

AMID REPORTS ON CHINESE EXPANSION OF BASES, SRI LANKA UNVEILS SOP: NEED FOR A REALITY CHECK?

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India has realized it cannot possibly balance China's growing influence on its own, nor can it afford to have the U.S. leave the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) given China's significant presence in the island littorals. New Delhi requires the island nations much more than in the past to collectively balance Indian Ocean security. Sri Lanka is pivotal in this equation. Reports published by Aid Data and RAND have identified the Sri Lankan port Hambantota as a highly probable PLA military base. This issue brief attempts to analyze the US research reports and further draws attention to the geopolitical trends in the IOR, where India, China, and the U.S. are entangled in a great power competition. Against this backdrop, how will Sri Lanka maneuver its foreign policy? Will India further facilitate space for the U.S., just like in the past establishment of Diego Garcia? What will be the success of the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) introduced by the Sri Lankan government due to security sensitivities concerning New Delhi?

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China's Growing Influence in IOR

"Will the Americans establish their military base in Sri Lanka when they vacate Diego Garcia?"¹ was the first question posed by Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena to this author, who served as Director General of the national security think tank, Institute of National Security Studies (INSS) at a meeting held at presidential office few weeks after the Easter Sunday terror attack in 2019. My reply was not based on conjecture or imagination: "We do not have any data to support this future scenario." The meeting was about

the Easter Sunday Terror attack and not on the American military base in Sri Lanka. Nevertheless, the question revealed that a section of the Sri Lankan society, those in authority or otherwise, was contemplating the subject as it could cause an outcry from parties who are absolutely opposed to any U.S. base in Sri Lanka.

Diego Garcia is a militarized atoll located south of the equator in the Indian Ocean and the largest of the 60 small islands of the Chagos Archipelago. Diego Garcia is one of two critical U.S. bomber

bases in the Indo-Pacific region, along with Andersen Air Force Base in Guam. The U.S. established the base directed towards the Soviet naval power, a direct adversary in the Cold War. At the time India too was considered a Soviet ally. Now the adversarial naval power is from China and India is against China. Today, the Soviet position is taken by China in the Indian Ocean. In 2019, The Hague, the International Court of Justice deemed the continued British archipelago administration illegal. The ruling was supported by the United Nations General Assembly. However, the British dismissed this ruling as not legally binding, moving away from the global norms and values established by the West. Sri Lanka's Chinese-built Hambantota port is 960 miles from Diego Garcia. According to Darshana M. Baruah and Yogesh Joshi, "Diego Garcia allows the U.S. Navy to maintain an active presence in the Indian Ocean, thereby keeping the Chinese naval power at bay" while "India condoned the U.S. naval presence in the Indian Ocean even when it publicly supported the return of the islands to Mauritius".² This Indian position undoubtedly impacts the balance of power in the Indian Ocean.

It was Sri Lankan Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranayake who introduced the proposal for an Indian Ocean Region (IOR) to be turned into a Zone of Peace (IOZP) at the Non-Aligned Movement summit in 1964 in Cairo; her specific call was the eradication of military bases and denuclearization of the IOR.³ India supported the IOZP initiative. At the same time, India supported the initiative to secure the Indian Ocean from extra-regional powers by silently bandwagoning with the U.S. while publicly opposing the position on the U.S. military base in Diego Garcia. Back then, Indian Foreign Secretary Y. D. Gundevia said, "If Mrs. Bandaranaike shouts about Chagos, because it is nearer to Ceylon [Sri Lanka] than Lop Nor; the same argument must apply, in reverse, to Lop Nor, which is a slap across our northern borders. We cannot talk about islands in the Indian Ocean without condemning Chinese nuclear land bases

New Delhi has realized it cannot possibly balance China's growing influence on its own, nor can it afford to have the U.S. leave the region given China's significant presence in the island littorals. Sri Lanka is pivotal in this equation. The problem lies in the island littorals, where local political elites prefer an alternative to India, due to Indian and U.S. domestic intervention.

nearer to our borders."⁴ China's 1962 war with India, followed by the 1964 nuclear test in Lop Nor, was the main reason for India to support the U.S. base in the Indian Ocean. Since India's historical engagement with IOR littorals has been limited due to its focus on the northern borders, Prime Minister Modi's 'Neighborhood First'⁵ and SAGAR⁶ policies have been more effective in keeping the IOR littorals closer to India's foreign policy ambit.

Six decades later, New Delhi has realized it cannot possibly balance China's growing influence on its own, nor can it afford to have the U.S. leave the region given China's significant presence in the island littorals. New Delhi requires the island nations much more than in the past to collectively balance Indian Ocean security. Sri Lanka is pivotal in this equation. The problem lies in the island littorals, where local political elites prefer an alternative to India, due to Indian and U.S. domestic intervention. According to the

latest poll carried out by SAFN⁷ with a selected sample in Sri Lanka on various disciplines, almost everyone agreed foreign intervention is a key factor impacting Sri Lanka’s domestic politics and on the question of intervention by U.S., India and China, U.S. scored the highest whereas China scored the lowest intervention. This depicts China’s successful strategic communication with the public, which has had a positive impact.

Probability of a Chinese Military Base in Hambantota

Sri Lanka’s Hambantota port was identified in a July 2023 report by reputed research organization Aid Data⁸ as the next top geographical location for a Chinese military base. China established its first overseas military base in Djibouti in the Indian Ocean. Aid Data captured the existing data trends and when compared with eight other geographical locations in West Africa, South Asia, East Asia, and in the Pacific, Sri Lanka’s Hambantota port ranked as the top option in the order in which

they might be prioritized or sequenced by Beijing (see Table 1).

Table 1: Compiled from Aid Data Report: Harboring Global Ambitions: China’s Ports Footprint and Implications for Future Overseas Naval Bases, July 2023⁹

Port	Ranked according to possible locations prioritized/sequenced by Beijing (Aid Data 2023)
Hambantota, Sri Lanka	1
Bata, Equatorial Guinea	2
Gwadar, Pakistan	3
Kribi, Cameroon	4
Ream, Cambodia	5
Luganville, Vanuatu	6
Nacala, Mozambique	7
Nouakchott, Mauritania	8

“According to Aid Data, ‘China’s single largest port investment anywhere is at Hambantota, and Beijing exercises direct control over the facility. Coupled with Sri Lanka’s strategic location, the popularity of China among elites and the population, and Sri Lanka’s alignment with China in UNGA voting, Hambantota is the top candidate for a future base.’

According to Aid Data, the justification for moving Hambantota to the top position is its location, investment, security cooperation and China’s popularity among local elites and population. The report explains “China’s single largest port investment anywhere is at Hambantota, and Beijing exercises direct control over the facility. Coupled with Sri Lanka’s strategic location, the popularity of China among elites and the population, and Sri Lanka’s alignment with China in UNGA voting, Hambantota is the top candidate for a future base.” The argument is further advanced with naval cooperation being further cemented in 2018 when China gave a Type 053 frigate to the Sri Lankan Navy as a gift rather than a foreign military sale (FMS). The Aid Data assessment, however, that “Beijing exercises direct control” over the port of Hambantota is inaccurate, as the Sri Lankan

government has jurisdiction over the leased port and its surrounding land. This is further proven by Indian vessels such as MV Swarna Godavari recently docking at Hambantota International Port (HIP).¹⁰

In contrast is the report published by RAND Corporation in 2022.¹¹ The RAND report suggests Hambantota is in Tier 2, which consists of countries that scored in the top 50 percent across two dimensions, 'Feasibility' and 'Desirability', to establish a military base (see Figure 1). Tier 2 is lower than the Tier 1 countries. Tier 1 has a higher probability and consists of countries that scored in the top quartile of all 108 countries. Gwadar in Pakistan is in Tier 1, with higher feasibility and desirability as a base from China's viewpoint compared to Hambantota Port.

When assessing both data sets (see Table 2), it is evident that the RAND report considered most ports identified by Aid Data. There are some Myanmar and Bangladesh ports in Tier 1, as determined by RAND, but the Aid Data report does not place them in the top eight probable military bases list. Further, the question remains, why would China want to establish its second base in the Indian Ocean when it already has a presence in Djibouti? The reason is not difficult to decipher: The South Asian ports will directly impact India's security and be a significant geopolitical advantage for China. But, it is more likely that China will pick from two other regions for their next military base, West Africa (Bata in Equatorial Guinea and Kribi in Cameroon) and East Asia (Ream in Cambodia). All three geographies with autocratic regimes fully endorse Chinese policies and are

Figure 1: Indicators of Instability in Potential Host Nations for Future Chinese Bases



SOURCE: Reproduced from Garafola et al., 2022.
 NOTE: Flag icons represent the top 50th percentile of countries in both dimensions of desirability and feasibility. Icon placement is approximate and does not reflect specific potential basing or access locations within these countries.

much more likely to invite the Chinese for base operations than Sri Lanka. Hambantota could follow Cambodia and West Africa, if necessary from a Chinese perspective.

Table 2: SAFN Comparison of Aid Data and RAND data¹²

	CHINESE INVESTMENT ¹	AID DATA ¹ 2023	RAND 2022 ²	SAFN	Lease	JUSTIFICATION AidData ²	Justification SAFN
Hambantota, Sri Lanka	2.19B	1	Tier 2	3	99 years (2017)	China's single largest port investment anywhere is at Hambantota, and Beijing exercises direct control over the facility. Coupled with its strategic location, the popularity of China among elites and the population, and Sri Lanka's alignment with China in UNGA voting, Hambantota is our(AidData) top candidate for a future base. Naval cooperation was further cemented in 2018, when China gave a Type 053 frigate to the Sri Lankan Navy as a gift, rather than a foreign military sale (FMS).	Second Indian Ocean base. Strategic importance SLOCS
Bata, Equatorial Guinea	659M	2	Tier 2	2		Located in the West or Central Africa's Atlantic coast. China has heavily financed Bata port, which is strategically located. Politically, Equatorial Guinea (as well as Cameroon, and Togo) all have the "virtue" of being family dynasties or authoritarian regimes in power for years with succession plans in place or mooted. Per the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index in 2022, all three rank towards the very bottom of global democracy rankings: Togo at 130th, Cameroon at 140th and Equatorial Guinea at 158th.	Off international attention, Autocratic regime
Gwadar, Pakistan	577M	3	Tier 1	3		Beijing's single largest customer for military exports. Pakistan and Myanmar having been listed in studies by the PLA itself as promising potential hosts , as reported by RAND. China is significantly more popular (87 percent) than the US (27 percent) with the public in Pakistan, with a whopping 60-point difference in China's favor.	Third Indian Ocean base. Pakistan Close relations CPEC
Kribi, Cameroon	1.30B	4	Tier 3	2		Kribi port trails only Hambantota in terms of the size of Chinese investment. It is Bata's most likely competitor , but the ports are only about one hundred miles apart . China may decide to choose only one. Cameroon's UNGA voting and overall geopolitical positioning aligns well with China. Elsewhere, Caio in Angola, Freetown in Sierra Leone, and Abidjan in Cote d'Ivoire would all be basing possibilities, based on the size of Beijing's investments there.	Off International attention, Autocratic regime
Bangladesh			Tier 1			Economic dependency. Autocratic rule.	
Myanmar	1.3B ³		Tier 1		70% 50 years (2018) ³	Military rule and economic dependency.	
Ream, Cambodia	18M	5	Tier 1	1	30 years(2019) ³	Regime's heavy dependency to China. Hun Sen is a long-time ally of Beijing , and it is he who matters. The elites of Cambodia have done well under BRI and are aligned closely with China.	Targeting gulf of Thailand. Closer to Indian Ocean Djibouti. Regimes alliance
Luganville, Vanuatu	97M	6				An investment of USD \$97 million is not small, as it puts Vanuatu in the top 30 globally. And there is precedence: in World War II, the strategically-located island was home to one of the largest US Navy advanced naval bases and repair facilities in the Pacific.	
Honiara Solomon Islands	170M(ADB)					China Civil Engineering Construction Company (CCECC) was the only company to submit a bid in the competitive tender for the redevelopment project. Upgrading the old international port in Honiara and two domestic wharves in the provinces. 9 agreements signed with China, one agreement on Law enforcement 2023.	
Nacala, Mozambique	230M	7	Tier 3			Nacala would make most sense—it has seen sizable Chinese investment and is a deepwater port.	
Nouakchott, Mauritania	499M	8	Tier 3			The West African nation is also significantly closer to Europe and chokepoints like the Straits of Gibraltar—roughly only two days' steaming at 20 knots. The PLAN also has a second option in Mauritania, the port of Nouadhibou to the north.	

1. https://docs.aiddata.org/reports/harboring-global-ambitions/Harboring_Global_Ambitions.html 2. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1496-1.html 3. <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/china-regional->

It is clear that the criteria 'Feasibility' and 'Desirability' to establish a military base is more realistic than other background criteria in assessing the probability of establishing a military base. Although the Chinese influence is considerable and clear in Sri Lanka, in view of the above, there is little justification in claiming that Hambantota has a very high probability of becoming China's second foreign military base.

Dimuthu Attanayake captures the visit of Khanjar, a Khukri-class corvette of the Indian Navy to the Trincomalee port,¹³ which came amid projections by

the U.S.-based Aid Data research report. The Indian High Commission in Colombo hailed the visit as "augmenting [the] capabilities of the Sri Lanka Navy". While there is an established bilateral now to develop Trincomalee as an energy hub with Indian assistance, other connectivity projects including a physical bridge connecting Sri Lanka with India will

create geopolitical tension with China and occupy more significant political support and economic space in Colombo. It is important to note that in the past, measures like what Wickremasinghe initiated and committed in India in July, especially Trincomalee port development, the 13th amendment, and the physical bridge connecting India have been weaponized by the ultranationalist Sinhalese Buddhists, and the Rajapaksas invariably benefited at subsequent elections by highlighting the same. Adding to this tension will be the success of Sri Lanka's Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) towards Chinese military vessels.

The U.S. research reports from Aid Data and RAND do have a strategic call for U.S. Indian Ocean military policy to change in the near future. The report's indication of Hambantota is a clear strategy orchestrated to bring more attention towards Chinese concentration in the island nation and the IOR littorals. The push from the U.S. research circle will burden the Indian foreign policy circle, which wishes to support U.S. "silent bandwagoning" and publicly oppose U.S. expansion in the IOR. In this dilemma, the U.S. would pass the buck to India to take the leadership role as the net security provider. If the U.S. pushes harder on India to exert pressure on the island littorals, the latter could align with China due to hegemonic tendencies.

Table 3: Total number of warships / survey ships visiting Sri Lankan ports 2020- 2023 (till August 11)

Year	Total number of warships	Total number of 'scientific' survey ships
2020	47	1
2021	45	1
2022	49	1
2023/ 11 Aug	19	2
Total	160	5

Source: Data from Sri Lanka Navy¹⁴

Sri Lankan SOP on Foreign Vessels

The Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) warship *Hai Yang 24 Hao* arrived at the port of Colombo on August 10, 2023.¹⁵ Commanded by Jin Xin, the 129-meter-long warship ship was crewed by 138 PLAN officers. The timing of the Chinese warship's arrival was two weeks after the successful Indo-Lanka bilateral concluded with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Wickremasinghe of Sri Lanka. Prime Minister Modi said that it was necessary for India and Sri Lanka to work together, keeping in mind each other's "security interests" and "sensitivities".¹⁶ The reference was to the multiple

***“It is more likely that China will pick from two other regions for their next military base, West Africa (Bata in Equatorial Guinea and Kribi in Cameroon) and East Asia (Ream in Cambodia). All three geographies with autocratic regimes fully endorse Chinese policies and are much more likely to invite the Chinese for base operations than Sri Lanka.*”**

Chinese maneuvers in Sri Lanka, occasionally threatening India's national security. The last time New Delhi had a concern was when *Yang Wang 5*, the Chinese 'spy ship' docked at Hambantota port.¹⁷ Despite warnings from New Delhi, the Wickremasinghe government allowed the ship's docking, ignoring India's security concerns. There was also a grand welcome with parliamentary members welcoming the Chinese ship. Due to the strained relationship over the *Yang Wang 5* visit, the Wickremasinghe government approved a special cabinet paper on July 17, 2023, for a "Standard Operating Procedure (SOP)" for granting diplomatic clearance to foreign sea vessels and foreign government or military aircrafts visiting Sri Lanka.¹⁸ By introducing an SOP, Wickremasinghe has sent two clear messages: One, that small nations like Sri Lanka have agency and maneuvering space to deal with big powers in the region; and two, it reflects Colombo's sensitivity towards India's national security.

In the present day, with *Hai Yang 24 Hao*, perhaps China is testing the new SOP. Nilanthi

Samaranayake from USIP assesses, “The long-term implications of Sri Lanka’s new SOP are not yet known, but the SOP itself will be tested over the coming years”.¹⁹ The next Chinese research vessel to arrive at Colombo and Hambantota ports will be in October, the *Shi Yan 6*,²⁰ which would raise concerns in New Delhi despite the SOP and the security guaranteed from Sri Lanka due to the underlying nature of the port call, which is “research purpose” and her capability to conduct research in the Indian Ocean. There is a clear distinction between official military ship visits and research vessels for scientific oceanographic purposes.²¹ PLA’s research on mapping the ocean floor, salinity content, and sub-surface temperatures is part of the more extensive strategic exercise for submarine operations in the Indian Ocean.

According to Sri Lanka Navy data, there has been more visits of Indian and Japanese vessels than Chinese since 2020 (see Table 3). The alarming hype of Chinese vessels over others is the strategic security weight China carries to the Indian Ocean. In the past, Colombo has played the China card in the backdrop despite the pro-India commitment by the Rajapaksas. The submarine visit in 2014 was one such incident. According

“By introducing an SOP, Wickremasinghe has sent two clear messages: One, that small nations like Sri Lanka have agency and maneuvering space to deal with big powers in the region; and two, it reflects Colombo’s sensitivity towards India’s national security.

“The U.S. Aid Data and RAND reports on Chinese bases and Colombo’s SOP will be read by China as a strategy orchestrated by the U.S. and India to facilitate their own expansion in the island nation to contain the Chinese presence.

to the Ministry of Defence spokesperson Col. Nalin Herath, “India is fully aware of the vessel’s visit and has not expressed any concern over it. India and Sri Lanka are on the same page.”²² The present regime has a Rajapaksa component, which India should not miscalculate; the government majority in parliament is in Rajapaksa’s hands. The recent visit of Namal Rajapaksa²³ to China, where he explained the importance of Chinese projects and China’s role in the development of Sri Lanka, clearly indicates the continuation of China’s position by the Rajapaksa political party. Samaranayake further recommends, “U.S. policymakers could consider increasing the provision of maritime security resources to smaller states in the Indian Ocean, which consistently seek greater technical capacity for managing their ports.”²⁴ Although this is seen as a more pragmatic measure, unfortunately, it will not play well in the domestic political space where Rajapaksa and others, judging from the past, can label the U.S. presence as a concern for the sovereignty and national security of the nation. The U.S. Aid Data and RAND reports on Chinese bases and Colombo’s SOP will be read by China as a strategy orchestrated by the U.S. and India to facilitate their own expansion in the island nation to contain the Chinese presence. Any future Chinese initiation agreed by Sri Lanka to transform Hambantota into a military base will

alter the Indian Ocean security balance, where India will have one option – agree to greater U.S. presence in the Indian Ocean just like in the past.

Conclusion

The U.S. Aid Data and RAND reports on Chinese bases have less significance to the island's littoral political establishments, given the mismatch between the two reports in positioning Hambantota as the next Chinese military base. Before considering Hambantota, China may look at either West Africa or East Asia. After all, any Chinese effort to militarize Hambantota will alter the Indian Ocean security balance. India would further facilitate space for the U.S., just like in the past establishment of Diego Garcia. The Chinese concern is more with New Delhi than Colombo as New Delhi will double its efforts with bilateral agreements of cooperation and aid. As such, the Aid Data report on envisaged Chinese bases does not open a window for pre-emptive counter measures such as increased U.S. presence in the Indian Ocean. From an Indo-U.S. perspective, Colombo's security assurance via the new SOP does not reflect Colombo's sincerity to contain China nor support U.S./India foreign policy towards China. It is reasonable to assess that Sri Lanka's economic tie-up through multiple loans and infrastructure diplomacy by China has a more considerable significance for the local community and domestic politics in the island nation.

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