



## Trincomalee Harbour in the Indo-Pacific: Strategic Significance and Contemporary Geopolitical Implications for India

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### ABSTRACT

Trincomalee Harbour situated on the north-eastern coast of Sri Lanka, fourth largest natural harbour in the world, holds considerable geo-political significance due to its strategic position and extensive maritime capabilities. This paper investigates the contemporary geo-political dynamics surrounding Trincomalee Harbour and assesses its strategic relevance to India, focusing on regional security challenges amidst the shifting power dynamics in the Indo-Pacific. The Paper argues that India's interest in the Srilanka, particularly in Trincomalee, stems from strategic security concerns regarding potential threats to India's coastline. India views Trincomalee Harbour as vital to its maritime security framework, given its geo-strategic positioning and proximity to crucial sea lanes of communication. Further the paper argues that India's strategic interest in developing Trincomalee port is driven by a need to counterbalance China's expanding influence in the Indian Ocean region. This paper employs a multidimensional analysis that integrates historical context, regional power dynamics, and evolving geo-political landscapes in the Indo-Pacific. Additionally, multiple linear regression analysis has been carried out to quantify the impact of various variables on India's security perceptions regarding Trincomalee Harbour.

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### 1. Introduction.

In 2009, Robert D. Kaplan examined the significance of the Indian Ocean within the evolving geopolitical landscape of the post-Cold War era. He likened the greater Indian Ocean region to a microcosm reflecting global dynamics, characterized by a juxtaposition of fiercely safeguarded national sovereignty alongside remarkable interdependence facilitated by burgeoning economies and military capabilities, as well as vital infrastructure such as pipelines and maritime trade routes. Kaplan further posited that the increasing involvement of China

in the Indian Ocean would inevitably lead to a rivalry with India, marking a departure from historical Western dominance in the region dating back to the 16th-century Portuguese invasion. Various historians and strategic analysts have underscored the geopolitical, commercial, military, and maritime trade dominance of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) globally. It serves as a conduit for 70 percent of total maritime transportation between the East and West, as well as the North and South. Throughout history, the Indian Ocean has been a focal point of international trade. Notably, it encompasses four out of the world's six major chokepoints: the Strait of Malacca, the Straits of Hormuz, the Strait of Mandeb, and the Mozambique Channel (Butt, Khari, Khizar, & Bhatti, 2020).

At the close of the British Raj and India's attainment of independence, the scholar diplomat K.M. Panikkar fervently advocated for immediate collaboration among India, Burma (Myanmar), and Sri Lanka, asserting it as imperative for a pragmatic Indian defense strategy. Panikkar's vision to transform the Indian Ocean into "Mare Nostrum" aimed to fortify India's geopolitical standing, emphasizing the necessity for a foundational

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federation for mutual defense among these nations. Nehru and Gandhi echoed similar sentiments, highlighting shared cultural ties and characterizing Sri Lanka as India's "daughter state." Throughout history, Sri Lanka's pivotal role at the crossroads of major geopolitical interactions, owing to its unique geographic location in the Indian Ocean, has intricately linked its destiny with India's. Positioned strategically, Sri Lanka serves as a crucial hub for international commerce, connecting maritime trade routes between West and East Asia, Africa, and the Arab and Eastern worlds (Madutharanga, Timur, & Surjaatmadia, 2023). Given the increasing importance of Indian Ocean waterways for India's global trade expansion and the imperative to secure India's growing energy demands, Sri Lanka's geographic significance becomes even more pronounced, accentuating the necessity for close collaboration between these nations for mutual prosperity and security.

Interestingly, the political tumult in the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal wielded a direct influence on Sri Lanka's domestic political landscape and security apparatus. As various powers vied for dominance in the Indian Ocean region and coveted ports situated within the Bay of Bengal, Sri Lanka underwent a strategic recalibration, abandoning erstwhile kingdoms to fortify territories encompassing newly acquired ports. Notably, during the nascent stages of the Silk Road, wherein the Manthai port served as a pivotal juncture for transcontinental trade, Sri Lankan monarchs established the Anuradhapura kingdom around the strategic Manthai port. Subsequently, the incursions by the Chola dynasty into the Srivijaya port and Southeast Asia disrupted burgeoning commercial activities traversing the Bay of Bengal, spanning from Song China to southern Asia. Concurrently, Sri Lanka's Anuradhapura kingdom and the Manthai port faced Chola invasions, prompting Sri Lankan rulers to retreat to Polonnaruwa, thereby establishing a new kingdom centered around the Gokanna port. This cyclic pattern persisted throughout history, including the era of European colonization, wherein rival European powers fiercely contested for dominion over the Trincomalee port (Brewster, 2014b). Trincomalee, a significant natural harbor located on the Eastern coast of Sri Lanka, has long been recognized as a crucial point of access for dominating trade routes in the Bay of Bengal, Indo-China, and the Malayan regions. Its strategic importance was evident as far back as the late Anuradhapura period, with increased activity observed during the reign of the Polonnaruwa Kingdom from the 11th to the 13th centuries AD. Since the 15th century, various European powers, including the Portuguese, Dutch, British, French, and Danish, have competed for control, often engaging in military conflicts at Sri Lanka's ports, particularly Trincomalee (Attanayake, 2019). Trincomalee Harbor is situated approximately 350 kilometers north of the primary East-West maritime route in the Indian Ocean, to the north of Trincomalee Bay, which comprises three distinct bays, including Kodyar Bay to the south and Tambalagam Bay to the west (given in Figure 1).

As projected by Kaplan in 2010, Sri Lanka's forthcoming trajectory will be markedly shaped by the strategic rivalry between India and China vying for dominance in the Indian Ocean. However, Sri Lanka's capacity to navigate this geopolitical land-

scape is significantly circumscribed by its current entrenchment in a debt crisis, necessitating substantial financial assistance primarily from China. Consequently, Colombo's strategic flexibility is contingent upon external financial backing, thereby diminishing its autonomy. Furthermore, India's geographical proximity to Sri Lanka and the profound socio-cultural connections between the two nations confer upon India considerable leverage in influencing Sri Lanka's internal dynamics. This aspect further complicates Colombo's endeavors to cultivate closer relations with China.

The engagement of China in the establishment of the Hambantota port situated in the Southern Province of Sri Lanka has sparked considerable concern in India subsequent to the formalization of the agreement between the administration led by Mahinda Rajapaksa and Chinese state-owned entities, particularly the China Harbor Engineering Company. The primary apprehension in New Delhi stems from the strategic importance ascribed to Hambantota, accentuating India's discomfort over the expanding influence of China in its immediate periphery. The proximity of the port to India has raised security concerns, especially given its adjacency to critical infrastructural assets such as power plants along the southern coastline of India. The development of this port potentially grants China the capability to monitor India's nuclear, spatial, and maritime facilities in South India, thus serving as a potential vantage point for surveillance activities. India's security apprehensions regarding Chinese involvement in Sri Lanka have been compounded by the rapid influx of Chinese investments across the island, including the enhancement of the Mattala International Airport. The culmination of these concerns manifested with China's agreement with the Sri Lankan government to commence the Colombo Port City project, which is expected to reshape the geopolitical landscape in the Indian Ocean region. This initiative, aimed at establishing a quasi-extra-territorial zone with its distinct legislative framework governing trade and investment, has heightened suspicions in both India and the United States regarding the extent of China's influence in Sri Lanka.

## 2. Trincomalee harbour another pearl in China's string?.

China's unveiling of the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road as part of its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), previously known as One Belt One Road, seeks to rejuvenate ancient trade routes connecting China to Europe through both land and sea passages. Covering 65 countries and nearly 60 percent of the world's population, the initiative represents a significant geopolitical and economic endeavor. In recent years, defense analysts have increasingly referred to China's strategic expansion in the Indian Ocean region (IOR) as the "string of pearls," a term originating from a 2004 report *Energy Futures in Asia* by Ross H. Munro of Booz Allen Hamilton published by the Office of Net Assessment, US Department of Defence. This concept depicts China's establishment of strategic relationships and infrastructure projects along crucial sea lanes. Investments in countries like Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar are perceived to serve defensive and offensive objectives,

protecting China's energy interests and broader security goals. Recent data highlights the complexity of China's investments, notably in Hambantota, where disputes persist over control of Hambantota International Port Services Ltd. (HIPS). Despite Sri Lanka's claims, CM Ports has publicly disclosed its majority stake (58%) in the company, underscoring the intricate strategic implications of China's involvement in key infrastructure projects (Bajpae, 2020). The BRI continues to expand its global footprint, with ongoing agreements and projects shaping international trade and infrastructure development, while influencing geopolitical dynamics and economic alliances.

The geographical environment stands as a paramount determinant influencing the geopolitical significance of a nation or region. Particularly noteworthy is the proximity to maritime expanses, given their consequential role, especially concerning a region's adjacency to crucial water bodies vital for global trade routes. Admiral Colombage underscores the manifold advantages of Trincomalee port, hailing it as a pre-eminent maritime facility recognized universally for its exceptional attributes. Historical accounts, such as Admiral Nelson's observations in 1775, attest to its distinction as one of the world's premier harbors. Notably, Trincomalee's natural depth of 25 meters obviates the need for dredging, distinguishing it markedly from Hambantota and Colombo ports. Furthermore, in the contemporary era marked by nuclear armaments and submarine-based missile systems, Romesh Somasundaram emphasizes Trincomalee's strategic relevance, noting its ample harbor depth facilitating the discreet maneuvering of nuclear submarines. Trincomalee's longstanding history as a naval base further underscores its strategic significance, particularly given its proximity to countries bordering the Bay of Bengal, including India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. As China's economic influence extends into Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Bangladesh, Trincomalee assumes added significance as it commands the entrance to the Bay of Bengal, increasingly recognized for its economic and strategic value. Admiral Colombage underscores Trincomalee's advantageous proximity to Southeast Asian ports relative to Hambantota, positioning it as a pivotal commercial asset, situated strategically at the southern terminus of Sri Lanka, overlooking critical sea lanes in South Asia (Drishti, n.d.).

In 2015, China articulated a maritime strategy termed as "Near Seas Defence and Far Seas Protection" in its defense white paper, aiming to broaden the geographic and operational scope of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). Despite the absence of a precise delineation of what constitutes the "far seas," China initiated substantial investments in various littoral nations within the Indian Ocean Region. Notably, infrastructure development projects in Chittagong and Gwadar, along with the completion of Hambantota port in Sri Lanka, signify China's strategic endeavours ("The Indian Navy Has a Big Problem: The Subsurface Dilemma," 2014).

Recent years have witnessed escalating concerns over China's escalating presence in the region, largely perceived as part of a concerted effort to extend its influence across the Indian Ocean periphery. Notably, China's investments in Sri Lanka, including the expansion of Hambantota port and the Colombo International Container Terminal, underscore its growing economic

and diplomatic ties with the country. However, apprehensions have been raised regarding the strategic intentions behind these investments, particularly concerning the potential military utility of Hambantota port and its proximity to crucial maritime routes.

While the Chinese government maintains that its investments in Sri Lanka solely aim at fostering economic growth, skepticism persists regarding underlying military objectives. Experts contend that these investments form part of China's broader strategy to secure access to strategic locations and bolster its influence in the Indian Ocean region.

The recent acquisition of land near India and the utilization of Hambantota as a docking site for Chinese Navy submarines highlight China's strategic objectives. Moreover, developments such as the construction of Colombo Port City serve to enhance China's proximity to India's southernmost tip, Kanyakumari, further augmenting its strategic footprint in the region.

China's influence is notably expanding in Sri Lanka's northern region, with investments spanning renewable energy infrastructure and aquaculture, particularly in sea cucumber cultivation. Given China's significant consumption of sea cucumbers and the global demand for this commodity, initiatives to facilitate its export from Sri Lanka to China underscore China's multifaceted approach to expanding its influence in the region. The establishment of a production facility for artificial breeding in Jaffna further underscores China's strategic interest in the region. Furthermore, in June 2022, the Sri Lankan cabinet approved a substantial commercial sea cucumber project covering significant areas in the northern and eastern districts of the country. These developments signal a gradual but noticeable increase in China's influence along Sri Lanka's northern and eastern coasts (Brewster, 2014a).

### 3. Trincomalee harbour ?strategic relevance for India.

India has always demonstrated a keen interest in Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka). Somasundaram referred by prominent Indian strategic thinker, R. R. Ramachandra Rao, who articulated India's substantial stake in preventing the establishment of hostile powers within Ceylon's borders. Rao emphasized the critical nature of safeguarding Ceylon, stating that the presence of foreign airstrips and naval control over strategic points like Trincomalee would significantly render the Indian peninsula to potential air and sea threats along its extensive coastline. Ceylon, Rao asserted, lay within India's defense ambit, situated at the core of Indian Ocean security concerns (Subramanyam, 2022).

By the 1980s, India harbored apprehensions of encirclement by adversarial forces, primarily due to tensions with China, the United States, and Pakistan. Concerns heightened as India perceived the pro-Western J.R. Jayewardene (JR) regime in Sri Lanka as potentially aligning with anti-Indian Western alliances. India's support for the Tamil minority further strained relations with JR's administration. Adding to India's anxieties, JR reminded British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in 1985 of the enduring Defense pact signed between Britain and Sri

Lanka in 1947, implying potential military cooperation against India.

These factors contributed to India’s firm stance on incorporating explicit provisions concerning Trincomalee within the framework of the India-Sri Lanka Accord of July 1987. A formal Exchange of Letters between President JR Jayewardene and Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi served to confirm the mutual agreements reached, including the commitment that Trincomalee, along with any other Sri Lankan port, would not be utilized for military purposes detrimental to India’s interests. Additionally, the restoration and operation of the Trincomalee oil tank farm were slated for joint venture between India and Sri Lanka.

However, the actual transfer of control over the tanks to India did not occur until 2003, as part of an arrangement tied to India’s support for the Norwegian-brokered peace process aimed at resolving the conflict with Tamil separatists in Sri Lanka. Presently, India has been presented with an opportunity to collaborate with Japan in the development of Trincomalee harbor, while also engaging in partnerships with Singapore and Japan to establish the hinterland as an Economic Zone (Madutharanga, Timur, & Surjaatmadia, 2023).

**4. Trincomalee Oil Tank farm Deal - what it means for the India.**

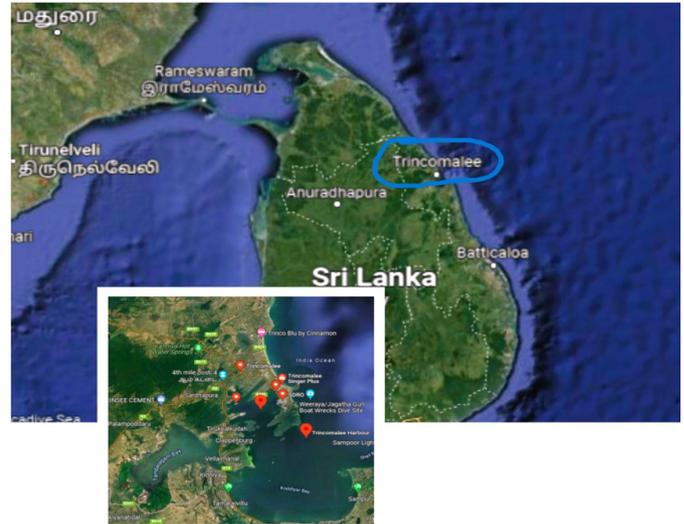
The Lanka Indian Oil Company and Ceylon Petroleum Corporation have formally entered into an agreement aimed at the development of a substantial oil storage tank facility situated at Trincomalee, a project initiated during the British colonial era. This agreement signifies a significant advancement for New Delhi in a protracted and contentious initiative within Sri Lanka’s eastern Trincomalee district, renowned for its advantageous natural harbor.

Originally constructed by the British during World War II for refueling purposes, the oil tank farm, situated in ‘China Bay’ adjacent to the highly sought-after natural harbor of Trincomalee, consists of 99 storage tanks, each capable of holding 12,000 kiloliters, distributed between the Lower and Upper Tank Farms. The conception of this collaborative endeavor dates back 35 years to the Indo-Lanka Accord of 1987. Indian Oil Corporation established its Sri Lankan subsidiary, Lanka IOC, in 2003, which presently operates 15 tanks within the facility. The ongoing negotiation of the new agreement pertains to the utilization of the remaining tanks. These accords represent a significant stride in expanding the scope of the mutually beneficial economic partnership, facilitating Sri Lanka’s progress toward positioning Trincomalee as a pivotal energy and transportation hub to reinforce its energy security (Subramanyam, 2022).

In terms of recent developments, it is pertinent to note that the finalized agreement between the Lanka Indian Oil Company and Ceylon Petroleum Corporation represents a tangible advancement in the long-standing endeavor to develop the Trincomalee oil storage tank farm. This project, initially conceived over three decades ago, underscores the enduring partnership between India and Sri Lanka in bolstering economic cooperation and regional stability. Furthermore, against the backdrop

of evolving geopolitical dynamics in the Indian Ocean region, the consolidation of energy infrastructure in Trincomalee holds broader strategic significance, contributing to enhanced energy security and maritime connectivity for both nations.

Figure 1: Trincomalee Harbour, Srilanka.



Source: Google Maps, March 25, 2024.

**5. Data Analysis.**

*5.1. Analysis Methods .*

Multivariate statistical analysis investigates methodologies for systematically organizing and analyzing data affected by random influences, with the objective of inferring or predicting the underlying phenomena of interest. In many real-world contexts, the interrelationships among variables are intricate, making precise quantitative assessments challenging. However, discernible correlational patterns frequently emerge within the dataset. Linear regression analysis, a mathematical statistical technique, is employed to address the associations among variables. By identifying the optimal combination of multiple independent variables, regression analysis enables the prediction of dependent variables.

*5.2. Analysis Process.*

The test data underwent multiple linear regression analysis using SPSS software. The outcomes of this analysis are presented in Tables 1 to 3.

Table 1: Model Summary.

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.910 <sup>a</sup>	.828	.813	1.797

Source: Authors.

Predictors: (Constant), Strengthening India’s presence in the Indian Ocean is necessary for its strategic security, Trincomalee Harbour plays a crucial role in regional trade and commerce

The analysis conducted through multiple linear regression in SPSS revealed compelling results. The model exhibited a robust correlation ( $R = 0.910$ ) between the dependent variable and a combination of independent variables, namely, "Strengthening India’s presence in the Indian Ocean is necessary for its strategic security" and "Trincomalee Harbour plays a crucial role in regional trade and commerce". The coefficient of determination ( $R^2 = 0.828$ ) indicated that approximately 82.8% of the variance in the dependent variable was accounted for by these predictors, suggesting a strong predictive capability. Adjusted  $R^2$  (0.813) accounted for model complexity, and the standard error of the estimate (1.797) provided insight into the model’s predictive accuracy.

Table 2: ANOVA<sup>a</sup>.

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	342.353	2	171.176	53.035	.000 <sup>b</sup>
	Residual	71.007	22	3.228		
	Total	413.360	24			

Source: Authors.

a. Dependent Variable: Strategic significance of Trincomalee harbor.

b. Predictors: (Constant), Strengthening India’s presence in the Indian Ocean is necessary for its strategic security, Trincomalee Harbour plays a crucial role in regional trade and commerce.

The provided data reflects the results of an analysis of variance (ANOVA) table derived from a regression model. The model comprises two main components: regression and residual, with the former representing the portion of variance in the dependent variable (Strategic significance of Trincomalee harbor) explained by the included predictors, and the latter denoting unexplained variability. The sum of squares for regression (342.353) indicates the magnitude of explained variability, while the sum of squares for residuals (71.007) quantifies unexplained variability. The F-statistic (53.035), comparing the mean square for regression to the mean square for residuals, suggests that the regression model is statistically significant in elucidating the dependent variable’s variance. Moreover, with degrees of freedom accounted for, the analysis underscores the effectiveness of the predictors, namely, "Strengthening India’s presence in the Indian Ocean is necessary for its strategic security" and "Trincomalee Harbour plays a crucial role in regional trade and commerce", in elucidating the strategic significance of Trincomalee Harbor.

Table 3. Constant: The constant term represents the expected value of the dependent variable when all predictors are zero. In this case, it is not statistically significant ( $p = 0.289$ ), indicating that the intercept alone may not adequately explain the strategic significance of Trincomalee harbour.

- Trincomalee Harbour: The coefficient (0.270) indicates

Table 3: Coefficients<sup>a</sup>.

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			
(Constant)	.660	.618		1.068	.289	
1	Trincomalee Harbour plays a crucial role in regional trade and commerce	.270	.118	.244	2.280	.026
	Strengthening India's presence in the Indian Ocean is necessary for its strategic security	.495	.146	.363	3.393	.001

a. Dependent Variable: Strategic significance of Trincomalee harbor

Source: Authors.

that for every unit increase in the perceived role of Trincomalee Harbour in regional trade and commerce, the strategic significance of the harbour increases by 0.270 units. This predictor is statistically significant at the 0.05 level ( $p = 0.026$ ).

- Strengthening India’s presence in the Indian Ocean: The coefficient (0.495) suggests that strengthening India’s presence in the Indian Ocean for strategic security purposes is associated with an increase in the strategic significance of Trincomalee harbour. This predictor is highly significant ( $p < 0.001$ ), indicating a strong relationship.

The analysis indicates that both predictors, Trincomalee Harbour’s role in regional trade and India’s strategic presence in the Indian Ocean, are important factors contributing to the strategic significance of Trincomalee harbour. Strengthening India’s presence in the Indian Ocean appears to have a stronger effect compared to the role of Trincomalee Harbour in regional trade. Through analytical methods used in the above study same has been established, although Trincomalee harbour holds strategic position in the region not much focus was given on its development part. Therefore the impact on regional trade is potentially less. However in recent years due to growing geopolitical activities in the region, Trincomalee has gained insights among the regional as well as extra regional powers.

## 6. India’s Security Dilemma.

Defensive realism is grounded in four foundational assumptions that delineate the translation of structural variables into international outcomes and states’ foreign policies. These assumptions encompass four qualitative variables, namely categorical variables, each contributing to the framework’s elucidation.

Primarily, the theory posits the security dilemma as an inherent and unresolvable aspect of anarchical systems. Secondly, it contends that structural modifiers, including the balance between offensive and defensive capabilities, geographic proximity, and access to critical resources, impact the severity of the security dilemma among specific states. Thirdly, defensive realism underscores the role of material power in shaping states’ foreign policies through the cognitive processes and calculations of their leaders. Lastly, it acknowledges the influence of

domestic political dynamics in constraining a state's efficacy in responding to external stimuli. These assumptions not only delineate the incentives for interstate conflict or cooperation but also explicate the intricate links between external pressures and the actual foreign policy behaviors of individual states. Robert Jervis augments this theoretical framework by presenting four distinct scenarios delineating conditions conducive to varying degrees of a security dilemma. Jervis highlights the pivotal role of distinguishing between offensive and defensive behaviors and the relative advantages of offense and defense within given circumstances.

In the first scenario, where offensive and defensive actions lack discernibility but offense holds a strategic advantage, the security dilemma intensifies substantially, fostering aggressive posturing by status quo states and precipitating the prospect of an arms race. Conversely, in the second scenario, where defense holds a strategic advantage despite indistinguishable behaviors, the security dilemma remains intense, albeit with avenues for enhancing security without posing threats to other states.

In the third scenario, distinguishable behaviors coupled with an offensive advantage mitigate the intensity of the security dilemma, albeit with latent risks of future aggression. Conversely, in the fourth scenario, where both offensive and defensive behaviors are discernible and defense holds a strategic advantage, the security dilemma recedes significantly. Jervis emphasizes the potential misinterpretation of defensive military buildups as offensive maneuvers, prompting aggressive responses from other states and engendering the possibility of an arms race. Moreover, the security dilemma may precipitate the formation of new alliances, particularly if offensive capabilities are perceived to outweigh defensive capacities (Holslag, 2009).

In a compelling portrayal presented by Mohan Malik, the dynamic interaction between the Indian sub-continental plate and the Eurasian tectonic plate, akin to a perpetual grind and thrust, reflects the pervasive friction and instability characterizing the Himalayan mountain range. Similarly, the bilateral relations between India and China are marked by volatility, friction, and tension. Contemporary scholarly discourse underscores a pronounced strategic competition between India and China across diverse spheres, particularly evident along their Himalayan frontier, within the context of their interactions with Pakistan, and throughout South Asia and the Indian Ocean region. Numerous scholars argue that a Sino - Indian security dilemma is either present or emerging in the Indian Ocean, a notion increasingly integrated into political discourse, as evidenced by allusions to the 'Malacca Dilemma' or the 'Hormuz Dilemma' by political figures elucidating the vulnerability of maritime communication lines across the Indian Ocean (Amarasinghe, 2020).

Moreover, the prevalent 'String of Pearls' narrative encapsulates these perceptions, positing that China's strategic interests in numerous port and infrastructure projects in the Indian Ocean region potentially pose a threat to India. Recognizing the paramount importance of the geographical environment in shaping human society, it is imperative to acknowledge the sea as a critical component, occupying a significant portion of the Earth's surface..

India's strategic presence at this pivotal juncture not only serves to counterbalance Chinese dominance in the Indian Ocean but also aligns with its aspirations of regional power status. Additionally, leveraging existing land links, the Trincomalee port presents an avenue for India to enhance trade connections with Southeast Asia and Africa, thereby consolidating its tactical position in the region. Notably, merchant ships navigating from the ports of Kolkata and Yangon to the Suez Canal frequently utilize Sri Lanka's premier ports, Colombo and Trincomalee, underscoring the island's role as a critical nexus for communications, trade, and naval operations in the Indian Ocean region (Adaderana, 2023). Given Trincomalee's status as a primary naval base, the influx of external regional powers into Sri Lanka could potentially disrupt India's maritime shipping routes, posing a challenge to its waterway shipping interests.

**Strategic Significance:** India's historical and geographical proximity to Sri Lanka has endowed it with considerable influence over the island nation. The strategic significance of the port located within the Indian Ocean has attracted the attention of various nations, including India, Japan, and the United States, reflecting a complex interplay of geopolitical interests. Trincomalee Port stands out as one of the world's premier natural harbors, boasting dimensions surpassing those of Colombo Port by a factor of ten. Presently, Sri Lanka's Ports Authority is engaged in revitalizing Trincomalee as a hub for metropolitan development.

In contemporary strategic discourse, Trincomalee Port emerges as an optimal site for accommodating nuclear and nuclear-powered submarines, aligning with evolving defense policies. Its expansive area facilitates submarine concealment from detection systems such as radar or sonar, accentuating its military significance. Consequently, the prominence of Trincomalee Port is poised to escalate, propelled by its multifaceted utility.

A report from the Sri Lanka Ports Authority underscores the port's economic viability, with a net profit of Rs 11 billion and revenue totaling Rs 44 billion in 2016. Trincomalee Port's historical role as a pivotal military installation during World War II further underscores its enduring strategic importance. The initiation of the 2020 Asian Development Bank study, commissioned by Japan, underscores the international interest in the development potential of Trincomalee Port (Daojiong, 2007).

**Balance China's influence:** Despite the burgeoning mutual interests and deepening interactions between China and India, the two nations find themselves ensnared in a persistent military security dilemma, fostering mutual distrust and a tendency towards military equilibrium. This situation has engendered a nuanced and multi-tiered military power balance, which has the potential to contribute to regional stability. The ongoing disputes over border territories and the attendant negotiation challenges, notably India's insistence on clarifying the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and China's insistence on promptly concluding a definitive exchange agreement, underscore the complexity of the situation. The establishment of the Trincomalee port is envisioned as a strategic counterbalance to China's

expanding influence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). With China's existing access to the Hambantota Port, securing the Trincomalee port assumes paramount importance for India. India has already committed significant investments to the development of Trincomalee, indicating its strategic significance and potential benefits. Furthermore, the project has attracted geopolitical attention from various nations, including Japan and the US.

The development of Trincomalee port not only presents an opportunity for India to assert its dominance in the Indian Ocean region but also offers a chance to rectify past strategic missteps, particularly concerning the Hambantota Port. Trincomalee boasts one of the most prominent natural harbors in Asia, offering India a strategic advantage in balancing China's influence. Moreover, India's involvement in Trincomalee is poised to bolster its control over maritime trade routes, with potential implications for container traffic through the Colombo port and cargo operations at the Hambantota port.

China's escalating demand for crude oil, which is projected to double within the next two decades, underscores its imperative to secure alternative supply routes. Currently, more than 85% of China-bound oil traverses through the Straits of Malacca, leading to concerns about overreliance on this route (Bajpae, 2020). The pursuit of alternate routes reflects China's strategic efforts to mitigate its vulnerability stemming from dependence on the Malacca Strait.

The rivalry between India and China, spanning maritime, energy, and strategic domains, manifests across various dimensions in the Indian Ocean region. Robert Kaplan characterizes China's expansion as 'vertical,' extending southwards into the Indian Ocean, while India's expansion is depicted as 'horizontal,' reaching out to littoral countries from west to east. Small nations such as Sri Lanka find themselves caught in the midst of this geopolitical contestation.

**Maritime Trade Routes:** The port presents not only one of Asia's most exceptional natural harbors but also represents a strategic opportunity to counterbalance China's influence within the region. Furthermore, it holds the potential to enable India to assert dominance over maritime trade routes, particularly with its involvement in Colombo port for container traffic and cargo transportation in Hambantota port. The engagement of Indian companies in this development stands to significantly bolster India's presence and influence in regional maritime trade networks. India's maritime trade volume has been steadily increasing, making strategic investments in ports all the more significant for its economic and geopolitical interests.

## 7. In alignment with India's Indo-pacific strategy.

Sri Lanka has emerged as a focal point for numerous influential nations, primarily owing to its advantageous positioning within the Indo-Pacific region. Notably, China and India, its immediate neighbors, wield considerable sway over Sri Lanka's internal affairs. India, in particular, has integrated its neighborhood and Indian Ocean strategies into its broader Indo-Pacific approach. This strategic maneuvering serves India's interests

in bolstering its regional influence, assuming a role as a principal security provider, mitigating Chinese encroachment and encumbrances within the Indian Ocean, and showcasing its maritime capabilities. India has embarked on a series of initiatives, notably the institutionalization of the Colombo Security Conclave, and has extended support to Sri Lanka through provisions such as a Free-Floating Dock Facility, Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre, and Dornier Reconnaissance aircraft. These endeavours are strategically aimed at mitigating both conventional and unconventional security threats (Butt, Kharl, Khizar, & Bhatti, 2020).

Additionally, Sri Lanka's pivotal position within the Indian Ocean Region, intersecting vital maritime routes, complements its aspirations to establish itself as a global financial centre and a pivotal regional maritime hub. Sri Lanka has championed the concept of an inclusive and open Indo-Pacific region, underscoring the necessity to safeguard the security and prosperity of the Indian Ocean domain through the promotion of a maritime order that guarantees equitable access to global maritime resources, adherence to international legal frameworks, and observance of established norms and regulations.

Latest trends indicate that as geopolitical dynamics continue to evolve, Sri Lanka's strategic significance remains paramount, attracting increasing attention from major powers seeking to assert influence in the Indo-Pacific realm (Daojiong, 2007). Furthermore, recent developments underscore the importance of maritime security and cooperation among regional actors, emphasizing the imperative for collaborative efforts to uphold stability and prosperity in the Indian Ocean.

## Conclusions.

Contemporary geopolitical importance of Trincomalee Harbour holds undeniable prominence within regional dynamics, particularly concerning India. The strategic significance of Trincomalee Harbour to India extends beyond its geographical proximity, encompassing its potential as a pivotal maritime nexus, thereby fostering both economic and security imperatives. The presence of a deep-sea port at Trincomalee affords India a critical strategic foothold in the Indian Ocean, bolstering its maritime capabilities and conferring a strategic advantage amidst shifting geopolitical landscapes. Moreover, it is imperative to acknowledge that Trincomalee constitutes just one facet of India's overarching maritime strategy. Other pivotal ports within the region, such as Gwadar in Pakistan and Hambantota in Sri Lanka, also bear substantial geopolitical relevance. A comprehensive evaluation of the challenges and opportunities inherent in these ports is requisite to formulate an adaptive and holistic foreign policy approach. In navigating the intricacies of the contemporary geopolitical milieu, India must exercise vigilance to safeguard its national interests, promote regional stability, and engage in diplomatic endeavors conducive to cooperation. The strategic calculus must encompass not only immediate gains but also the enduring ramifications for India's geopolitical standing within the Indian Ocean realm. Fundamentally, the significance of Trincomalee Harbour and other key regional ports necessitates a nuanced and forward-thinking

strategy from India. Through adept diplomatic maneuvering, economic collaboration, and strategic foresight, India can harness these maritime assets to fortify its status as a pivotal actor in the evolving geopolitical dynamics of the Indian Ocean.

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