

From Maritime Blindness to Maritime Awareness: The Role of BRI and MSR in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

The problem of maritime blindness has long characterized the postcolonial world, where internal conflicts and limited resources have made these countries neglect their maritime spaces, which are critical for trade, connectivity, and strategic depth. This has resulted in the under-appreciation of maritime spaces despite their geographic, economic, or geopolitical importance, making them pawns in other geopolitical imagining and engineering.

In the 21st century, China's rise through its global connectivity project of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Maritime Silk Road (MSR) has invited praise and apprehension. While the initiative promises to create sustainable infrastructure across the globe and improve connectivity by rejuvenating the old nostalgia of the Silk Route and heritage politics, this project is often accused of debt-trap diplomacy. The over-dependency on Chinese loans threatens the sovereignty and exerts undue geopolitical influence on the recipient country. Yet despite this, countries continue to accept Chinese loans to boost their maritime infrastructure, trade, and security. This ambitious Chinese project has been instrumental in reshaping maritime geographies, particularly by investing in the neglected spaces and the "void" left by the government.

China's BRI offers an intriguing lens through which to examine whether this blindness is being addressed or reconfigured. This paper investigates and aims to explore whether the initiative has contributed to a deepened maritime consciousness, maritime capabilities, institutional reform, and advanced sustainable maritime development, or whether it has produced a new form of maritime dependency anchored in geopolitical interests. The paper analyses the case of Sri Lanka, as it is central to the Indian Ocean, and a key Global South country with huge debts to China.

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Introduction

The 21st century is marked by the rise and return of the dragon, overcoming its humiliating defeat at the hands of the colonizers. The dragon, i.e., China, has designed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) to advance their reach and influence in distant lands through a series of connectivity projects like roads, railways, ports, pipelines, telecommunication, and infrastructure developments. These investments aim to advance China's dreams, including advancing influence over maritime chokepoints, straits, and trade by building naval bases, artificial islands, aircraft carriers, strengthening its commercial and military fleet, and building infrastructure. This is used to lure countries under its geopolitical influence and create a civilizational, financial, security, and institutional alternative to the contemporary Anglo-American hegemonic system (Albert, 2018; Popescu, 2024).

Today, China remains a globally connected, empowered, and capable country. They overcame their colonial humiliation not through ignorance or victimhood but because they could invest in their own strategic geography, both borders and maritime, reconnect with global trade networks, and build institutional and infrastructural maritime strength. The MSR has particularly transitioned China from a humiliated semi-colony to a formidable maritime power. This became possible due to its calculated policy planning, long-term investments in seapower, and a vision that aligns oceanic spaces into strategic assets that advance national development and global influence (Wei & Ahmed, 2015)

However, this is not a luxury experienced by most formerly colonized states. These postcolonial countries remain trapped in continental thinking, surrounded by land-centric concerns such as border conflicts, regime crises, interventions, resource limitations, etc (Bouchard & Crumplin, 2010; Lekunze, 2022). Consequently, despite extensive coastlines, strategic locations, and access to vital sea lanes, maritime spaces and security concerns are largely neglected. Oceans become invisible in policy and public imagination, highlighting historical and institutional failure to integrate maritime vision into national priorities. This phenomenon is called "sea blindness" or maritime blindness (Learschi, 2023). This prevents them from being active players in the maritime domain despite having favourable maritime geographies.

The Chinese market views the BRI and the MSR as a win-win cooperation between countries. They present this project as a project that belongs to the whole world, where the entire world benefits and builds a global community of shared future (The Third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, 2023). It presents itself not only as a development partner but also as a geopolitical actor shaping the future of maritime connectivity in the Global South. The Global South remains one of China's biggest partners in these projects, lured by its promising investments. Under these circumstances, could China's win-win cooperation help the Global South overcome its maritime blindness?

Sri Lanka, a pivotal island country in the Indian Ocean region (IOR), has long failed to integrate the maritime spaces in its national development agenda. It is one of China's leading maritime partners of the MSR in the IOR. Under these circumstances, could the MSR help Sri Lanka overcome its maritime blindness and help advance its maritime priorities?

This paper investigates this. To do this, the paper investigates the developing countries' interests in oceans and how colonialism changed their maritime priorities. It then explores the MSR and presents the compelling case of Sri Lanka to assess whether the MSR, through its infrastructure and capacity-building, has finally been able to address the maritime blindness and systemic neglect of maritime priorities of the developing countries and build their capacities. Sri Lanka is an intriguing case, as this country has been held as a victim of China's debt-trap diplomacy. However, the island continues to expand its maritime relationship with China. A qualitative case-study-based methodology shall be utilized to investigate this. A wide range of secondary sources shall be used to gain insights. This includes many policy reports, academic literature, official documents, etc. Both contextual analysis and triangulation of documents shall be employed for analysis.

What does the Ocean mean to the developing world?

Oceans are the reservoir of vast biotic and abiotic resources like fish, lobsters, seaweeds, oil, natural gas, nickel, copper, gold, etc., which are rich sources of nutrients and of high commercial value. It helps in connecting distant lands. As a result, countries have moved from land-grabbing to ocean-grabbing to control the blue resources, sustain their economies, and ensure connectivity (Barbesgaard, 2018; United Nations Environment Programme, 2024). It stabilises the climate, influences monsoons, and absorbs CO₂, which is necessary to support the developing world's agricultural and disaster vulnerability profiles. It provides livelihood

opportunities, supports aquaculture, and is also a source of energy. As it is a significant source of food, energy, medicine, and jobs, it becomes the key to sustainable development and growth (Solberg, 2019).

While the Ocean provides resources for all, the differing capacities between the Global North and the Global South have resulted in unequal access and utilisation of resources. Moreover, the Global North has an asymmetric normative edge over the Global South. Countries from the Global North view the sea as a means for expanding capitalist influence for trade. They consider the Ocean a strategic space to control and enhance maritime security, military dominance, and geopolitical influence (Russell, 2006). They have historically used this route for wealth accumulation, industrialization, technological advancements, and gaining knowledge through technological and research advancements (Blachford, 2022). Clark and Cisneros-Montemayor (2024) hold that the colonial roots are responsible for this asymmetric access and appropriation of the Ocean. They hold that maritime spaces were historically used for colonial expansion and resource extraction. Through this foreign control over indigenous coastal and island communities, and the growth of the plantation economy, natural economic models were disturbed, devastating local communities and ecosystems. They lack technological infrastructure, political will, investment in naval capacity, maritime domain awareness, and financial capital to invest in maritime surveillance, deep-sea mining, sustainable fisheries, or green shipping. Moreover, even after decolonisation, African countries lack the capacity to control their own waters. While partly the reason is the land conflicts and the rare use of the sea strategically in inter-state conflicts, the external powers' presence in the African waters through military exercises, naval bases, or capacity building reveals Africa's vulnerability to neo-colonial maritime control. Moreover, their inability to deny these external countries access during conflicts further raises their vulnerability and colonial legacies (Lekunze, 2022).

This unequal access has also manifested themselves in the governance mechanisms of the Ocean, where the Global North leads international maritime governance, sets norms like freedom of the sea, etc., and uses a utilitarian and scientific lens to encourage sustainable exploitation and governance (Borschberg, 2006, cited in Blachford, 2022). The developing nations often find themselves marginalised from agenda-setting processes despite being among the most dependent on ocean resources. Stojanovic and Farmer (2013) argue that the demarcation of the Ocean through spatial control and jurisdiction has been the essence of ocean

colonialism, going beyond the traditional concept of resource control. Ocean spaces are more colonised through structures on the sea via ports, energy infrastructure, aquaculture, open-access global commons, and expansion of human activity into deep-sea zones.

For the Global South, the sea is a source of survival for food security, poverty reduction, and livelihood security (United Nations, 2023; Chaturvedi, 2022). They consider the Ocean a domain for asserting sovereignty, self-reliance, and empowerment. While the United Nations Law of the Sea provides the legal framework for oceans for all countries, it also gives an asymmetric advantage to the developed world and corporations. For instance, the developing world has condemned the “open-access”. This is because they fear that the Global North will have an edge in accessing resources due to the lack of technical capacities and financial backing, leading to privatization and enclosure of the commons. As a result, they demand Exclusive Economic Rights debates to protect their resources at least within their territorial jurisdiction (Neher, Arnason, and Mollet, 1989, cited in Barbesgaard, 2018; Campling and Colas, 2018). Moreover, Article 62 of the UNCLOS permits foreign states to access the resources of coastal states, provided “the coastal State cannot harvest the entire allowable catch” and has a “surplus” of living resources within its EEZs (sic)” (Burke, n.d.). Countries can license and enter into contracts and agreements to access this. As most developing countries have limited capacity and financial wealth, most developing countries rely on selling rather than building capacity, leading to “wealth blindness”. A similar case can be seen when the developing world argued for a fully public seabed mining model. The developed world, however, favoured private sector participation. Though the resultant model had features of both, it unequally benefits the technologically advanced and economically powerful states, including the state-sponsored corporations (Feichtner & Ginzky, 2024). This results in wealth blindness, whereby the developing countries, due to the lack of technology, skills, and knowledge, are deprived of appreciating the economic value of their marine resources and the untapped opportunities of the maritime sphere (Tiller, De Santo, Mendenhall, Nyman, and Ralby, 2020). Moreover, this lack of capacity may further add to the “maritime blindness” due to their incapacity and “general ignorance about maritime strategic and security issues associated with the ocean commons” (Dunne, 2013, p. 2). This produces a disparity in the Global South countries’ ability to ensure maritime security, resource extraction, and ocean governance.

Colonialism, West-led Institutions, and Search for Alternatives

While technological and knowledge disparity play a prominent role, colonial roots cannot be neglected for the wealth blindness and maritime blindness of developing countries. The arrival of the colonizers reconstituted political space, reshaping economic exchanges, human mobility, and interactions (Pretholdt, 2015). They reorganised the maritime “space to their own advantage” (Davies, 2023, p.58). Winder (2009, p. 186) notes that imperial practices, discourses, power relations, and collaborations shaped both colonizers and the colonized. This influenced them in complex and lasting ways. For the colonised, this led to the gradual delegitimization of the indigenous maritime practices and knowledge system and the systematic erasure of precolonial maritime consciousness. These collaborations led to the gradual acceptance of the modernised practices and spaces by the colonised, introducing political imaginations of the ocean space.

Upon decolonization, the spatial divisions and interactions were reconceptualized with colonial boundaries, with the reclamation of their rights and land, primarily organized around race and ethnicity threads. The newly decolonised countries inherited the colonial visions of territoriality that were more inward-looking, aiming to consolidate territorial sovereignty rather than restore regional maritime linkages. They took a continental turn rather than an oceanic vision. Many countries ripped off their historical maritime linkages as they opted to consolidate their territorial borders, limiting their geopolitical imaginaries to the land only. Moreover, they devalued oceanic engagements and traditions once central to their trade, cultural exchange, and mobility. They saw these traditions as incompatible with the modern nation-state building. For instance, Zanzibar banned sailing vessels that had docked at an Arab port from entering Zanzibar in the preceding year, restricting historical maritime linkages (Pretholdt, 2015; Ranganathan, 2021).

Moreover, these newly decolonized countries encountered numerous border conflicts and fragile institutions. This directed national attention toward continental rather than maritime concerns. Political imaginaries became landlocked as they suffered from secessionism and civil wars, which diverted their investment in their navies, limiting their capacity to deal with the rising maritime security threats and their ability to explore their maritime region. Due to their focus on land-based threats, these countries have long neglected the maritime sector. As a result, what were once transregional maritime networks were now replaced with port infrastructures that supported extractive economies, essentially mimicking the colonial pattern.

Furthermore, tweak infrastructure, limited technology, and insufficient technical knowledge constrain their ability to govern maritime spaces (Okafor-Yarwood, Eastwood, Chikowore, & de Oliveira Paes, 2024). For instance, India, China, etc., became busy consolidating their internal boundaries such that it was only after globalization in the case of India and the U.S. presence in the Taiwan Strait in the case of China that both countries realized their maritime blindness and took reforms (Basu, 2023; Machaffie, 2020).

The oceanic sphere could not remain neglected for long. The onset of globalization and the end of the Cold War have introduced new threats like piracy, smuggling, etc (Larsen, 2024). Additionally, globalization made the oceans central for trade and growth. Moreover, they are vital sources of the Blue Economy (UN Trade and Development, 2025), helps reduce climate change, food and disaster vulnerability (Kenny, Bishop, & Lemire, 2021), and the revival of maritime cultures have turned developing countries' attention to the oceanic space. Additionally, in the sphere of intensifying geopolitical rivalries and maritime securitization, ocean consciousness is back in the strategic calculus of all countries (Turker, 2024). As a result, developing countries worldwide shifted their focus towards the Ocean. However, they lack the technology, resources, and finances to develop maritime infrastructure and ensure maritime security. This leads to insecurity.

Though they have taken loans over the years from the Bretton Woods institutions to enhance port modernization, these loans facilitated less trade and more debt, as in the case of the Ghana Ports Rehabilitation Project designed by the World Bank, which increased the debt of the country and forced the government to adopt the structural adjustment measure (World Bank, 1987). Moreover, as countries had to first fit into the conditions given by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) before receiving loans, it affected their economy further, like in the case of the revival project on the Maputo Corridor (Sequeira, Hartmann, and Kunaka, 2015); Tanzania Port Modernisation, 1990 (World Bank, 2022), etc. This was because these countries adopted a structural adjustment program that gave the private investors contracts, threatening the local investors (Sommer, 1999). Thus, due to the conditional nature of the loans and inclusion of private players, developing countries, despite being willing to modernize and expand their maritime infrastructure, faced several issues as international financial institutions imposed conditions, and several countries refused to provide aid. Developing countries resisted this by searching for “alternative modernities” and alternative institutions for growth, development, and transformation (Chakraborty, 2000, cited in Ashcroft, 2009). China thereby

designed the MSR as an alternative to encourage growth and development and reinvigorate the old historical maritime histories.

The BRI and MSR Alternative

In 2012, when Xi Jinping came to power, the global situation was filled with vulnerabilities and financial dependencies, increasing inequalities, and asymmetric relations among the countries. The international atmosphere was influenced by North-led agendas on cyberspace, migration, trade, etc., increasing discontent in the developing world. This led to resistance against globalization while requiring new drivers to recover from the global financial crisis. Taking advantage of this environment, China designed the BRI in response and aimed to resolve the three deficits that Xi (2017, cited in Dunford and Liu, 2019) argued the world suffered. These deficits include a deficit in peace, a deficit in development, and a deficit in governance.

The BRI aims to build a new model of inclusive development and to reshape the rules of international relations and global governance. It aims for win-win solutions through economic cooperation, trade, common development, and advanced people-to-people connectivity, achieving people's collective interests and aspirations worldwide. It seeks to undertake massive infrastructure development projects that shall aid in integrating the space while boosting trade, alleviating poverty, and mitigating climate change (Komakech and Ombati, 2023; Dunford and Liu, 2019). The BRI includes both land and sea components that aim to rejuvenate China's ancient trading routes with South Asia, Europe, and Africa. It differs from the Washington Consensus as it does not require countries to confine themselves to any standards like democracy, liberal order, human rights, etc., to avail of membership and loans (Smith, 2021, p. 2; Benabdallah, 2018).

The sea component or the Maritime Silk Route (MSR) is designed based on ancient nostalgia to use heritage to reignite old relationships and reconnect China to Asia. It aims to reinvigorate the image of China, which historically has been both a continental power and a maritime power connecting the East and South China Sea, reaching the Gulf and Europe via the Indian Ocean (Guan, 2016). Through this project, China aims to cultivate a regional integration narrative in Southeast and South Asia that places it at the center. It uses its civilizational heritage and ancient cultural and commercial interactions to design the present and criticize how the prosperity of the past has been hampered due to the colonial encounters and shifting of the

metropolis, leading to the abuses and injustices of these countries (Pozzi, 2022). China uses its past as a soft power tool to expand its influence and investments, aiming to rekindle the prosperity of earlier times with other countries.

The MSR aims to build a broad-scoped, multi-tiered, comprehensive, and all-dimensional Blue Partnership that aligns its goals with the Sustainable Development Goals by creating a connectivity project that fosters harmony between man and the Ocean through joint protection, management of marine resources, and marine welfare. It calls for an open, inclusive, multi-stakeholder governance system that aims for joint development and sharing benefits. This partnership is defined by commitments to green development, ocean-centered prosperity, maritime security, innovation-driven growth, and cooperative governance. Moreover, it aims to cooperate on issues like blue carbon, fisheries, climate change, etc. Additionally, China promises to upgrade technology and the marine industry, facilitate maritime transport, develop information networks, undertake joint rescue missions, navigate security, and innovate growth through technological transfer (The State Council, People's Republic of China, 2017). Through the MSR, China aims to develop a blue economy for itself and others (Zhang, Butt, Iqatish, and Zulfikar, 2023). Moreover, the MSR, by using emotional triggers of past relations and anti-colonial rhetoric, aims to rebuild ties that challenge the “outdated governance system” and “reform the current global governance system” by proposing an alternative solution to issues like security, development, and global governance of the developing countries (Benabdallah, 2021, p. 298).

However, despite the promised benefits, the U.S. and its allies have viewed this initiative skeptically. They have called this a “debt trap diplomacy” exemplified by China’s leasing of Sri Lanka’s Hambantota port for 99 years (Zhou, 2024), “opaque governance” due to the lack of transparency (Crabtree, 2019); “infrastructure white elephants” due to investment in projects that barely yields promised returns as seen in the case of Gwadar port and its employment promise (Gupta, 2022); “colonialism with Chinese characteristics” as it builds dependency relations (Kleven, 2019); “erosion of local autonomy” as construction of infrastructure projects has displaced and relocated local people and engaged in land-takeovers (Denng, 2021 cited in Rahman, Ishaq and Naeem, 2023); “strategic militarization” like bases for peacetime logistical support in Yemen, Oman and Djibouti, military bases for large warships such as in Pakistan and logistical support and docking of warships in Seychelles etc., affecting the sovereignty of these countries (China Defence Mashup, 2013 cited in Popescu, 2024). Additionally, this has

also caused substantial environmental risks due to the clearing of vast tracks of forests for railways, roads, and increased pollution due to fossil fuel usage, while over 265 threatened species were affected (Hilton, 2019, cited in Chiu, 2022; Teese, 2018). It is also responsible for several human rights violations (Desierto, 2024).

Under these circumstances, considering the contrast between the stated objectives and the critiques the MSR has provoked, this study now examines the case of Sri Lanka to assess how the MSR has helped to address maritime insecurities and blindness while developing its capabilities.

Case Study

Sri Lanka is located at the geostrategic gateway of the Indian Ocean through which the East meets the West. It is situated in the center of the Indian Ocean and is not a peripheral island. Having no land boundaries, it has since ancient times embraced a maritime orientation. In the past, it served as the cosmopolitan entrepôt for trade between East Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, South India, Southeast Asia, and China. Its ports like Mantai, Galle, and Trincomalee were the busiest centers where Arab, Chinese, Indian, and Malay merchants frequently docked. This led to many cultural exchanges among the Arab, Chinese, Indian, and Malay merchants. Trade flourished through the maritime route, where it exported cinnamon, ivory, gems, pearls, and elephants and imported luxury goods, ceramics, and textiles. This also served as the route for cultural and religious exchanges between the Romans, the Moors, Arabs, Indians, Chinese, etc. Buddhism flowed here to South East Asia (Attanayake, 2021). Ports like Gōkanna, Jambukolapattana, Godapavatha, Weligama, Uraturai (Kayts), Beruwala, Chilaw, Wattala, Negombo, and Panadura have ensured since the Iron Age (Tennakoon, 2025). It became central to the Spice and the Silk Routes. As per research, Dehigama (2021, cited in Tennakoon, 2025) reveals that as per the inscriptions from port cities, the foreign traders were protected from customs regulations. There were well-detailed import duties, trade regulations etc indicating a well-developed trade system. This allowed Sri Lanka to prosper as a hub of cultural, commercial, and spiritual exchanges. However, it continued to face the threat of pirates and military campaigns against the Burmese (Tennakoon, 2025).

However, the coming of the Empire dismantled these ancient networks. It further shifted the country from being the center of inter-regional linkages, and it transitioned to a resource extraction and strategic naval utility center, all for the Empire's advantage. It became a part of

imperial control, not cultural or economic exchange. While the Portuguese alliances with King Bhuvanekabahu VII monopolised the trade of cinnamon and pearls in the European market, the arrival of the Dutch and their monopoly through a formal treaty changed the trade scenario of Sri Lanka. “They restricted local merchants’ access to global markets, monopolising areca nut in 1670 and regulating pepper sales,” and also built coastal forts around the region (Tennakoon, 2025, p. 135). The coming of the British changed the entire dynamics, whereby the introduction of the plantation system disrupted the native economy. It progressively deteriorated the native agrarian economy, forcing them to grow only cash crops. It took acquiring land through The Crown Lands (encroachment) Ordinance No 12 of 1840, Registration of Temple Lands Ordinance No 10, and The Waste Lands Ordinance No 1 of 1897 to help the British to “large privately owned estates producing primary commodities for export to European markets” (Shanmugaratnam, 1981, p. 71). This ultimately transformed Sri Lanka from a multipolar trade into a node in unidirectional extraction for the European empires. British colonial policies emphasized land-based governance, leaving maritime sectors underdeveloped. With the Indian Ocean becoming a battleground during World War 2, as the Rome–Berlin–Tokyo Axis decided to disrupt trade in the Indian Ocean to fight against the Allies, Sri Lanka became a vital way for the Allies to keep the Axis power in check. Post-independence, Sri Lanka relied on its colonial masters for its protection, partnering with the British to keep India out (Attanayake, 2021).

The island, to avoid the same destiny as the Suez Canal crisis, took leadership in mobilizing countries in the UN to adopt the Indian Ocean as a “Zone of Peace” (United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, 1975). Though initially embracing its maritime identity, its identity began eroding as Sri Lanka took a nationalist turn, mimicking the colonial policies of divide and rule, as it consolidated benefits for the Sinhala only that led to the eruption of Tamil secessionism (Attanayake, 2021). This land-based nationalism and internal ethnic politics that dominated the state's imagination resulted in Sri Lanka neglecting its maritime identity.

As a consequence, Sri Lanka had to utilize its resources to battle out the threat of the Liberation Tamil Tigers Eelam (LTTE), neglecting the Ocean for a long time, leading to maritime blindness. Occupied by the War, Sri Lanka, for a long time, neglected the emerging threats of piracy, smuggling, trafficking, fishery crimes, etc. This diverted their resources from upgrading their technologies to utilize the EEZs, with illegal fishing by Indian fishers in its waters going undetected for years. Moreover, they banned fishing during the War as they feared it would

threaten the country's security, and they also deployed the navy for this purpose (Bueger, Edmunds, and McCabe, 2020; Majumber and Malhotra, 2020). Moreover, Sri Lanka had to partner with India to prevent the smuggling of weapons by the LTTE, reflecting the incapacity of Sri Lanka's navy (Gokhale, 2009). During this period, investments in Sri Lanka's trade and maritime infrastructure declined, leading to trade disruption and delayed modernization of its ports, technology, and personnel, contributing to its maritime blindness.

Only after the War did Sri Lanka focus on rebuilding their maritime identity. While they realised the importance of their position in the Indian Ocean, they also realized they lacked the capacity. During the War, the navy could not stop the "supplies by sea using both small boats and big ocean-going vessels" and acted defensively (Balachandran, 2022). Furthermore, Josph (2017) highlighted that the Sri Lankan navy has limited surveillance capabilities, allowing illegal activities to occur within its zone. Moreover, they still rely on technology and other countries' knowledge and power. Additionally, they lack submarines in their naval fleets. Moreover, their port infrastructure remains out of date. As a result, they are finding ways to upgrade their maritime capabilities to enable quick responses to various security threats and access their own resources.

In 1998, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) approved providing Sri Lanka a USD 60 million loan to upgrade the Colombo Port. Unfortunately, the project was halted due to the ongoing War. It again requested a loan in 2001. However, it was met with rhetoric due to its human rights abuses. Moreover, this loan also came with strict market reform measures. As a result, the Asian Development Bank stepped in and became the project's primary funder (Rao, 2001; World Bank, 1997). Similarly, due to domestic political concerns, the U.S. and India denied their requests to construct the Hambantota Port. This was then again funded by China. Similarly, the 2009 IMF loan came with huge shame as the human rights activists argued against it (Tran, 2009). Similar instances can be further seen in the 2015 request, the Extended Fund Facility case, etc. These constant accusations and turn-downs by the West and allies and their institutions have placed Sri Lanka in the "waiting room" for loans and development (Chakraborty, 2000). This made them look for alternative partnerships and gradually embrace the China option (Himmer and Rod, 2023).

China was a partner that did not intervene internally or with political or human rights strings attached. They behaved perfectly business-likely, making China an attractive option and Chinese-led institutions an attractive case. Moreover, it often shielded China and Sri Lanka

from Western-sponsored accountability efforts at the UN Security Council. It provided development assistance whenever the West and its allies turned their backs (Wheeler, 2012). The partnership started in 1950 when it officially recognised China, signed the Rice-Rubber Pact in 1952, and bloomed with the onset of the BRI. Sri Lanka welcomed Chinese investments and officially joined BRI and MSR in 2014, with China overtaking India as Sri Lanka's leading trading partner (Attanayake & Ren, 2021). Since then, China has invested in several projects like Southern and Central Expressways, Hambantota Port, Mattala International Airport, Norocholai Energy Plant, Colombo Port City Project, the Lotus Tower, CICT Colombo Terminal, the Kandy North Pathadumbara water supply project, etc. China has also invested in soft power exchanges like tourism, cultural, military, and education exchanges (Wignaraja, Panditaratne, Kannangara and Hundlani, 2020).

Additionally, it has invested in 13 Diesel Engines for Railways, Hambantota Bunkering Facility, Rock Removal in Hambantota Port, Northern Power Sector Procurement, Southern Expressway, etc. Moreover, the China Merchants Group invested \$500 million in a container terminal at Colombo Port. Additionally, China was granted an oil exploration contract, along with India, in 2006 (Wheeler, 2012). It also led to Projects like the Panadura Fisheries Harbour Breakwater. Sri Lanka has also signed the General Administration of Customs of China (GACC) for better trade terms on marine products (Global Times, 2024). Under its MSR vision, China collaborates with the Sri Lankan government to work on scientific research on fish and aquaculture development (The Economic Times, 2023).

How does it help Sri Lanka?

Sri Lanka represents a typical case of having it all yet unable to utilise any. Despite being located at the centre of the IOR and lacking any land boundaries, the country was still unable to build itself as a critical maritime actor in the IOR due to its engagements in internal conflicts, lack of naval, technological, financial, and knowledge capabilities, etc., after the War. However, Sri Lanka realised its maritime aspirations and designed the Hambantota Port to reduce the capacity burden on Colombo Port. However, countries like the US, India, and others rejected the proposal, leading to the initial unfulfillment of its dream. However, the coming of China helped Sri Lanka to fill the vacuum and pursue its maritime development projects further (Himmer and Rod, 2022). This Port's development reduces Colombo Port's burden, while its close industrial reach enhances its services (Wingaraja et al., 2020). Moreover, the creation of the Hambantota Bunkering Facility has helped support oil refueling in one of the busiest

shipping lanes in the world. It supports Sri Lanka's maritime economy through fuel supply, provisioning, and ship repair. In January 2025, it added new fuels like Very Low Sulphur Fuel Oil and Marine Gas Oil, helping “cater to a broader range of vessels” (Hambantota International Port Group Pvt Ltd., 2025). Moreover, its support in the Rock Removal in Hambantota Port further helped improve the navigability and attract deep-draft vessels. This helps transform a vision into operational readiness. Moreover, the additional development of the CICT Colombo Terminal has made it the only deep-water terminal in South Asia, making it the “most efficient port in South Asia and the Indian subcontinent,” according to the Global Container Port Performance Index, 2021, solidifying Colombo’s position as a leading transshipment hub in the Indian Ocean (Hellenic Shipping News, 2022). The development of the Colombo Port City has invited new investments in the region and eased business facilitation in the area (Wingaraja et al., 2020). The Colombo Port has begged the 12th best connectivity port in the world in the Drewry Port Connectivity Index 2020 and the 24th place including the highest-performing Port in South Asia according to the World Bank and S&P Global Port Performance Programme in 2022. Its peaceful conditions, port capacity, and unique location have further helped ships to transship as they rerouted during the Red Sea crisis, making it an attractive transshipment point (Tennakoon, 2025). This would not have been possible if the construction, modernization, and expansion of ports and harbours had been facilitated through Chinese help, which improved technology, a better surveillance system, and increased container capacity. This has enhanced its ability to engage with maritime commerce and assert relevance in the IOR trade route. This has helped place Sri Lanka's maritime domain back at the center of national economic strategy, embracing maritime connectivity, ocean-based trade, and blue economy potential.

Additionally, the Chinese Projects, such as the South and Central Expressway, Railway projects, etc, have improved intra-country connectivity. This has reduced commutation timing by boosting hinterland connectivity and increasing the smooth delivery of goods. It has supported trade facilitation and competitiveness by enhancing maritime and logistical infrastructure. This helps boost export-import activities and integrate East Asia, the Middle East, and European markets. However, by engaging in electricity production, this Chinese initiative has accelerated the creation of Port City, developed it as a business hub, and improved the trade and local economy. Moreover, the CICT Colombo Terminal and Port City use green energy, reducing the climate pressure of Sri Lanka and dependence on fossil fuels while providing access to better technology (Wingaraja et al., 2020).

Furthermore, Chinese investments are faster with less rigorous procedures and without the need to change the political and economic structure of the country. Its fast, efficient implementation has enhanced the government's political legitimacy and consolidated power in the country. It has contributed to the growth and development of the local communities and economy by boosting trade and transport (Attanayake, 2023). Through China's cooperation with Sri Lanka on scientific research on fish and aquaculture, China has helped Sri Lanka build its marine capacity and knowledge, boost livelihood, food, nutrition, and the blue economy. Projects like the Panadura Fisheries Harbour Breakwater have helped Sri Lanka improve coastal protection and harbor safety for fishing vessels by ensuring warm-water conditions and facilitating all-year fishing conditions. Improving fisheries also helps attract proposals for marine bioengineering, sustainable aquaculture, pharmaceuticals, etc, from countries globally (Tennakoon, 2025).

Additionally, the emergence of non-traditional loan providers like China has attracted the attention of traditional loan providers, who are increasing their investments to counter China, which has further improved its maritime capacities (Attanayake, 2023). For instance, Australia has partnered with Sri Lanka to counter human smuggling. These collaborations, which otherwise may not have been possible due to human rights accusations, became possible due to Chinese attention there. This collaboration has provided Sri Lanka with skills and assistance that have helped present itself as a capable actor in dealing with maritime security threats and as a responsible maritime actor (Joseph, 2017). Additionally, the U.S. has committed "to develop a deep-water shipping container terminal at Colombo Port" (U.S. Embassy Colombo, 2023, cited in Tennakoon, 2025, p. 142). Moreover, China has invested in modern technologies and advanced surveillance in these ports to detect illegal activities, which has increased the country's maritime domain awareness. China's presence in Djibouti and Seychelles helps ensure the safe passage of goods to Sri Lanka as it combats piracy and safe shipping lanes there (Chowdhary, 2023).

China has also stationed warships in the Hambantota Port, gifted a warship to Sri Lanka, and patrolled vessels to deal with maritime threats on the sea (The Economic Times, 2019). This helps China to overcome its overall maritime blindness and deal with maritime issues. Furthermore, China's promise to improve marine research and develop fisheries and aquaculture is key to empowering the local communities.

This is exemplified by the functioning of the Colombo Port during COVID-19, where upgraded digital technology and less reliance on fossil fuels continued and reaped economic benefits (Wignaraja and Kannangara, 2020). This starkly contrasts with the times of the Civil War, where a lack of capacity led to the closure of Kankesanthurai Port in Jaffna while closing the ferry service between India and Sri Lanka (Laskar, 2023). These improved capacities have also facilitated it to the reliable transshipment location that has helped countries reroute to avoid the Red Sea crisis.

Thus, Sri Lanka, a war-torn country previously limited in naval, technological, and financial capacity, has pushed itself towards maritime blindness and now emerges as a capable maritime actor. The BRI, which helped modernise its maritime architecture, enhanced its capacity and improved connectivity in the IOR, has now emerged as a key transshipment route, particularly after the Red Sea crisis. Moreover, creating the deep-sea CICT Colombo Terminal and removing the risk from Hambantota enabled the port to host deep-draft vessels, reducing the burden of Colombo Port and positioning Sri Lanka among the top global connectivity hubs. Furthermore, fuel supply, provisioning, and ship repair investments integrated the island into one of the busiest shipping lanes. Additionally, the green-powered facilities reduce dependence on fossil fuels, reaffirm their commitment to climate change, reduce maritime pollution, and support blue economy growth. Chinese investments have also helped Sri Lanka boost its surveillance and maritime domain awareness facilities, strengthening its role as a responsible security actor in the IOR.

Additionally, the collaboration in fisheries, aquaculture, and marine research has helped expand Sri Lanka's technical knowledge base and supports the local economy. This also allows them to attract counter-investments from traditional partners such as the U.S. and Australia and enhance the economy and infrastructure of Sri Lanka. Its collaboration with the BRI has boosted its bargaining power and legitimacy. Moreover, improved hinterland connectivity through expressways and railways has accelerated trade flows, integrating Sri Lanka into broader regional markets. If Sri Lanka continued with its archaic infrastructure and could not supply fuel, this trust in Sri Lanka as one of the biggest transshipment destinations would not have been placed. As a result, these developments have helped transform Sri Lanka's maritime domain from a neglected periphery into the centerpiece of its national economic strategy, removing maritime blindness and enabling the country to reassert itself as a critical Indian Ocean actor. Thus, we see that Chinese investments in Sri Lanka have helped Sri Lanka take

an oceanic turn, enabling it to rejuvenate old connections, build blue water capacity, and emerge as a reliable IOR actor.

Conclusion

Sri Lanka is the most natural country to have a maritime orientation, considering its central location in the IOR. However, Sri Lanka has historically been an active facilitator of transregional exchanges. However, the coming off of colonialism has changed Sri Lanka's status quo in maritime orientation. From a hub facilitating polycentric exchanges, it has now transformed into a unidirectional extraction point that has replaced organic connectivity with strategic subservience. It has transformed the historically ocean-oriented country into a land-centric one with the coming of the plantation and the denial of the native's agency. Despite decolonisation, Sri Lanka failed to uproot its colonial inheritance and spoke the colonial language of divide and rule, diverting the meagre resources left after decolonisation into the conflict. The domestic politics that reoriented the state inward initiated Sri Lanka's maritime amnesia, whereby it forgot its oceanic heritage to pursue land-based, majoritarian nation-building. The War that drained the resources resulted in the ignorance of maritime crimes, illegal fishing, etc. It was very late when it realised the importance of developing its own maritime capabilities, as the other countries had already progressed far. Weak naval surveillance, outdated port infrastructure, absence of submarines, and reliance on foreign tech made Sri Lanka vulnerable in its Exclusive Economic Zone and diminished its potential Indian Ocean capabilities. This gap forced Sri Lanka to seek external partners. It aimed to fill the capability void shaped by war, underinvestment, and structural neglect. However, the conditionalities and waiting time have pushed Sri Lanka to pursue more pragmatic partnerships with China. Since then, it has helped Sri Lanka to build its maritime capabilities.

China's investments in Sri Lanka have helped the country to bridge its infrastructure gap. It has helped to resist the West, preserve its agency, and explore new allies and partnerships for growth and development. It has helped Sri Lanka improve their operational stability and trade resilience. Through these investments, Sri Lanka can capitalize on its geopolitical position, support the blue economy, and deploy more resources for maritime patrols and SAR missions.

Though accusations of debt-trap diplomacy and use of the ports as naval bases prevail, Himmer and Rod (2022) argue that it is not a debt-trap but rather a debt-for-equity exchange that takes

place. The Port remains under Sri Lanka's sovereignty, while the CMPort controls only a significant stake (Hameiri, 2020, cited in Himmer and Rod, 2022).

Overall, Sri Lanka's association with MSR and BRI has reduced the vulnerability and inefficiency seen during the Civil War crisis while improving its capacity to navigate global crises effectively, deal with maritime threats, develop its resources, and reduce the reliance on fossil fuel, utilizing green energy. This helps Sri Lanka to achieve long-term economic and political stability through advanced technology, sustainable practices, and diversified investments. It has also re-established its maritime identity. Thus, BRI and MSR helped Sri Lanka overcome its maritime blindness.

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