Kuik (2008) terms a 'binding engagement' form of strategic hedging. In other words, there seems to be a binding reciprocal relationship between the two countries, which is arguably structured around the Indo-Lanka Accord and the executive letters exchanged prior to its signing. While some have argued that all negotiations related to the Indo-Lanka Accord were wholly in India's favour, such arguments fail to appreciate the subsequent evolution of Indian strategic perspective, to the point that it *de facto* demonstrated a reciprocal respect for Sri Lankan security interests by not intervening in the Sri Lankan civil war in the period 2008-09, despite intense domestic pressure to do so.

Thus, this paper answers its first question, i.e. is Sri Lanka relying on China to strategically balance against India, in the negative. As a smaller state pursuing a multi-actor engagement strategy, Sri Lanka would naturally turn to a variety of actors for its defence needs, including China. However, India has always remained a special defence partner – even though Sri Lanka would be loath to put all its strategic eggs in an Indian basket.

Having thus answered the first of its two questions, the paper will now focus on providing an answer to the second, i.e. is it likely that Beijing would use Sri Lanka to pose a strategic challenge to India in the Indian Ocean. In doing so, it will firstly provide a brief introduction to the current discourse on China's alleged strategic intent in Sri Lanka. Secondly, by providing some empirical examples of how great powers establish naval bases beyond their strategic backyard, it will outline the conditions necessary for such bases to pose a threat to strategic rivals. Thirdly, it will conduct a comparative analysis of the Chinese and Indian navies' capabilities in the Indian Ocean, to determine whether the Chinese navy does fulfil the conditions to be able to successfully use Sri Lanka for a naval base, thereby challenging Indian strategic interests.

3. Chinese Strategic Interests and Sri Lanka

Much of the commentary on Sri Lanka-China relations in recent times has pointed out the important position that Sri Lanka occupies in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Located at the centre of the Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka has long served as a trade hub along the Maritime Silk Route that connected the markets of Europe and the Middle East with India as well as East and Southeast Asia (De Silva 2005, 43-46). The BRI, which seeks to revive both the land and maritime silk routes with a massive infrastructure drive worth nearly USD 1 trillion (Perlez and Huang 2017), has two major projects underway in Sri Lanka: the Hambantota Port, and the Colombo International Financial City (formerly the Colombo Port City).

The commentary on Sri Lanka and its position within the BRI has often argued that the BRI projects in Sri Lanka, particularly the Hambantota Port, could potentially be part of a broader Chinese strategy to 'encircle' India with a string of naval bases in its neighbourhood. Such commentary has pointed to China's first overseas naval base in Djibouti, as well as other major BRI projects such as the Gwadar Port in Pakistan, as evidence of this Chinese 'encirclement' of India. Such arguments contend that these ports could be developed as dual-use facilities, i.e. to serve both a commercial and military purpose, and that China would wrest control of these ports from local governments using 'debt-trap diplomacy', i.e. exchanging the high levels of debt incurred by such governments for Chinese equity in the projects (Chellaney 2017). China's obtaining of a majority stake in the Hambantota Port last year was seen as proof of the latter argument, and speculation once more became rife that the former argument, i.e. that China would militarise Hambantota, would eventually become a reality.

However, this paper seeks to make the argument that Sri Lanka would not serve as a viable military outpost for China in the Indian Ocean at present, and indeed for the foreseeable future.

It will make this argument by demonstrating that (i) historically, great powers have established naval bases overseas – especially in strategic rivals' areas of influence – only when they have a clear naval advantage over that rival, and (ii) that China currently does not have the military capacity to conclusively prevail over India in a conventional naval conflict in the Indian Ocean. As long as China remains at an overall strategic disadvantage over India in the Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka's geographic proximity to India will render it an unviable location for a naval base for China in the region**.**

3.1. Great Powers and Naval Bases

Throughout history, great powers have sought to establish military outposts beyond their immediate territory, usually to protect their trade interests in distant markets. In examining the establishment of these overseas outposts, it is pertinent to note that many of them began as trading posts with a primarily commercial focus. However, with the growth of trade and rising competition from rival powers, the countries controlling those trading posts moved swiftly to militarise them. For example, the Suez Canal, initially built as a joint venture between the French-led Suez Canal Company and the Egyptian government, became a largely British project in 1875, after the Egyptian government sold off its majority stake in the canal to the British government due to inability to pay off the heavy debts incurred in its construction (Holland 2018). British commercial control of the canal soon turned to military control after the invasion of Egypt in 1882 (Holland 2018). The development of Hong Kong was also similar, with the port of Canton north of Hong Kong being initially used as the sole point of entry for European commerce to China; following the First Opium War, Britain gained political control of Hong Kong in 1842 (South China Morning Post 2011), and began constructing the naval base there (HMS Tamar) that very year (Steemson and Drurty 2012).

When considering these historical examples against the current context of Chinese investment in Sri Lankan ports – particularly Hambantota – the prospects for Sri Lanka, India and broader regional security does not look encouraging. In a turn of events similar to that involving the Suez Canal, China recently purchased a majority stake in the Hambantota Port, due to the Sri Lankan government's inability to pay off the massive debts it incurred from China during the port's construction. Given the established historical precedent of commercial ports eventually turning into naval bases, many commentators in India and elsewhere argued that Hambantota would soon also be militarised by the Chinese.

3.2. The Importance of Naval Superiority

This perception, however, fails to take one important factor evident in these historical examples into consideration – it fails to note that most (if not all) of the commercial ports were eventually developed as naval bases during a time when the great power controlling the port possessed a clear and unequivocal naval advantage over any competing regional or extra-regional powers.

For example, when the British took control of Suez, the Royal Navy was already the largest and most powerful naval fleet in the world. While accurate data for the size of the fleet is

difficult to obtain for this time period, it was estimated that the Royal Navy had around 1000 ships (both combat and non-combat) in 1859, around twenty years prior to its takeover of Suez (Olney Times 1859). The Royal Navy also maintained a strong lead in naval power during this time through the 'two-power standard', which required the fleet to be as powerful as the combined fleets of the next two largest naval powers (the French and the Russians) (Kennedy 1997, 52). As such, the navy of the Ottoman Empire (which nominally controlled Egypt at the time) could not possibly have offered any significant resistance to the Royal Navy, even within its own strategic sphere of influence.

Therefore, Britain's establishment of military control over Suez occurred in a regional geopolitical environment where there was no significant challenge to its naval superiority. Similarly, the Chinese navy was powerless to counter the Royal Navy during the First and Second Opium Wars, when British control of Hong Kong was established and reinforced. In more recent times, regional powers such as India were unable to prevent the US from establishing a military presence in the Indian Ocean – despite diplomatic opposition to the building of the base at Diego Garcia (US State Department 1969). Therefore, it should be clear from these examples that the militarisation of a commercial port generally succeeds in the absence of any substantial naval opposition within the region to the power that is seeking to militarise the port.

The Soviet attempt to establish bases in Cuba, on the other hand, serves as a counterpoint to the foregoing examples, demonstrating what could happen when a great power attempts to establish itself militarily within the strategic backyard of another great power, without enjoying clear naval superiority over its rival. The Soviets, it must be admitted, were not specifically seeking to militarise a commercial port in Cuba; nevertheless, they planned to forward deploy a substantial naval force in Cuba, including at least seven ballistic-missile submarines (Drent 2003, 1). Other plans included the establishment of Medium Range Ballistic Missile and Intermediate Range Ballistic Missile sites on the island (Utz 1993). These military installations were a direct threat to the security of the US and its allies, and importantly provoked a significant naval response from the US. The US Navy, supported by the Royal Navy and the Royal Canadian Navy, established a month-long naval blockade on Cuba (Utz 1993, 1). The US Navy deployment of two 'hunter-killer' groups based around Anti-Submarine Warfare carriers was more than capable of meeting the naval challenge posed by the Soviet deployment of four-five Foxtrot class submarines (Utz 1993), which further suffered from poor communications and internal ventilation systems (Ketov 2005).

It is therefore clear that a great power cannot seek to entrench a naval force in the strategic neighbourhood of a rival power if it does not have a clear naval advantage over that rival. The examples of British establishment of naval bases as well as the contrasting example of the failed Soviet attempt to base a naval force in Cuba provide strong empirical evidence in support of this assertion. It is now worthwhile considering the case of Hambantota Port in relation to this assertion, i.e. whether China's PLAN enjoys the sort of clear naval superiority over the regional power (India) that would allow it to entrench itself militarily in Hambantota.

4. Comparative Analysis 2: The Chinese and Indian Navies in the Indian Ocean

4.1. Chinese Naval Modernisation and Expansion into the Indian Ocean

The Chinese military is not only the largest, but also one of the most rapidly growing militaries in the world. Chinese expenditure on defence, according to the Stockholm Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) (2018), has increased fivefold over the last decade, and is the second largest defence budget in the world after that of the US. China has also put its first fifth-generation fighter jet, the J-20, into service (centre for Strategic and International Studies 2018); has developed significant capabilities in cyber-warfare (Raska 2017); and, importantly for the topic of this paper, has embarked on an ambitious naval expansion and modernisation.

While much of this modernisation drive has focused on improving the quality of its naval force rather than multiplying the number of platforms, i.e. ships and aircraft, that it possesses, in recent years the modernisation drive has also shifted towards increasing the strength of the naval fleet (O'Rourke 2018). For example, China had no ballistic-missile submarines till 2008, but now has four; it had no aircraft carriers till 2012, but now has one operational carrier, with two additional carriers under construction; it had no corvettes (light frigates) till 2014, but now has a growing force of such vessels, with nearly 37 having entered service as of November 2017 (O'Rourke 2018). In tandem with this rapid naval expansion, China has begun making contentious territorial claims over the South China Sea and constructed several artificial islands in the region that are now confirmed as military installations (Philips 2018). Chinese claims regarding the South China Sea – expressed in the form of the ambiguous and contentious 'Nine Dash Line' – are backed by an increasingly assertive nationalism that seeks to rebuild Chinese pre-eminence in the Asia-Pacific, which it considers its historic sphere of influence (Lim 2016).

Besides the South China Sea, China has made increasing naval forays into the Indian Ocean as well. While its initial entry into this geopolitical theatre was prompted by a need to defend its merchant shipping against piracy, China has now established a permanent presence in the region through its base in Djibouti (Al-Jazeera 2017) and has conducted live-fire naval drills in the eastern Indian Ocean as well (Panda 2017). These developments have raised concerns among the Indian strategic establishment, with Indian Navy Chief Admiral Sunil Lanba claiming that there are at least six to seven PLAN vessels in the Indian Ocean at any given time (Singh 2018). China's shift towards using submarines for anti-piracy operations has also raised concerns in India, with India deciding to deploy about 14-15 ships year-round within the region in response, as well as to permanently station warships at the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, at the mouth of the Straits of Malacca (Sagar 2017). In addition, India has consistently maintained that the entry of Chinese nuclear submarines into the Indian Ocean would constitute a 'red line' (Holmes 2014), and the docking of a diesel-powered Song-class submarine at the Colombo Port in late 2014 – while not a clear violation of the 'red line' – triggered official protest from India against Sri Lanka (Parashar 2014). However, the maritime 'cold war' (as it was referred to by a former Commander of the Sri Lankan Navy) between the two navies shows

little sign of abating, with the PLAN's 'Blue 2018A' fleet recently conducting exercises in the eastern Indian Ocean, in a supposed bid to deter the Indian Navy from taking any steps to intervene in the political crisis in the Maldives (Aneja 2018).

4.2. China's Advantage: A Larger Fleet

Given this maritime cold war scenario, many experts and analysts have been speculating on the possibility of a Sino-Indian naval confrontation in the Indian Ocean. Countries like Sri Lanka are seen to serve an important role in such conflict, with ports like Hambantota possibly serving as a base for deploying PLAN vessels and submarines. However, as has been mentioned earlier, this paper will seek to assert that Hambantota cannot be used by the PLAN as a forward deployment base against India, given that the PLAN does not have a decisive naval advantage over the Indian Navy in the Indian Ocean. In such a context, Sri Lanka's geographical proximity to India makes Hambantota unviable as a possible Chinese naval base.

When comparing the PLAN against the Indian Navy, currently available data suggest that the PLAN has a roughly 4:1 advantage over India (Holmes 2017). China's total naval assets comprise around 714 vessels, while India has 295 (Chakraborty 2017). When considering specific kinds of vessels, China currently has around 106 missile boats and corvettes compared to India's 25; 52 frigates compared to India's 14; 26 destroyers compared to India's 11; and 68 submarines compared to India's 15 (Sethi 2017). While both countries have one operational aircraft carrier at the moment, China is expected to field its second aircraft carrier – the Type 001A – for sea trials quite soon, while India's second carrier – INS Vikrant – would not have its aviation complex or even anti-aircraft missiles ready until 2023 at the earliest (Pandit 2018). Such qualitative disparities are also evident with other vessels; for example, China's indigenously developed Type 55 destroyer is expected to carry around 120 missiles of various types, while India's most advanced destroyer, the yet-to-be commissioned Project 15-B Visakhapatnam class, will have only 50 missiles (Firstpost 2017). Projections of naval forces up to 2020 also display a proportion of 4:1 in China's favour. It is estimated that by 2020, the PLAN would have 73 submarines compared to India's 17; the PLAN is also expected to field nearly 30 Guided Missile Destroyers, while India is expected to have only 8 such vessels; the PLAN would also have around 92 frigates and corvettes, compared to India's 32 (Holmes 2017). It therefore seems clear that the Indian Navy is outgunned by the PLAN, both now and for the foreseeable future.

4.3. India's Advantage: Geography and Partners

However, this disparity in naval force fails to take into account the effect of the geopolitical theatres that both powers operate in. For China, the South China Sea is a far more important geopolitical theatre than the Indian Ocean. Much of China's sea-borne trade and energy supplies pass through the South China Sea en route to Chinese ports (including those that initially have to pass through the Indian Ocean). In a political sense, the South China Sea is a far more important theatre to China due to it historically being a maritime region in which China exercised a great deal of strategic influence (Holmes 2013). This importance of the South

China Sea is further heightened by the Chinese government's nationalist rhetoric on rebuilding China's power and influence as a regional player (Lim 2016). Therefore, given this political context, asserting Chinese naval supremacy in the South China Sea becomes an imperative. However, it must be noted that the US and its allies – such as Japan, South Korea and Taiwan – maintain a strong naval presence in the region, with the US Navy conducting its Freedom of Navigation exercises in the region as a direct response to the growing Chinese naval presence (Storey 2018). It is therefore highly probable that the PLAN would be compelled to deploy its existing aircraft carrier, and perhaps its second one as well, in the South China Sea. Given the numerous support vessels needed to form a carrier battle group, this means that a considerable section of the overall PLAN fleet would remain deployed in the South China Sea, leaving only a smaller fleet to venture into the Indian Ocean. It therefore appears that India would only have to contend with a smaller portion of the overall PLAN fleet in the Indian Ocean.

In such a situation, India gains something of an advantage due to a number of factors. Firstly, the geography of the Indian Ocean region strategically favours the Indian Navy. The Indian Navy would have direct and relatively short routes to potential battle sites within the Indian Ocean, while the PLAN would have to project its forces across a vast distance, as well as via sea lanes and chokepoints (the Straits of Malacca) that would impose great strains on its supply lines and logistical capabilities (Holmes 2017). In addition, a large part of the Indian subcontinent juts out into the Indian Ocean, giving India a central position within the region with the ability to command both the eastern and western sections of the Indian Ocean. In addition, India has control over the Andaman and Nicobar islands, which are strategically located in the centre of the Bay of Bengal and command entry into the Indian Ocean via the Straits of Malacca (Holmes 2017). These islands could serve as forward deployment bases which the Indian Navy could use to obstruct Chinese naval movements across the Indian Ocean. The shallow waters of the Malacca Straits also compel submarines to surface (Pandit 2017), which facilitates India's ability to conduct surveillance over Chinese naval movements from bases in the Andaman and Nicobar islands. India is currently expanding and developing its military facilities on these islands; the expansion plans include the extension of the runways at its naval air stations from 3000 to 10000 feet, to accommodate fighter jets as well as long-range maritime reconnaissance aircraft such as the Boeing P-81 and transport planes such as the Lockheed C-130 Hercules (Gupta 2017). India could further use these islands to set up land-based Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) systems that could pose further challenges to a PLAN fleet attempting to enter the Indian Ocean (Holmes 2017).

It is therefore clear that the geography of the Indian Ocean region favours India in a potential naval conflict scenario with China. In addition to geography, India also has the added advantage of having several defence partners that could reinforce its naval strength in the Indian Ocean. While formal military alliances are unlikely to emerge in the near future, defence groupings such as the Quad – an informal mechanism consisting of India, Australia, Japan and the US – have recently begun to revive their security cooperation (Smith et al. 2018). Importantly, the Quad has begun to connect this cooperation to a normative vision of a 'free and open Indo-Pacific' (Smith 2018), a concept that challenges China's actions in the South China Sea and possibly serves as a tacit warning against a possible replication of such steps in

the Indian Ocean. India's bilateral cooperation with certain regional and extra-regional defence partners has arguably progressed more swiftly. For example, it recently concluded an agreement with Oman to allow Indian Navy vessels to access the strategically located Duqm port at the mouth of the Straits of Hormuz, thereby giving the Indian Navy a greater presence in the Arabian Sea (Roy 2018). India also recently signed a logistics exchange agreement with France, which allows the Indian Navy to access French naval facilities in the Indian Ocean, including in Djibouti and on Reunion Island (Baruah and Raja Mohan 2018).

Given the twin factors of favourable geography and defence partnerships, India would be quite capable of forcing a stalemate with the PLAN in the least, in the Indian Ocean theatre. It could therefore be quite plausibly claimed that a port such as Hambantota could not serve as a viable forward deployment naval base for China. Considering Sri Lanka's geographic proximity to India, any attempt to militarise Hambantota might provoke an Indian response along the lines of the US naval blockade of Cuba in October 1962. While Hambantota could still be used as a site for intelligence gathering and Chinese surveillance of Indian naval activity in the region, the case for a role as an actual base for PLAN vessels has been shown to be somewhat weak, given India's general strategic advantage over China in the Indian Ocean.

5. Implications for Sri Lanka

The foregoing comparative analyses have shown that: firstly, Sri Lanka's defence relations with India are overall stronger than its defence ties with China; and secondly, that the Chinese navy is still not capable of decisively besting India in a conventional naval conflict scenario in the Indian Ocean. This suggests that Sri Lanka is not engaging in outright balancing behaviour against India, and additionally that the likelihood of Sri Lanka being used as a strategic pawn in a Chinese naval encirclement of India is low. In other words, it is neither in Colombo's nor Beijing's interest to compete strategically with India using Sri Lankan territory.

However, such analysis would also have made clear that China is nevertheless a significant defence partner for Sri Lanka, and an increasingly important economic partner as well. Therefore, it is necessary to consider the implications of Sri Lanka's 'binding engagement' with India as well as its multi-actor engagement strategy for the country, and how Sri Lanka should move forward in each case.

Firstly, given Sri Lanka's long-standing commitment to diversifying its defence partnerships and its unwillingness to bandwagon with India, it is likely that Indian strategic circles will continue to be alert regarding any Sri Lankan overtures/exchanges with other powers that could be construed as 'detrimental' to Indian interests. Given this scope for misunderstanding – which has already been demonstrated by the Indian protest over the visit of the Chinese submarine to the port of Colombo in 2014 – it is imperative that both India and Sri Lanka seek to clarify any ambiguities stemming from the Sri Lankan commitment to not let its ports be used in violation of Indian strategic interests. The mechanisms for having such discussions already exist in the form of the Indo-Lanka Defence Dialogue – what is perhaps required is a

bilateral Statement of Understanding that builds on the 'gentlemen's agreement' set out in the exchange of executive letters preceding the Indo-Lanka Accord. Establishing clarity on this very important point would allow Sri Lanka to continue its long-established policy of welcoming friendly navies without the risk of Indian misinterpretation of such incidents.

While working towards strategic clarity at the bilateral level, Sri Lanka can also work with other smaller states in the Indian Ocean region to strengthen international normative frameworks that uphold freedom of trade and navigation, thereby underscoring the right of smaller states to welcome and have defence and economic exchanges with any state they wish. Sri Lanka is taking the lead in facilitating such normative strengthening through a Track 1.5 conference termed 'The Indian Ocean: Defining Our Future' in Colombo in October 2018, which will bring together the states of the Indian Ocean littorals as well as major maritime users of the Indian Ocean, to have a dialogue on issues such as freedom of navigation based on the legal framework of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (Wickremesinghe 2018). This conference will be followed by a major multilateral conference in 2019, that seeks to build on the understandings reached at the Track 1.5 dialogue. By facilitating such a dialogue on freedom of navigation in the Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka not only hopes to initiate a process that can mitigate strategic competition in the Indian Ocean (especially between India and China), but also hopes to showcase its Indian Ocean hub ambitions to the broader region.

Secondly, Sri Lanka must note that, even if it does not directly contribute to heightening Indian strategic concerns about Chinese 'encirclement', it is possible that the broader dynamic of strategic mistrust between the two powers can nevertheless have a negative impact on its interests. For example, a Sino-Indian naval confrontation or standoff in any part of the Indian Ocean – while a remote possibility at the moment – can adversely affect Indian Ocean maritime traffic, which is crucial to the economic and energy security of smaller regional states like Sri Lanka. Therefore, it is in Sri Lanka's interest to not merely seek to assert its own right to diversify its defence partnerships vis-à-vis India, but also to attempt to build cooperation and trust between China and India over non-controversial issues such as non-state actor threats to maritime security. As the Lead Coordinator of IORA's Working Group on Maritime Safety and Security (DailyFT 2017), Sri Lanka has an opportunity to focus IORA's maritime security agenda towards countering non-traditional security threats, and to more actively involve IORA Dialogue Partners (which include China) in such conversations. Sri Lanka's efforts to indirectly promote Sino-Indian dialogue over non-traditional maritime security threats are arguably given an additional boost by its rising international profile in this area, as is evident from the UN Office on Drugs and Crime's Global Maritime Crime Programme headquartering itself in Sri Lanka. It must also be noted that this role of dialogue-builder between India and China is not a new one for Sri Lanka, given Sri Lanka's attempt to mediate between both powers during their 1962 border conflict. As such, it is not inconceivable that Sri Lanka could reinstate itself in this role, while being mindful of current security dynamics between the two powers.

Thirdly, Sri Lanka must consider the implications of Sino-Indian strategic competition for fulfilling its own defence needs. Since 2009, Sri Lanka has had no significant internal threat to

its security, and therefore, a change in military doctrine that focuses on playing a more proactive role in regional security is warranted. Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's vision for the Sri Lankan Navy taking on a blue-water role would allow it to help plug in the 'gap' in Indian Ocean security cooperation between the anti-piracy patrols in the western Indian Ocean (such as Combined Task Force 150 and Combined Task Force 151) and those in the eastern Indian Ocean (such as the Malacca Strait Patrols). In addition, Sri Lanka requires enhanced surveillance and monitoring capacity to effectively deter maritime crime in its vast External Economic Zone (EEZ). This requires significant acquisitions of new military hardware, particularly naval vessels and surveillance assets such as drones, and strengthening of cooperation with regional partners to increase MDA. Given these needs, Sino-Indian competition provides an opportunity for Sri Lanka to obtain materiel from both partners, and the preceding sections of the paper have demonstrated that it has already exploited this opportunity to some benefit. However, to make the best of this opportunity, Sri Lanka needs to be very clear about its future security policy, specifically when it comes to the determination of defence-related budgetary allocations. Defence spending data shows that Sri Lanka continues to spend significantly more on its army than its navy; for example, the budgetary allocations for acquisition of capital assets for the army and navy in 2015 were approximately LKR 3.4 billion (USD 21.2 million) (Sri Lanka Army 2015, 4) and LKR 1.7 billion (USD 10.7 million) (Sri Lanka Navy 2015, 16) respectively. Therefore, even when recurrent expenditures – which are in any case much larger for the army given its higher number of personnel – are discounted, the budgetary allocations for the navy remain inadequate compared to the role it is expected to play in meeting Sri Lanka's future security needs. Therefore, if Sri Lanka is to make the best of Sino-Indian competition by obtaining materiel from both these partners to upgrade its navy, it must firstly articulate a clear defence doctrine that prioritises the navy and allocates sufficient funds to realise this goal.

While obtaining naval materiel from both India and China is overall beneficial to Sri Lanka, there is still a need for it to develop its indigenous shipbuilding industry, to reduce overwhelming dependence on these two partners and maintain a certain level of strategic autonomy. Given that Sri Lankan companies have the technical expertise to produce a wide range of naval vessels from small inshore patrol craft to larger OPVs (Lye 2018), Sri Lanka should give priority to local suppliers and use its domestic shipbuilding industry to signal to partners such as India and China that their contributions to Sri Lankan defence needs would have to be at a higher level of technology and capability than that currently demonstrated by local industry.

6. Conclusion

This paper has sought to answer two major, interrelated questions: is Sri Lanka balancing against India by developing defence ties with China, and would China use Sri Lanka in a strategy of navally encircling India. After reviewing the literature on small state strategies vis-à-vis larger neighbours, it engaged in a comparative analysis of Sri Lanka's defence ties with both India and China to answer the first question and conducted a comparative analysis of

Chinese and Indian naval power in the Indian Ocean to answer the second question. The conclusions it came regarding the two questions are given below.

Firstly, smaller states cannot afford to build defence partnerships with extra-regional powers at the expense of a larger regional power. Such relationships, where they have been attempted, have not brought about positive outcomes for the smaller state, such as in the case of Cuba's attempt to build defence ties with the Soviet Union. In Sri Lanka's case, the empirical evidence broadly shows that Sri Lanka's defence ties with India are overall stronger than those it has with China. While China may dominate as an arms supplier to Sri Lanka, such transactional relationships do not match up to the deeper level of dialogue and military-to-military ties which Sri Lanka has with India. In terms of the 'soft' aspects of defence ties, Indo-Lanka ties are much stronger than Sino-Lankan ties.

Secondly, Sri Lanka would not serve as a viable military outpost for China in the Indian Ocean, largely due to the PLAN not possessing a decisive naval advantage over the Indian Navy within the Indian Ocean theatre. This lack of a decisive naval advantage stems from several factors such as the limited number of forces the PLAN could spare for action in the Indian Ocean, the regional geography that favours the Indian Navy, and India's various defence partnerships. This would make any potential Chinese naval outposts in the Indian Ocean vulnerable to Indian naval responses that the PLAN would not be in a position to defend against. It is therefore likely that Sri Lankan ports such as Hambantota would not be militarised by China, at least not for the foreseeable future. While the use of Hambantota for low-level military uses related to surveillance cannot entirely be ruled out, the sort of aggressive Chinese military expansion that can be observed in the South China Sea is quite unlikely in the Indian Ocean region, due to the reasons outlined above. This leaves Sri Lanka's stronger defence relations with India intact and unlikely to be threatened by China's growing economic ties with Sri Lanka.

Finally, this context of strategic competition between India and China in the Indian Ocean has significant implications for Sri Lanka, for which it would need to consider and develop responses. It would have to clarify its binding strategic commitment to India and ensure that this commitment does not encroach on its strategy of diversifying defence partnerships. Sri Lanka could also use its rising regional profile on non-traditional maritime security issues to indirectly build dialogue between China and India in this area. In addition to these externally-oriented measures, Sri Lanka should also rethink its defence doctrine to fit its new post-war environment and aspirations, by allocating more funds for naval expansion and by supporting local shipbuilding industries; such measures would not only allow it to make the best of Sino-Indian strategic competition in the Indian Ocean, but would also lend it a measure of strategic autonomy against both powers.

The Indian Ocean is, as Sri Lankan Prime Minister Wickremesinghe recently put it, the 'Ocean of the Future'. However, it is also a future fraught with uncertainty, where one of the major contributory factors to this uncertainty will be the growing strategic rivalry between India and China. For a state like Sri Lanka, charting an independent course for its foreign policy whilst being conscientious of the strategic concerns of its larger neighbour has been no easy task

amidst this growing rivalry. However, as this paper has shown, Sri Lanka has had a clear understanding of its strategic environment and of how to best ensure its security as a smaller state through a policy of strategic hedging. What future tests Sri Lanka will face in adhering to this policy, though, remain to be seen.

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