

## Navigating Power Play: Sri Lanka's Strategic Role in Indo-Pacific Geopolitics

Neeraj Singh Manhas

*The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, India, neeraj.m-polsciphd@msubaroda.ac.in*

Jyot Shikar Singh

*O.P. Jindal Global University, India, jssingh@jgu.edu.in*

Tilak Raj Sharma

*Central University of Jammu, India, tilk.nss@cujammu.ac.in*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/jss>  
pp. 168-190

### Recommended Citation

Manhas, Neeraj Singh; Singh, Jyot Shikar; and Sharma, Tilak Raj. "Navigating Power Play: Sri Lanka's Strategic Role in Indo-Pacific Geopolitics." *Journal of Strategic Security* 19, no. 1 (2026) : 168-190. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.19.1.2575>  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/jss/vol19/iss1/8>

This article is brought to you for free and open access by the Open Access Journals at Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Strategic Security by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ University of South Florida.

---

# **Navigating Power Play: Sri Lanka's Strategic Role in Indo-Pacific Geopolitics**

## **Abstract**

The Indo-Pacific's geopolitical significance has surged due to China's assertive rise, prompting the QUAD nations to counterbalance Beijing's influence. Sri Lanka, a strategically located island state, emerges as a key hub for global trade and security. It examines how Sri Lanka navigates its geopolitical position to achieve national goals while balancing the interests of larger powers. Lastly, Colombo's strategic engagements with major powers and regional frameworks highlight efforts to assert agency and amplify the voices of smaller island states. Despite its strategic importance, Sri Lanka's agency is constrained by power asymmetries in the Indo-Pacific, contributing to understanding small-state geopolitics.

## Introduction

The Indo-Pacific region (IOR) has emerged as a crucial arena in contemporary geopolitics, marked by complex interactions between major powers and smaller states. The power imbalances in the international system are reflected in the multifaceted political, economic, and social pressures that larger governments exert on island states in this region. The importance of the IOR is enhanced by its strategic chokepoints and crucial marine routes, which pass through 35 littoral states and 12 landlocked nations. China's white paper underlines the reciprocal benefits of this strategy, particularly for the IOR's island governments.<sup>1</sup> China's white paper highlights the reciprocal benefits of its Indo-Pacific strategy, especially for the region's island governments. This paper seeks to address the research question: *How do small states like Sri Lanka navigate the geopolitical landscape of the Indo-Pacific to assert their agency amid great-power competition?* It is noteworthy that Sri Lanka's interactions with foreign powers predate the current Indo-Pacific story, indicating a longer historical trajectory of influence and intervention. Sri Lanka was the focus of superpower competition during the Cold War, juggling its strategic alliances to maintain its independence. An important example of the intricate and often delicate role that external forces play in shaping Sri Lanka's internal and regional dynamics is the presence of the Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF) in the late 1980s. The deployment and subsequent withdrawal of the IPKF exposed the limitations and opportunities for small-state agencies in the face of great-power intervention.

The research objective is to analyze Colombo's strategic responses to the evolving Indo-Pacific order, focusing on its engagements with major powers and regional frameworks. By situating Sri Lanka's foreign policy within the broader context of small-state geopolitics, this study examines how Colombo defends the interests of other island states in the region while balancing its national interests against external pressures. The argument advanced in this paper is that although Sri Lanka's strategic location has attracted considerable attention from global powers, its agency remains constrained by systemic power imbalances. Nevertheless, Sri Lanka's foreign policy reflects a dynamic blend of strategic hedging, multilateralism, and identity-driven diplomacy, allowing it to assert itself within the Indo-Pacific's competitive landscape.

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) exemplifies the intensifying power dynamics in the region, with its twenty-first-century maritime civilisation strategy offering purported reciprocal benefits, particularly for island governments. As Robert D. Kaplan notes, China's naval power projection is vertical, in contrast to India's horizontal approach.<sup>2</sup> Kaplan's categorization highlights that Beijing's strategy focuses on establishing dominance along specific maritime corridors, particularly through port investments and militarization in regions such as the South China Sea and IOR. On the contrary, New Delhi's horizontal approach emphasizes broader regional engagement and influence through multilateral initiatives, such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association, and partnerships with smaller states to ensure a balanced and cooperative maritime order.<sup>3</sup>

Beyond these regional powers, extra-regional actors such as Washington, Tokyo, and Moscow have also strengthened their naval presence in the IOR. Recognizing the region's strategic importance, the United States redefined its Pacific Command as the Indo-Pacific Command, signaling a strategic pivot to counter China's maritime expansion. However, no significant maritime power rivalries or conventional wars currently exist among IOR states. Rather, nations remain highly aware of the need to preserve security along vital waterways, sea lanes, and chokepoints. Their mutual interest in maintaining maritime peace is underscored by the importance of trade security, a pillar of economic stability. This paper thus situates Sri Lanka's geopolitical agency within this intricate regional framework, offering insights into the broader dynamics of small-state diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific.

## Literature Review

The geopolitical dynamics of the IOR have garnered increasing academic attention due to their intricate blend of economic interdependence, maritime security, and strategic rivalries. Sri Lanka, the focus of this paper, plays a pivotal yet often underexplored role in this complex theater as a small state navigating within the geopolitical complexities of competing with large states. For Michalski, Brommesson, and Ekengren, small-state geopolitics emphasizes how these governments manage their vulnerabilities by forming alliances with more powerful nations across the political, military, and economic fronts.<sup>4</sup> The goal of this literature study is

to place Sri Lanka in this context while highlighting its strategic actions in the Indo-Pacific. While complementary viewpoints from Balance of Power theory highlight the enduring significance of strategic alliances, discussions of shelter theory offer a fundamental lens for understanding how small states seek stability amid conflicting great-power interests. Moreover, Sri Lanka's strategic geographic position at the crossroads of the BRI and the Quad underscores the need to examine its geopolitical agency.<sup>5</sup> This section will thus engage with these scholarly debates to establish a foundation for analyzing Sri Lanka's nuanced role in the Indo-Pacific order.

### Small-Scale Geopolitics

Small-state geopolitics occupies a crucial place in international relations, particularly in regions marked by strategic competition such as the Indo-Pacific. Small states, defined by limited territorial, military, and economic capacities, must navigate an international system shaped by power asymmetries. Furthermore, they tend to rely on international conventions, institutions, and alliances to counter their inherent vulnerabilities.<sup>6</sup> Waltz's theory of balance and bandwagoning, which holds that lesser nations either seek equilibrium through coalitions or affiliate with bigger powers for protection, is consistent with this tendency.<sup>7</sup> One of the best examples of small-state governments strategically maneuvering in the Indo-Pacific to balance superpowers such as Beijing, New Delhi, and Washington is Sri Lanka. As Kuik's strategic hedging paradigm explains in greater depth, minor governments aim to establish a variety of ties to reduce the risks of relying on a single power.<sup>8</sup> This adaptive behavior resonates with Browning's notion of ontological security, in which small states seek stability by reinforcing identity and historical narratives that bolster their international standing.<sup>9</sup>

Muller and Beeson's research on regional security dynamics, which highlights how small states maintain regional order despite having little material might, is also reflected in Colombo's diplomatic approach.<sup>10</sup> Lee highlights how small-state agencies are being strengthened using soft power and cultural diplomacy, especially in culturally diverse nations such as Sri Lanka.<sup>11</sup> In the IOPR, this manifests in Colombo's balancing of Chinese infrastructure investments with Indian security partnerships, reflecting what Taliaferro characterizes as 'strategy of constrained

autonomy'.<sup>12</sup> Colombo's role as a crucial yet limited actor in the IOR system is highlighted by the interplay of structural reliance, institutional participation, and strategic hedging, which necessitates an analysis that draws on both realist and constructivist frameworks.

The Indo-Pacific geopolitical environment has emerged as a crucial arena for power competition, driven by the strategic rivalries of major powers such as the USA, China, and India. The importance of this area stems from its marine trade routes and geostrategic chokepoints, which are critical to military maneuverability and the global economy. According to Aoi, the Indo-Pacific has evolved from a minor geopolitical concept to a major axis of world politics in the twenty-first century, reflecting shifting power dynamics in an increasingly multipolar world.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, the way major countries frame the Indo-Pacific often obscures the agency of smaller states, reducing them to passive geopolitical battlefields rather than engaged diplomatic actors.<sup>14</sup> The limitations of deterministic great-power narratives are highlighted in this context by Sri Lanka's handling of Indo-Pacific geopolitics since Colombo has demonstrated significant flexibility through economic diversification and strategic hedging.

Quad's evolving security framework, comprising the US, India, Japan, and Australia, further complicates the Indo-Pacific's geopolitical calculus, as its maritime security agenda often clashes with China's BRI.<sup>15</sup> Wirth's research cautions that the Indo-Pacific narrative can reinforce Cold War-style divisions, undermining regional stability by compelling small states to align in binary ways.<sup>16</sup> Colombo's balancing act amid these competing frameworks demonstrates 'strategic pluralism,' in which small states resist being locked into a single geopolitical sphere.<sup>17</sup> China's investments in Sri Lanka's Hambantota port, which have been condemned for fostering economic dependence but also hailed for boosting local economic potential, demonstrate how big countries still use infrastructure diplomacy to impose their control.<sup>18</sup> Despite these challenges, the geopolitical importance of the Indo-Pacific means that small states cannot be disregarded. Their participation in international frameworks such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) is still constrained by great-power politics. Consequently, while usually depicted as a disputed region dominated by superpower rivalries, the Indo-Pacific offers small states opportunities for strategic assertion, albeit within structurally unequal conditions.

In recent literature, the role of small states in international security has evolved beyond their portrayal as passive or vulnerable actors. Building on the foundational insights of *Small States and International Security: Europe and Beyond* by Clive Archer, Alyson J.K. Bailes, and Anders Wivel, it becomes evident that small states' security strategies have expanded past traditional military considerations to incorporate economic, societal, and environmental dimensions.<sup>19</sup> This change highlights an ontological redefinition of security grounded in cooperative multilateralism, strong institutions, and good governance. The editors stress that rather than relying solely on material capabilities, tiny states actively influence their security environment through diplomatic agility, norm entrepreneurship, and close participation in international institutions. This more comprehensive strategy aligns with Sri Lanka's diplomatic response to Indo-Pacific geopolitics, which combines realpolitik with normative engagement in organizations such as the IORA.

Expanding this line of argument, *The Success of Small States in International Relations: Mice that Roar*, challenges the long-standing structural assumption that small states must “punch above their weight” to matter in global politics.<sup>20</sup> Baldacchino contends that large powers are anomalies in a system where smaller polities predominate numerically, and that tiny states are the norm rather than the exception in international politics. The comparative case studies in the book, which range from emerging island nations like Antigua and Barbuda to the microstates of Europe, show how agenda-setting, coalition-building, and moral authority help small states achieve diplomatic success. The analysis of Sri Lanka is redirected from its weaknesses to its use of multilateral diplomacy and strategic geography as resilience mechanisms. Colombo's concurrent participation in Indian-led frameworks and the BRI exemplifies Baldacchino's idea that small states are active managers of asymmetry rather than mere victims of it.

Moreover, Baldacchino's earlier work on island and microstate geopolitics demonstrates that insularity can be converted from a condition of isolation into a platform for strategic self-representation. In this way, to strengthen their diplomatic agency, small island governments create unique identities based on historical narratives and spatial distinctiveness; this framework is consistent with Browning's ontological security thesis, as mentioned

earlier. To maintain autonomy amid Indo-Pacific competition, Sri Lanka employs identity-driven diplomacy that draws on non-alignment legacies and civilizational ties.

Tom Long's *A Small State's Guide to Influence in World Politics* (2022), which offers a relational theory for understanding how small states function within asymmetric power hierarchies, complements this identity-centered approach. According to Long, the ability of tiny states to maneuver and change their connections with larger players is what gives them influence rather than their absolute capabilities.<sup>21</sup> In Long's framework, influence depends on strategic timing, relational framing, and diplomatic entrepreneurship. He identifies tools such as normative alignment, problem definition, and agenda-setting as mechanisms by which small states can exert disproportionate impact within global governance structures. In Colombo's context, this is evident in Sri Lanka's careful calibration of narratives around "constructive neutrality" and "strategic connectivity," which allow it to mediate competing Indo-Pacific discourses without overt alignment.

## Positioning Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's strategic location at the intersection of the Indian Ocean has made it a major focus in Indo-Pacific geopolitical literature. Scholars have highlighted the country's dual identities as both a small state and a major maritime operator, and its dual roles as both a victim and a benefactor of regional power struggles. For Senevirathna, the necessity of maintaining close security ties with the United States and India, as well as its reliance on Chinese investments through the BRI, has altered Colombo's foreign policy.<sup>22</sup> This balancing approach has led to what can be characterized as 'strategic fluidity,' in which Colombo's foreign policy continuously adjusts in response to evolving power dynamics.<sup>23</sup> However, critics such as Biyanwila argue that this fluidity risks economic dependence, especially given Sri Lanka's debt crisis, which opaque infrastructure agreements with Beijing have exacerbated.<sup>24</sup> Thus, the diplomatic fluidity Sri Lanka enjoys also tests its resilience globally.

However, the nation's geopolitical literature often ignores Sri Lanka's robust diplomatic engagement in regional institutions such as IORA, where it has sought to exercise greater agency through multilateral

cooperation, as noted by Khurana.<sup>25</sup> LeFevre, meanwhile, criticizes Western-centric Indo-Pacific frameworks for ignoring the viewpoints of smaller states, further substantiating how Sri Lanka's diplomacy is frequently limited to reactive posturing rather than constructive planning.<sup>26</sup> Substantiating LeFevre's assertion, Thomas (2023) notes that although Sri Lanka's Hambantota port commonly symbolizes Beijing's maritime growth, Colombo can leverage it as a strategic advantage in talks with other nations.<sup>27</sup> Thus, the literature on Sri Lanka's Indo-Pacific engagement reveals a nuanced interplay of dependency, resilience, and diplomatic maneuvering, challenging simplistic narratives of small-state passivity.

While considerable research has examined Sri Lanka's geopolitical positioning in the Indo-Pacific, notable gaps persist in the existing literature. Much of the scholarly discourse focuses on Colombo's economic dependencies and security vulnerabilities, often framing its foreign policy as reactive to external pressures from Beijing, New Delhi, and Washington.<sup>28:29</sup> This limited perspective overlooks the agency that Colombo exercises through multilateral engagements and diplomatic negotiations, especially within the IORA and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation.<sup>30:31</sup> Moreover, the literature inadequately addresses Sri Lanka's evolving domestic political landscape, particularly since the 2024 elections, when emerging policy signals could redefine its foreign policy priorities. Thus, despite considerable scholarly attention to BRI projects such as Hambantota, how Colombo manages these investments through domestic political alliances and shifting civil society reactions requires renewed focus. Filling these gaps might lead to a more thorough understanding of Sri Lanka's diplomatic agency and its broader contribution to the development of the Indo-Pacific order.

## Theoretical Framework

A robust theoretical framework that goes beyond traditional realist interpretations focused on great-power competition is necessary to comprehend Sri Lanka's strategic behavior in the Indo-Pacific. Applying a multi-theoretical lens is crucial given the island state's distinct geopolitical context, defined by its dependence on external forces and its pursuit of strategic autonomy. For Thorhallsson, Shelter Theory offers important

insights into how small governments seek protection from larger powers in political, military, and economic spheres to achieve stability.<sup>32</sup> While policy conditionalities have sparked domestic debates over sovereignty, Colombo's financial partnership with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) reflects this dynamic empirically. The IMF's 2023–2025 Extended Fund Facility (EFF) program, valued at US\$2.9 billion, has enabled macroeconomic stabilization following the 2022 crisis.<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile, as part of BRI, which is worth over US\$4 billion in total, Sri Lanka works with China on major infrastructure projects, such as the Colombo Port City project and the Hambantota International Port. The dual-edged aspect of dependency is best illustrated by these financial and infrastructure "shelters," since structural support also creates long-term strategic vulnerability, a dynamic that Shelter Theory effectively depicts.

Moreover, Colombo's balancing act among China, India, and the United States to protect its national interests is explained by Waltz's Balance of Power framework.<sup>34</sup> Alliance Theory, as explored by Keohane and Nye,<sup>35</sup> highlights the role of multilateral engagement in mitigating vulnerabilities. Meanwhile, Wivel and Steinmetz argue that small-state agency is shaped not only by material constraints but also by strategic narratives constructed through historical and diplomatic interactions.<sup>36</sup> This section, therefore, adopts an integrated theoretical perspective to analyze Sri Lanka's foreign policy, emphasizing both structural dependencies and the active exercise of agency within a competitive Indo-Pacific landscape.

Shelter Theory, developed primarily within small-state studies, emphasizes how vulnerable states seek economic, political, and societal protection from more powerful international actors. As conceptualized by Thorhallsson, such states depend on larger powers or international organizations to mitigate risks, absorb shocks, and ensure survival<sup>37</sup> within an uncertain global order. This dynamic is best illustrated by Colombo's reliance on Beijing for infrastructure development under the BRI. At the same time, academics such as Apostolopoulou warn that such dependence can erode state sovereignty and lead to a vicious cycle of debt and strategic weakness. Shelter is not necessarily asymmetric, as small states can use their geostrategic significance to rebalance their relationships.<sup>38</sup> This is demonstrated by their multilateral participation in the IORA and their bilateral defense engagements with India.

In Colombo's case, its engagement with the IMF during the 2022 economic crisis illustrates this broader application, albeit one tempered by policy conditionalities imposed by international financial institutions. While shelter theory is often critiqued for assuming passive state behavior, Theiventhran<sup>39</sup> highlights how Colombo's strategic flexibility demonstrates that small states can actively shape external dependencies through diplomatic maneuvering and selective alignment, thus contesting deterministic interpretations of the theory. The theories of alliance and balance of power offer crucial frameworks for comprehending Sri Lanka's strategic moves in the Indo-Pacific. According to the Balance of Power theory, which has its roots in classical realism, states seek to balance more powerful nations to survive, often by forming strategic alliances.<sup>40</sup> This balancing act is best illustrated by Sri Lanka's geopolitical position between Beijing and New Delhi. While still reaping the benefits of Beijing's BRI infrastructure investments, India's maritime relations with India, including naval exercises such as Milan, are intended to offset Beijing's influence.<sup>41</sup> This two-pronged approach supports Pizzolo and Pelaggi's claim that small governments may choose to "bandwagon with safeguards," maximizing benefits while minimizing risks.<sup>42</sup>

Colombo's security maneuvers are explained by the Balance of Power theory, which adds to this understanding. With its strategic location between China and India, Sri Lanka uses both diplomatic and military means to prevent entrapment. Sri Lanka demonstrates a pragmatic balance by actively participating in India-led naval exercises, such as SLINEX 2024, held in Visakhapatnam with INS Sumitra and SLNS Sayura, which featured combined communications, gunnery, and Special Forces operations. Its involvement in MILAN 2024, an Indian-hosted multinational naval exercise that brought together more than 40 regional players in February 2024, highlights Colombo's attempt to portray itself as a cooperative maritime stakeholder without forging exclusive partnerships. These practical interactions demonstrate how tiny powers can strategically coordinate without sacrificing autonomy, putting Pizzolo and Pelaggi's theoretical concept of "bandwagoning with safeguards" into practice.<sup>43</sup>

Alliance Theory further elucidates how Sri Lanka leverages multilateral platforms such as the IORA to reinforce its strategic autonomy. As noted by Zaman, institutional alliances provide small states with diplomatic

legitimacy and a platform to negotiate from a position of collective strength.<sup>44</sup> However, the conflicting interests of member nations make these partnerships fundamentally unstable.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, although Colombo is not a formal member of the Quad, its participation demonstrates a practical balancing strategy that reflects Wendt's concept of constructive alignment.<sup>46</sup> Finally, Gunasekara criticizes the balancing and alliance frameworks for underplaying the domestic political factors that drive Colombo's external alignments, even though these theories account for a large portion of Sri Lanka's foreign policy behavior.<sup>47</sup> This suggests that more nuanced theoretical applications are needed.

Recent theoretical advancements in international relations have shifted the analytical lens from material power dynamics to ideational and constructivist perspectives, offering deeper insights into Sri Lanka's geopolitical behavior. The concept of populist identity, as articulated by Kalis, suggests that small states craft narratives of historical and cultural exceptionalism to enhance their strategic significance.<sup>48</sup> In Colombo's case, its Buddhist heritage and historical maritime prominence are frequently invoked in diplomatic discourse, serving as tools of soft power. This aligns with Stefan's interpretation of the theory of "norm entrepreneurship," wherein states leverage cultural narratives to shape international norms.<sup>49</sup> Kakachia and Minesashvili contend that identity politics in South Asia increasingly intersect with foreign policy, reinforcing the symbolic capital of small states.<sup>50</sup> Thus, these new viewpoints shed light on the intricate relationship between identity, power, and agency in Colombo's Indo-Pacific strategy.

### Small-States in Indo-Pacific: Comparative Analysis

The small states of the Indo-Pacific region occupy a unique yet vulnerable place in the global geopolitical system, where external power dynamics both enable and constrain their strategic agency. To navigate great-power competition, nations such as Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Seychelles have developed flexible policies that combine economic and security alliances with international diplomacy, despite their modest military and financial capabilities. As Prajapati asserts, the Indo-Pacific's evolving security architecture has compelled small states to balance between assertive major powers while preserving their sovereignty.<sup>51</sup> While small states have also used these dependencies to boost their economies, Mitra emphasizes that

external dependencies stemming from infrastructure investments often constrain foreign policy authority.<sup>52</sup> Mishra and Sen further underline that these governments can exercise collective bargaining power by participating in multilateral frameworks such as IORA, which counteract structural vulnerabilities.<sup>53</sup> Therefore, comparing the experiences of Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Seychelles offers critical insights into how small states adapt to regional pressures while shaping their geopolitical destinies through innovative diplomacy and selective alignments.

## Economic Dependence and Strategic Investments

Economic dependencies and strategic investments play a defining role in shaping the foreign policy behavior of small states in the Indo-Pacific. Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Seychelles exemplify how external economic engagements can create both opportunities and vulnerabilities. Sri Lanka's reliance on China's BRI projects, particularly the Hambantota Port, has sparked widespread debates on "debt-trap diplomacy."<sup>54</sup> While Chinese investments have bolstered Beijing's infrastructure, critics argue that opaque financial terms have compromised the country's economic sovereignty.

The Maldives has also become more susceptible to economic shocks due to its reliance on tourism-driven income, leading to significant dependence on Chinese and Indian investments for infrastructure development, notably through the Maldives-China Free Trade Agreement.<sup>55</sup> By cultivating development ties with the US and India, particularly through maritime security cooperation focused on counter-piracy operations in the Indian Ocean, Seychelles has adopted a more varied approach.<sup>56</sup> However, such dependency on foreign aid and security partnerships often leads to policy constraints, limiting Seychelles' ability to exercise fully autonomous foreign policy choices.<sup>57</sup> While these states have shown resilience through economic adaptation, Wilkins warns that excessive reliance on external funding can entrench asymmetric dependencies, reducing strategic flexibility in international relations.<sup>58</sup>

## Security Partnerships and Military Alliances

Security partnerships and military alliances have become indispensable components of foreign policy for small states in the Indo-Pacific, reflecting

their efforts to navigate the region's volatile security environment. Sri Lanka has strengthened its defense cooperation with India through bilateral naval exercises such as *Milan* and *SLINEX*, reflecting a security-first approach aimed at countering Chinese maritime expansion.<sup>59</sup> Colombo has maintained a delicate balance by declining formal membership in the Quad, which is seen as a form of strategic hedging, despite its alignment with India.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, the Maldives' India-First foreign policy has served as the foundation for important defense accords, such as the DOSTI naval drills and the Indian-backed Integrated Surveillance System. Yet, this alignment has sparked criticism at home for what is seen as excessive reliance.<sup>61</sup>

Seychelles has pursued a mixed-security strategy, engaging the United States in counter-piracy operations and negotiating a naval base agreement with India for Assumption Island. However, this project faced significant domestic opposition due to sovereignty concerns.<sup>62</sup> Balancing such external military partnerships requires nuanced diplomacy, given the risks of being drawn into great-power rivalries. While these states have gained strategic visibility through military cooperation, long-term autonomy remains uncertain due to asymmetrical dependencies and shifting regional power dynamics.

Diplomatic agency and regional leadership have allowed small states in the Indo-Pacific to transcend their material limitations through strategic diplomacy and multilateral engagements. Sri Lanka has asserted its diplomatic agency by leveraging its leadership role in the IORA, hosting regional summits, and promoting maritime cooperation. Its cultural diplomacy, anchored in a shared Buddhist heritage, has further enhanced its soft power appeal in South and Southeast Asia.<sup>63</sup> Similarly, the Maldives has emerged as a climate diplomacy leader by advocating for climate resilience at global forums such as the United Nations Climate Change Conference, framing itself as a vulnerable yet resilient state.<sup>64</sup>

Seychelles has taken a proactive role in environmental diplomacy through initiatives such as the Blue Economy framework, thereby translating its environmental vulnerabilities into global advocacy.<sup>65</sup> However, such diplomatic initiatives are not free from geopolitical constraints, as external powers often attempt to co-opt these states' agendas through conditional aid and strategic investments.<sup>66</sup> Despite these challenges, small-state

agencies in multilateral settings demonstrate adaptive diplomacy, enabling states like Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Seychelles to exert disproportionate influence by framing themselves as indispensable actors in addressing transnational challenges.

### Sri Lanka: An Emerging Key Player in the Indo-Pacific?

Sri Lanka is an island nation that falls within the small-state category of the international system. Thorhallsson and colleagues use four traditional criteria to classify a country as a *small state*: population, territory size, gross domestic product, and military capacity.<sup>67</sup> Since Sri Lanka is a small island state, we contend that it could be included in the shelter theory, which Thorhallsson and associates define as “economically, politically, and socially dependent on the economic, political, and societal shelter provided by larger states and international organizations to survive and prosper.”<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, the implication of shelter is tied to three interconnected characteristics: *risk reduction in the face of a potential crisis, assistance in absorbing shocks during a crisis, and assistance in dealing with the crisis's aftermath*. Under the realist paradigm, Colombo, with its strategic location, territorial size, gross domestic product, and military capacity relative to regional and extra-regional major states, appears to be a strong candidate for applying shelter theory.

Regional and international institutions may impact the security of the IOR island states. A small state, therefore, must deal with issues including political and military defense, economic exports, and the cultural ambitions of major polities. Building on this notion, bilateral ties between smaller and larger countries strengthen the shelter's security in the current geopolitical context.

Larger powers like the United States and China have long engaged with Sri Lanka bilaterally. As historian Yang Wei recounted, in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the renowned Chinese explorer Admiral Zheng He docked his massive fleet in Sri Lanka. Zheng aimed to promote Chinese culture during his extensive voyages across South and Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and East Africa. His armada demonstrated China's vast naval forces and reinforced messages of diplomacy and trade. Meanwhile, Sri Lanka occupied a strategic location for provisions along the busy maritime route. Interactions between the global superpowers and Sri Lanka have thus

persisted for centuries, as their interests have aligned and collided with changing regional and international dynamics.<sup>69</sup> The best way to introduce Indian culture to Sri Lanka was Buddhism. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, as Moors migrated to Sri Lanka, trading seafaring routes from the Middle East, they brought influences from Arab and Persian states. The behavior of more massive regional and extra-regional states toward Sri Lanka is evident in these historical events.

Over time, this led to greater interdependence as trade and investment flourished and other national economies increasingly relied on one another. Globalization, however, is more than economics; it is a world without borders. Economic and technical forces are not just globalizing; they are overwhelming, Kenichi Ohmae argues, and the nation-state is fading in relevance and influence.<sup>70</sup> Even though Sri Lanka is an island, Colombo owes its coexistence with other regional and extra-regional larger governments to peace. Sri Lanka will not jeopardize national sovereignty but will submit to transnational pressures, actors, and institutions.

### **The Tricky Balance of Power in the Indian Ocean: Primary Power Blocs and Their Interactions with Sri Lanka**

The three leading power blocs in the IOR are India, the United States, and China, and all of them seek to bolster their maritime presence to serve what they deem to be national goals. From the South China Sea into the IOR, China seeks maritime expansion, particularly given the balance of power in the IOR. The US is closer to India today than it has been in decades. As Hans Morgenthau and others have shown, alliances become a built-in characteristic of the balance of power when competing states have three alternatives for protecting and enhancing their relative positions of power.<sup>71</sup> They can grow their power, improve their capacity by virtue of the power of other nations, or deny power to the adversary's other partner states. Small island nations like Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and the Seychelles must assess their allegiances to big-power countries as they compete in a much larger game.

When this configuration is integrated into the IOR, China and the United States compete against one another, and India also competes against China. Beijing has concerns about the South China Sea, and the Strait of Malacca security crisis has a significant impact on China. As a result,

China's alignment with Myanmar and Bangladesh is critical for energy transportation if any rivalry escalates. Additionally, they hold significant stakes in the ports of Hambantota, Sri Lanka; Gwadar, Pakistan; and Chabahar, Iran. On the other side, the United States and India share mutual interests. India's maritime strategy entails cooperation with smaller governments such as Sri Lanka and the Maldives. The shifting character of IOR alliances might be further bolstered by India and China developing oil pipelines to refuel and ship oil to deep-water ports in Chabahar and Gwadar, respectively.<sup>72</sup>

India's and China's maritime expansions require the use of the Chabahar, Hambantota, and Gwadar ports. India, in collaboration with Japan, established the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC), which connects the two continents and the Far East.<sup>73</sup> Sri Lanka is located at the crossroads of the sea lines of communication (SLOC) for the AAGC and BRI. This implies that Colombo must seek refuge in economic, political, and social arenas. As a small coastal state, Sri Lanka must therefore expand trade with a variety of partners to benefit from competitive trade routes and economic development projects.

Then-US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's tour of Asia during the Trump administration demonstrated Washington's strategic interest in the Indo-Pacific. During his visit, Pompeo encouraged Sri Lanka to defend against Chinese funding and investment, which he has characterized as predatory, while praising the United States as a friend and partner.<sup>74</sup> His warning came a day after he signed a defense pact with India, prompting the two countries to work more closely together to confront Beijing's threats. China's official Twitter account for the Chinese embassy in Sri Lanka responded to these developments: "Sorry, Mr. Secretary; we are currently focused on encouraging friendship and cooperation between China and Sri Lanka and are uninterested in your Alien vs. Predator game invitation; the US, as always, may play two roles concurrently."<sup>75</sup> This was a critical moment for Sri Lanka's foreign policy, as two giants in world politics and economy competed for Colombo's attention.

## Bilateral Agreements with Sri Lanka: A Sign of Deeper Engagement?

Sri Lanka has bilateral and multilateral security, political, military, and economic agreements with larger governments and international and regional organizations. Some of them include the Indo-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement (ISFTA), the Pakistan-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement (PSFTA), the South Asian Free Trade Area Agreement (SAFTA), the Asia-Pacific Trade Agreement (APTA), and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), all of which Sri Lanka has already signed and implemented.

In 2020, Sri Lanka convened the fourth trilateral meeting at the level of the National Security Advisors (NSAs) on Maritime Security Cooperation among Sri Lanka, India, and the Maldives.<sup>76</sup> More broadly, it aimed to stimulate collective action on marine security, maritime domain awareness, search and rescue, maritime pollution response, information sharing, and the addressing of piracy, drug, and arms trafficking in the IOR. At that event, leaders solidified the basis for two island governments to strengthen their maritime links with the IOR's larger states. When examined through the lens of the shelter theory, Sri Lanka and the Maldives lacked sufficient defense capabilities and resources to contribute to maritime security in the IOR. The shelter theory holds that small states' small and volatile markets, limited defenses, modest diplomatic corps, and poor economic resources are fundamental reasons for engaging with large states and organizations.<sup>77</sup>

## The Economic Crisis in Sri Lanka: Impact on Sri Lanka's Geopolitical Influence

From being a growing economy with successful export and tourism sectors, Sri Lanka was plunged into an economic and political crisis in 2022.<sup>78</sup> Due to unsustainable debt, the country declared bankruptcy and is currently awaiting IMF approval for a multibillion-dollar loan.<sup>79</sup> For a country that was once at the forefront of biodiversity and conservation efforts, it now needs to focus on more immediate economic concerns, such as debt restructuring.<sup>80</sup>

As one of the country's main creditors, China will likely leverage its position in this context. China has already financed several infrastructure projects in the IOR, including ports and roads, thereby exerting political influence in the region. Given Sri Lanka's dependence on Chinese finance

for structural projects, this may mean it would need to yield concessions that are antithetical to those of its nearest neighbor, India. A recent example of this was India's concerns about the docking of a Chinese ship at the Hambantota port.<sup>81</sup>

## The Emergence of the Quad in the Indo-Pacific Region: A Case for Including Sri Lanka and Other Island States

Historically, the Pacific and Indian Oceans were viewed as largely distinct strategic realms. South Asia and the Pacific region coexisted economically, politically, and militarily with the Indian Ocean. The two had a great degree of interaction. The establishment of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, often referred to as the Quad, among Australia, India, Japan, and the United States, demonstrates that participation in the Indo-Pacific is considered strategically important.<sup>82</sup> As a defense partnership manifested in joint military exercises, it is emerging as a key voice in discussions of territorial integrity in the current geopolitical scenario. Various middle powers—including Canada, France, the Netherlands, and Germany—have begun to formulate strategies to engage with the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>83</sup> The United Kingdom has gone a step further by publishing a nine-step action plan to engage with the Indo-Pacific on issues such as international trade and overseas aid.

However, the voices of Sri Lanka and island states in the IOR are overpowered by larger nation-states. Island states have their own challenges, such as mitigating climate change while balancing their sometimes-fragile economies. One such island state is the Maldives, which is similarly reliant on tourism when compared to Sri Lanka. However, tourism is also a sector that contributes significantly to global warming, which directly impacts the very existence of this island state. Therefore, Sri Lanka and other tiny island states in the IOR must manage their numerous partnerships with larger powers appropriately, genuinely, and in a paradigmatic manner to maintain maritime aspirations in the IOR.

## Conclusion

Sri Lanka's geopolitical maneuvering in the Indo-Pacific exemplifies the delicate balance small states must strike amid great-power competition.

This paper has demonstrated that, despite systemic power asymmetries, Sri Lanka exercises significant agency through strategic hedging, multilateral engagements, and identity-driven diplomacy. By leveraging its strategic location at the crossroads of vital maritime routes, Colombo has navigated complex relationships with major powers like China, India, and the United States, while amplifying its voice through regional frameworks such as the IORA. The comparative analysis with the Maldives and Seychelles further underscores that small island states, though constrained by economic dependencies and security vulnerabilities, can shape regional dynamics through adaptive diplomacy and collective bargaining.

Theoretically, this study advances small-state geopolitics by integrating realist frameworks, such as Shelter Theory and Balance of Power, with constructivist perspectives that emphasize identity and norm entrepreneurship. Sri Lanka's use of its Buddhist heritage as soft power and its leadership in multilateral forums illustrate how ideational factors complement material strategies, challenging deterministic narratives that portray small states as passive actors. However, the 2022 economic crisis and ongoing debt challenges, particularly with China's BRI investments, highlight the limits of this agency, as external pressures often constrain Colombo's strategic autonomy.

For policymakers, the findings suggest that Sri Lanka should prioritize diversifying economic partnerships to reduce reliance on single powers, strengthen its leadership in IORA to advocate for small-state interests, and deepen domestic consensus on foreign policy to enhance resilience. Larger powers, including Quad members, should engage small states like Sri Lanka as active partners rather than geopolitical pawns, fostering inclusive frameworks that address their economic and environmental vulnerabilities, such as climate change. The exclusion of island states from strategic dialogues like the Quad risks marginalizing their voices and undermining regional stability.

## Endnotes

- 
- <sup>1</sup> Alyson JK Bailes, Jean-Marc Rickli, and Baldur Thorhallsson, "Small states, survival and strategy," *Small states and international security: Europe and beyond* (2014): 26-45.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>3</sup> Jayan, P.A. 2013. "BRICS: Advancing Cooperation and Strengthening Regionalism." *India Quarterly* L A Journal of International Affairs, Vol. 68 (4) 363-384. Michael, Arndt. 2013. "Regional Multilateralism in South Asia." In *India's Foreign Policy and Regional Multilateralism*, by Arndt Michael, 48-112. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- <sup>4</sup> Michalski, Anna, Douglas Brommesson, and Ann-Marie Ekengren. 2024. "Small states and the dilemma of geopolitics: role change in Finland and Sweden." *International Affairs*, Vol. 100 (1) 139-157.
- <sup>5</sup> Abeyagoonasekera, Asanga. 2021. "Sri Lanka's Foreign Policy: Past, Present, and Future: Infrastructure Diplomacy and Contemporary Chinese Affairs." In *Routledge Handbook on South Asian Foreign Policy*, by Aparna Pande, 1-14. London: Routledge.
- <sup>6</sup> Pedersen, Rasmus. 2023. "Small states shelter diplomacy: Balancing costs of entrapment and abandonment in the alliance dilemma." *Cooperation and Conflict*, Vol. 58 (4) 441-459.
- <sup>7</sup> Waltz in S. Telbami, "Kenneth Waltz, Neoliberalism and Foreign Policy," *Security Studies*, Vol. 11 (3) (2002): 158-170.
- <sup>8</sup> Cheng-Chwee Kuik, "Shade of grey: Riskification and hedging in the Indo-Pacific," *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 36 (6) (2023): 1181-1214.
- <sup>9</sup> Christopher S. Browning, "Geostrategies, geopolitics and ontological security in the Eastern neighbourhood: The European Union and the 'new Cold War,'" *Political Geography*, Vol. 62 (2018): 106-115.
- <sup>10</sup> Lukas Maximilian Muller and Mark Beeson, "From Collective Security to the Construction of Regional Security Communities: Regional Security Governance in a Global Context," in *Handbook on Global Governance and Regionalism*, by Jurgen Ruland and Astrid Carrapatoso, (2022): 307-322.
- <sup>11</sup> Jack T. Lee, "Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy: Emerging Education Hubs in Asia," *Comparative Education*, Vol. 51 (3) (2015): 353-374.
- <sup>12</sup> Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, Steven E. Lobell, and Norrin M. Ripsman, "Introduction," in *The Realism Reader*, by Colin Elman and Michael Jensen, (2014): 1-6.
- <sup>13</sup> Chiyuki Aoi, "The Indo-Pacific, Geopolitics, and Strategic Communications: Construction of the Indo-Pacific," *Defence Strategic Communications*, Issue No. 14 (2024): 1-42.
- <sup>14</sup> R. James Ferguson, "Non-Traditional Security Dilemmas on the Belt and Road," *ISA Asia-Pacific Conference 2019: Asia-Pacific and World Order: Security, Economics, Identity and Beyond*, (2019): 1-24.
- <sup>15</sup> Muhammad Atif and Dr. Muqarrab Akbar, "The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) vs. Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad): A Perspective of a Game Theory," *Journal of Development and Social Sciences* (2021): 63-75.
- <sup>16</sup> Christian Wirth, "Filling the Void: The Asia-Pacific Problem of Order and Emerging Indo-Pacific Regional Multilateralism," *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 43 (2) (2022): 213-242.
- <sup>17</sup> Jose Miguel Alonso Trabanco, "Reformulating New Zealand's Grand Strategy," *New Zealand International Review*, Vol. 48 (2) (2023): 11-14.
- <sup>18</sup> Asanga Abeyagoonasekera, "Sri Lanka's Foreign Policy: Past, Present, and Future: Infrastructure Diplomacy and Contemporary Chinese Affairs," in *Routledge Handbook on South Asian Foreign Policy*, by Aparna Pande, (2021): 1-14.
- <sup>19</sup> Archer, C., Bailes, A., & Wivel, A. (Eds.). (2014). *Small states and international security: Europe and beyond* (1st ed.). Routledge.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315798042>

- <sup>20</sup> Baldacchino, G. (Ed.). (2023). *The success of small states in international relations: Mice that roar?* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003314745>
- <sup>21</sup> Long, T., & Long, T. S. (2022). *A small state's guide to influence in world politics*. Oxford University Press.
- <sup>22</sup> Asantha Senevirathna, "Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS): Challenges and Opportunities for Sri Lanka," in *Rebalancing Asia*, by Pramod Jaiswal and Deepak Prakash Bhatt (eds.), (2021): 181–192.
- <sup>23</sup> Kei Koga, "Japan's 'Indo-Pacific' question: Countering China or shaping a new regional order?," *International Affairs*, Vol. 96 (1) (2020): 49–73.
- <sup>24</sup> S. Janaka Biyanwila, "Lessons: Demilitarisation, Development and Democracy," in *Debt Crisis and Popular Social Protest in Sri Lanka: Citizenship, Development and Democracy Within Global North–South Dynamics (Diverse Perspectives on Creating a Fairer Society)*, by S. Janaka Biyanwila, (2023): 181–194.
- <sup>25</sup> Captain (Dr) Gurpreet S. Khurana, "Multilateral Structures in the Indian Ocean: Review and Way Ahead," *Maritime Affairs: Journal of the National Maritime Foundation of India*, Vol. 14 (1) (2018): 11–23.
- <sup>26</sup> Alexi LeFevre, "Anti-Colonial Discourse as Geopolitics: Expanding International Relations Theory," *Jindal Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 10 (2) (2022): 1–20.
- <sup>27</sup> Lammuanisiam Gangte, "The Debt-Trap Diplomacy Revisited: A Case Study on Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port," *Artha- Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol. 19 (2) (2020): 53–66.
- <sup>28</sup> Nilanthi Samaranyake, "Are Sri Lanka's Relations with China Deepening? An Analysis of Economic, Military, and Diplomatic Data," *Asian Security*, Vol. 7 (2) (2011): 119–146.
- <sup>29</sup> Shruti Pathania, "How China is Under-Developing Asia: The Case of Sri Lanka-Debt Trap and Diplomacy," *International Journal of Law Management and Humanities*, Vol. 5 (6) (2022): 1431–1437.
- <sup>30</sup> Nawalage S. Cooray, Upul Premarathna, Keerthi Sri Senarathna Atapaththu, and Tilak Priyadarshana, "Development and Challenges of Indian Ocean Blue Economy and Opportunities for Sri Lanka," in *Global Blue Economy*, by Md. Nazrul Islam and Steven M. Bartell (eds.), (2022): 1–37.
- <sup>31</sup> Amit Ranjan and Chulanee Attanayake, "The Bay of Bengal in the Evolving Indo-Pacific Debate," *Australian Journal of Maritime & Ocean Affairs*, Vol. 16 (3) (2024): 285–291.
- <sup>32</sup> Alyson J. K. Bailes, Bradley A. Thayer, and Baldur Thorhallsson, "Alliance Theory and Alliance 'Shelter': The Complexities of Small State Alliance Behaviour," *Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal* Vol. 1 (1) (2016): 9–26. doi:10.1080/23802014.2016.1189806.
- <sup>33</sup> International Monetary Fund. (2023, March 20). *IMF Executive Board approves US\$3 billion under the new Extended Fund Facility (EFF) arrangement for Sri Lanka* (Press Release No. 23/79). <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2023/03/20/pr2379-imf-executive-board-approves-under-the-new-eff-arrangement-for-sri-lanka>
- <sup>34</sup> E. M. S. Niou and P. C. Ordeshook, "A Theory of the Balance of Power in International Systems," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 30 (4) (1986): 685–715. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002786030004005>.
- <sup>35</sup> Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, "Power and Interdependence Revisited," *International Organization*, Vol. 41 (4) (1987): 725–753. doi:10.1017/S0020818300027661.
- <sup>36</sup> Rebecca Pedi and Anders Wivel, "The Power (Politics) of the Weak Revisited: Realism and the Study of Small-State Foreign Policy," in *Agency, Security and Governance of Small States*, edited by Thomas Kolnberger and Harlan Koff, (London: Routledge, 2023): eBook ISBN 9781003356011. doi:<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003356011>.
- <sup>37</sup> Alyson J. K. Bailes, Bradley A. Thayer, and Baldur Thorhallsson, "Alliance Theory and Alliance 'Shelter': The Complexities of Small State Alliance Behaviour," *Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal* Vol. 1 (1) (2016): 9–26. doi:10.1080/23802014.2016.1189806.

- <sup>38</sup> Nick Bisley and Andrew Phillips, "Rebalance to Where?: US Strategic Geography in Asia," *Survival*, Vol. 55 (5) (2013): 95–114. doi:10.1080/00396338.2013.841811.
- <sup>39</sup> Gz. MeeNilankco Theiventhran, "Energy as a Geopolitical Battleground in Sri Lanka," *Asian Geographer*, Vol. 41 (1) (2024): 21–45.
- <sup>40</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, "Anarchy and the Struggle for Power," in *The Realism Reader*, by Colin Elman and Michael Jensen, (2014): 1–9.
- <sup>41</sup> Captain (Dr) Gurpreet S. Khurana, "Multilateral Structures in the Indian Ocean: Review and Way Ahead," *Maritime Affairs: Journal of the National Maritime Foundation of India*, Vol. 14 (1) (2018): 11–23.
- <sup>42</sup> Paolo Pizzolo and Stefano Pelaggi, "Small Powers in the Indo-Pacific: Strategies, Opportunities, and Challenges," in *Handbook of Indo-Pacific Studies*, by Barbara Kratuik et al., (2023): 440–458.
- <sup>43</sup> Pizzolo, P., & Pelaggi, S. (2023). Small powers in the Indo-Pacific: Strategies, opportunities and challenges. In B. Kratuik, J. Van den Bosch, A. Jaskólska, & Y. Sato (Eds.), *Handbook of Indo-Pacific studies* (1st ed., pp. 19–?). Routledge India. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003336143>
- <sup>44</sup> R.U. Zaman, "Bangladesh's Quest for Development and the Sino-Indian Contestation," in *Crossing the Himalayas: Contributions to International Relations*, by N. Peng et al. (eds.), (2022): 133–155.
- <sup>45</sup> S. Yan, J.A. Karunaratne, L. Wang, X. Huang, and N.T. Fernando, "Institutional Advantages and Challenges of Chinese Outbound Direct Investment in South Asia," *Sri Lankan Journal of Banking and Finance* (2023): 41–59.
- <sup>46</sup> Alexander Wendt, "The Social Construction of Power Politics," in *Security Studies: A Reader*, edited by Christopher W. Hughes and Yew Meng Lai, (London: Routledge, 2011): eBook ISBN 9780203422144.
- <sup>47</sup> Sandya Nishanthi Gunasekara, "Bandwagoning, Balancing, and Small States: A Case of Sri Lanka," *Asian Social Science*, Vol. 11 (28) (2015): 212–220.
- <sup>48</sup> Aristotle Kallis, "Populism, Sovereigntism, and the Unlikely Re-Emergence of the Territorial Nation-State," *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol. 11 (2018): 285–302.
- <sup>49</sup> Cristina G. Stefan, "The Responsibility to Protect: Locating Norm Entrepreneurship," *Ethics & International Affairs*, Vol. 35 (2) (2021): 197–211.
- <sup>50</sup> Kornely Kakachia and Salome Minesashvili, "Identity politics: Exploring Georgian foreign policy behavior," *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, Vol. 6 (2) (2015): 171–180.
- <sup>51</sup> Sanket Kumar Prajapati, "Emerging Era of Minilateralism in Indo-Pacific," *SSRN*, (June 30, 2023): Available at <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4496884> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4496884>.
- <sup>52</sup> Ryan Mitra, "Why the Quad Is Not NATO: The Indo-American Impediments to Its Intergovernmental Structure," *India Review*, Vol. 22 (4) (2023): 463–484. doi:10.1080/14736489.2023.2236466.
- <sup>53</sup> Abhishek Mishra and Satyajit Sen, "Maritime Security and Development in the South-West Indian Ocean Region: Harnessing India's Engagement with Small Island Developing States," *ORF Occasional Paper No. 353*, April 2022, Observer Research Foundation.
- <sup>54</sup> Harsh.V. Pant, "China's Expanding Footprint in the Indian Ocean Region and the Indian Pushback," in *India's Foreign Policy and Economic Challenges*, by S. Beretta, A. Berkofsky, and G. Iannini (eds), *Global Power Shift*, (Cham: Springer, 2023): [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-20270-4\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-20270-4_7).
- <sup>55</sup> Uttara Umesh M and Aishwarya Sreenivas, "India-China Geopolitical Tensions: Strategic and National Security Implications with respect to Maldives," *Peninsula Journal of Strategy and Policy*, Vol. 1 (1) (2024): <https://pjsp.org.in/index.php/pjsp/article/view/71>.
- <sup>56</sup> Raghvendra Kumar, "Navigating Non-Traditional Security Threats in the Western Indian Ocean Region: Role of India's Defence and Security Cooperation with East African Island States," *Journal of Defence Studies*, Vol. 17 (3) (July–September 2023): 214–243, ISSN 0976-1004 (print); 2583-7567 (online).

- 
- <sup>57</sup> A. Marie and C. Bueger, “Seychelles: Island Solutions and Capacity Building Successes,” in *Capacity Building for Maritime Security*, by C. Bueger, T. Edmunds, and R. McCabe (eds), (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021): [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-50064-1\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-50064-1_8).
- <sup>58</sup> Thomas Wilkins, “Middle Power Hedging in the Era of Security/Economic Disconnect: Australia, Japan, and the ‘Special Strategic Partnership,’” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 23 (1) (January 2023): 93–127. <https://doi.org/10.1093/irap/lcab023>.
- <sup>59</sup> New norma in the Indo- Pacific: Sino- Indian Maritime security dilemma, 2015 Koh Swee Lean Collin
- <sup>60</sup> Kate Sullivan de Estrada, “India and Order Transition in the Indo-Pacific: Resisting the Quad as a ‘Security Community,’” *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 36 (2) (2023): 378–405. doi:10.1080/09512748.2022.2160792
- <sup>61</sup> S. Maitra, “Locating Sri Lanka and Maldives in India’s Neighbourhood First Policy: Identifying Areas of Convergence and Concerns,” in *75 Years of India’s Foreign Policy*, by P.P. Basu and T. Arshed (eds), (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024): [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-97-6054-1\\_14](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-97-6054-1_14).
- <sup>62</sup> James A. Malcolm and Linganaden Murday, “Small Islands’ Understanding of Maritime Security: The Cases of Mauritius and Seychelles,” in *Indian Ocean Islands*, (2018).
- <sup>63</sup> R.P.B. Singh and P.S. Rana, “Cultural Diplomacy in India: Dispersal, Heritage Representation, Contestation, and Development,” in *Transcultural Diplomacy and International Law in Heritage Conservation*, by O. Niglio and E.Y.J. Lee (eds), (Singapore: Springer, 2021): [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-0309-9\\_15](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-0309-9_15).
- <sup>64</sup> M.N. Islam, S. Tamanna, M. Noman, A.R. Siemens, S.M.R. Islam, and M.S. Islam, “Climate Change Diplomacy, Adaptation, and Mitigation Strategies in South Asian Countries: A Critical Review,” in *India II: Climate Change Impacts, Mitigation and Adaptation in Developing Countries*, by M.N. Islam and A.v. Amstel (eds), Springer Climate, (Cham: Springer, 2022): [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-94395-0\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-94395-0_1).
- <sup>65</sup> Lisa Otto, “Exploring Maritime Diplomacy of Small Island Developing States in Africa: Cases of Mauritius and Seychelles,” *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, Vol. 18 (2) (2022): 133–148. doi:10.1080/19480881.2022.2111049.
- <sup>66</sup> Sara Caria, “Cooperation Regimes and Hegemonic Struggle: Opportunities and Challenges for Developing Countries,” *Politics and Governance*, Vol. 10 (2) (2022): 71–81. ISSN: 2183-2463.
- <sup>67</sup> Alyson JK Bailes, Jean-Marc Rickli, and Baldur Thorhallsson, “Small states, survival and strategy,” *Small states and international security: Europe and beyond* (2014): 26–45.
- <sup>68</sup> Baldur Thorhallsson, Sverrir Steinsson and Thorsteinn Kristinsson, “Part I: Small States and Shelter Theory” in *Small States and Shelter Theory: Iceland’s External Affairs*, ed. Baldur Thorhallsson, (New York: Routledge, 2019).
- <sup>69</sup> Yang Wei, “Admiral Zheng He’s Voyages to the ‘West Oceans,’” *Maritime Asia*, Fall 2020, <https://www.asianstudies.org/publications/ea/archives/admiral-zheng-hes-voyages-to-the-west-oceans/>.
- <sup>70</sup> Kenichi Ohmae, *The Borderless World: Power and Strategy in the Interlinked Economy*, (USA: McKinsey & Company, 1990); and Kenichi Ohmae, *The End of the Nation State: The Rise of Regional Economies*, (USA: Free Press, 1995).
- <sup>71</sup> Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, (New York, 1948).
- <sup>72</sup> Soroush Aliasgary and Marin Ekstrom, “Chabahar Port and Iran’s Strategic Balancing With China and India,” *The Diplomat*, October 21 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/10/chabahar-port-and-irans-strategic-balancing-with-china-and-india/>.
- <sup>73</sup> Anilesh S Mahajan, “India’s Chabahar vs China’s Gwadar: New Delhi plays tic-tac-toe with Beijing,” *Business Today*, December 3, 2017, <https://www.businesstoday.in/latest/story/india-spread-its-influence-asia-counter->

- china-deendayal-port-trust-chabahar-port-china-pakistan-economic-corridor-india-china-relation-india-pakistan-90015-2017-11-21.
- <sup>74</sup> Namita Singh, "China is a 'predator,' Pompeo tells Sri Lanka on tour of Asian nations," *The Independent*, October 29, 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/mike-pompeo-china-predator-sri-lanka-trump-b1418930.html>.
- <sup>75</sup> Daily Mirror, "Not interested in 'AlienVsPredator game invitation': China to Pompeo," October 29, 2020, [https://www.dailymirror.lk/print/front\\_page/Not-interested-in-AlienVsPredator-game-invitation-China-to-Pompeo/238-198871](https://www.dailymirror.lk/print/front_page/Not-interested-in-AlienVsPredator-game-invitation-China-to-Pompeo/238-198871).
- <sup>76</sup> Ministry of External Affairs: Government of India, "4th NSA Level Meeting on Trilateral Maritime Security Cooperation," November 26, 2020, [https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/33238/4th\\_NSA\\_Level\\_Meeting\\_on\\_Trilateral\\_Maritime\\_Security\\_Cooperation](https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/33238/4th_NSA_Level_Meeting_on_Trilateral_Maritime_Security_Cooperation).
- <sup>77</sup> Baldur Thorhallsson and Sverrir Steinsson, "The Theory of Shelter," *Small States and the New Security Environment Conference*, Reykjavik, 26 June 2018.
- <sup>78</sup> "World Tourism Organization," 2024, accessed November 24, 2024, <https://www.unwto.org/tourism-statistics>.
- <sup>79</sup> Alexis Carey, "'Collapsed': Sri Lankan Prime Minister declares nation now bankrupt," *News.Com.Au*, 2022, accessed December 10, 2024, <https://www.news.com.au/finance/economy/world-economy/collapsed-sri-lankan-prime-minister-declares-nation-now-bankrupt/news-story/4036098a1771187562f81864146ee308>.
- <sup>80</sup> "Sri Lanka Mangrove Conservation Project Sri Lanka" (United Nations Climate Change, 2023), accessed November 10, 2024, <https://unfccc.int/climate-action/momentum-for-change/planetary-health/sri-lanka-mangrove-conservation-project>.
- <sup>81</sup> Et Online, "Chinese high-tech ship leaves Sri Lanka's Hambantota port," *The Economic Times*, August 22, 2022, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/chinese-high-tech-ship-leaves-sri-lankas-hambantota-port/articleshow/93710614.cms>.
- <sup>82</sup> Office of the Spokesperson. "Joint Statement on Quad Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific," *US Department of State*, February 11, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-quad-cooperation-in-the-indo-pacific/>.
- <sup>83</sup> Anirudh Bhattacharya, "Canada joins Quad joint naval exercise in Pacific Ocean," *Hindustan Times*, January 25 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/canada-to-join-quad-joint-naval-exercise-in-pacific-ocean-101611556512917.html>; Ministère de l'Europe et Affaires Etrangères, "The Indo-Pacific region: a priority for France," accessed May 10 2022, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/asia-and-oceania/the-indo-pacific-region-a-priority-for-france/>; Government of the Netherlands, "Indo-Pacific: Guidelines for strengthening Dutch and EU cooperation with partners in Asia," November 13 2020, <https://www.government.nl/documents/publications/2020/11/13/indo-pacific-guidelines>; and Ulatowski, Rafał, "Germany in the Indo-Pacific region: strengthening the liberal order and regional security," *International Affairs*, 98, no. 2 (2022): 383-402.