

# CHINA IN SRI LANKA AND SOLOMON ISLANDS: ROLE OF LITTORALS IN THE GEOPOLITICAL COMPETITION

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*This issue brief discusses the growing Chinese sphere of influence in Sri Lanka and Solomon Islands, its impact on the region and on the regional powers, India and Australia. The Rajapaksa regime in Sri Lanka and Sogavare administration in Solomon Islands face significant geostrategic competition where security agreements and multiple infrastructure projects are carried out in the littorals by extra-regional powers. Both regimes faced public protest, and are seen as fragile democracies where Chinese maneuvers are visible. China is making inroads using the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to expand into Sri Lanka's regional provinces. How do Sri Lanka and Solomon Islands threaten their immediate regional power? How can the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF)/Quad help vulnerable nations to realign with a rules-based order? What is the role of littorals in the security balance?*

Zbigniew Brzezinski pointed out, 'neither the US nor China can lead on its own. US power has diminished, and China is not yet ready or able to step up to the plane and may never be prepared to take on the role'.<sup>1</sup> Smaller nations such as Sri Lanka and Solomon Islands have become pawns in the geopolitical chessboard. Smaller yet strategically important island states are critical for their role and geographical position in the accelerating strategic competition between China-US, China-India, and China-Australia. Chinese influence in Sri Lanka distressing its close neighbor India has a pattern that matches China in Solomon Islands with its neighbor

Australia. With the tense geopolitical competition between US-China, the geostrategic littorals will play a pivotal role in the Indian and Pacific Ocean security balance.

On May 30, 2022, China released a position paper<sup>2</sup> on its relationship with Pacific Island countries. "China's position paper on mutual respect and common development with Pacific Island countries" highlights the significant economic and infrastructure assistance offered to the Pacific Island countries. Further elaborating, 'China has signed Belt and Road cooperation MoUs with all

the 10 Pacific Island Countries having diplomatic relations with China'.<sup>3</sup> The China-Pacific Island 'community with a shared future'<sup>4</sup> is in the making. The position paper was well-timed, released when Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi was visiting the South Pacific islands, including Solomon Islands, Kiribati, Samoa, Fiji, Tonga, Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, and East Timor. China's strategic expansion is evident with the 10 Pacific nations, where China wishes to enter into arrangements<sup>5</sup> — ranging from security and law enforcement cooperation to jointly develop fisheries, run the region's internet networks, and set up cultural Confucius Institutes and classrooms. In Papua New Guinea (PNG), Wang Yi was discussing salvaging an economic and security deal amidst the PNG national election. In PNG, a Chinese construction firm, China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC), has left a considerable infrastructure footprint.<sup>6</sup>

The 'Pivot to Asia' introduced by the Obama regime and continued by others, including the Biden administration, failed to calculate Chinese strategic maneuvers especially the hybrid civil-military nexus strategies adopted by China. The absence of US diplomatic missions in several Pacific Islands for decades contributed to the

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Chinese expansion. The same Chinese expansion in the Indian Ocean littorals, such as in Sri Lanka, was due to the failure of the India-US policy in the Indian Ocean. Canberra and New Delhi would need to take a much tougher posture on Chinese expansion and strategic maneuvers in its immediate periphery. Washington would require a more active Indo-Pacific strategy and country-specific commitments aligned to the Indo-Pacific norms, values, and economic framework. Chinese maneuvers in Solomon Islands and Sri Lanka are clear wake-up calls for Washington, New Delhi, and Canberra to reassess the strategic ambiguity depicted by China in its gray zone tactics.<sup>7</sup>

### **Rajapaksa in Sri Lanka and Sogavare in Solomon Islands**

Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare and Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa are political survivors — Sogavare being four times prime minister and the Rajapaksa dynastic rule in Sri Lanka seeing a second term. Both islands were geostrategically powerful battlegrounds during World War II. The allied forces' first significant

land offensive occurred in the Guadalcanal battle with Japanese troops in the Solomon Islands.<sup>8</sup> In Sri Lanka, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill saw defeating the Japanese air attack as a decisive turning point,<sup>9</sup> ending the Japanese expansion. Sri Lanka and the Solomon Islands sit on vital shipping lanes. Rajapaksa and Sogavare have entered into back-door dealings with the Chinese that have shaken the regional security balance and sent ripples, alarming US Indo-Pacific strategists. Sri Lanka's Chinese BRI footprint with large-scale strategic infrastructure is significant, just like in the Solomons and many other littorals. Most Chinese agreements, such as long-term lease agreements to Chinese loans, are opaque and non-transparent in both countries. Both leaders faced protests, in Solomons back in November 2021 and in Sri Lanka in the present. The Solomon Islands protest was mainly in the 'sector on logging industry where 'China is the destination for more than 90 percent of its timber exports'.<sup>10</sup> Stimulating political favors by Chinese foreign investors were visible in Solomon Islands. The same was seen in Sri Lanka, where the protestors highlighted Chinese unprofitable infrastructure projects and the continuous high-interest loans coupled with high-level corruption. Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa

resigned in May 2022 with public protest<sup>11</sup> turning violent by burning residences of parliament members. China's economic entanglements with the regime were an important factor in Mahinda Rajapaksa's downfall. Sogavare and Rajapaksa are also threatening their close neighbors, Australia and India, by bandwagoning with China and inviting an extra-regional power to the region.

## Chinese and US military logistics agreements

While Quad leaders are busy making promises in the Indo-Pacific theater, they would also need to focus attention on small littorals. Both Sri Lanka and the Solomon Islands face similar Chinese pressure due to their strategic location. Sri Lanka sits at India's immediate periphery facing the Indian Ocean; the Solomon Islands is in Australia's immediate periphery facing the Pacific Ocean. Both islands became a threat to their immediate neighbor due to the growing Chinese influence and strategic maneuvers. The recent Chinese military logistics agreement in the Solomon Islands,<sup>12</sup> which became a primary concern in the Australian elections, is similar to the Chinese influence through BRI projects, submarine visits and capture of strategic infrastructure and multiple hydrographic survey vessels that arrive in Sri Lanka. This has impacted India's security as China is a direct aggressor on the immediate northern border of India.

Security and logistics agreements in small nations such as Sri Lanka became a concern for their internal political stability since political factions benefited from these agreements to come back to power. The Rajapaksas allegedly used and abused; weaponizing the US security agreements during the 2019 elections, and attacking the previous government on threatening the nation's sovereignty. After coming back to power, the narrative changed, and such security agreements were continued. When Sri Lanka received the Status of Forces Agreement (SoFA)<sup>13</sup> in 2019 from the US, this author as the head of the

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national security think-tank in Sri Lanka, obtained the Chinese view on the US agreements. During a one-on-one meeting with the Chinese defense attaché Senior Colonel Xu Jianwei in Colombo, the Chinese position on SoFA was explained. The reply was swift: “You may sign whatever with the US but tell the defense secretary not to disappoint us when we also want to sign a similar agreement with Sri Lanka in the future”.<sup>14</sup> The message was clear from the Chinese that there would be a future agreement and Sri Lanka should not treat China differently from the US. The Hambantota port acquired for 99 years by the Chinese for a forward military logistics base<sup>15</sup> will be fully operational when such an agreement is made with the Chinese.

### **BRI in Sri Lanka’s Eastern province**

Chinese ambassador Qi Zhenhong’s recent visit to Sri Lanka’s Eastern<sup>16</sup> province on May 24, presenting donations to low-income families and discussing the expansion of China’s investment portfolio to the east with the governor Anuradha Yahampath is a strategic maneuver to escape the growing criticism from protestors against China’s underperforming infrastructure in the south of the island and focus on new geography targeting Sri Lanka’s resource-rich eastern province harboring the strategic natural depth, Trincomalee port. The ambassador visited the port,<sup>17</sup> took a boat ride and presented a map to the governor; the map depicts the ancient Maritime Silk Road, where China played a dominant role with many nations, including Sri Lanka. According to Chinese scholar Wang Jian, ‘President Xi’s requirement officially linked the Maritime Great Power strategy to the Belt and Road initiative’.<sup>18</sup> The mission of the Chinese Ambassador in Colombo was to tag Trincomalee and the eastern province to the modern-day BRI; it is a vital province with significant Indian investment and security sensitivity to New Delhi. China’s calculative maneuvers reflect clear strategic directions from Beijing. Previously

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too, China has tried to make inroads into the eastern province; during the presidency of Mahinda Rajapaksa (2005-2015). The Chinese mining investment company ZXJOY<sup>19</sup> had an interest in the mineral resources of the eastern province when they negotiated with the government. The same Chinese company was present in Niger extracting thorium. Back in the past, Chinese interest in getting mining licenses in the eastern province and in the present, the Chinese business chamber<sup>20</sup> investment in the east are clear signs of Chinese expansion to a valuable strategic province in Sri Lanka.

Brigadier General Robert Spalding’s book *Stealth War*,<sup>21</sup> explains that ‘it is clear that China didn’t exactly help Sri Lanka improve its infrastructure — it swamped the country in debt and has now gained significant economic control over the struggling but strategically placed nation’. Despite multiple criticisms of Chinese BRI projects in Sri Lanka, Beijing’s BRI agenda continues.

## Exploiting fragile democracies

Most of these littorals such as Sri Lanka and Solomon Island are fragile democracies. Sri Lanka has moved from a fragile state into a crisis state with economic and political instability. The instability in Sri Lanka could be seen as a disadvantage, thus China uses its local agency to navigate during instability as the largest trading partner and largest development contributor. Even in the Pacific, China is aware of the fragile democracies with high risk which are fertile ground for Chinese economic expansionism with a long-term goal to establish 'strategic-traps' in three domains — political, human rights and military. The long-term lease agreements on strategic infrastructure have further cemented China's position in these islands regardless of regime change. In Sri Lanka, the Chinese 99-year lease agreements were not revisited by subsequent regimes and perhaps will not be revisited by future regimes due to the already established, strong strategic relationship with China.

## PLA operations in India and Australia's marine sphere

At China Aerospace Security Institute (CASI) inside the National Defense University compound in Washington D.C., I was listening to former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd explain his analysis on China, referring to his new book *'The Avoidable War'*.<sup>22</sup> He says, 'while there is a bipartisan consensus on AUKUS, how do we read China and the modern global PLA in the conflictual environment, hinting of a possible PLA takeover of Taiwan by 2027'. Chinese PLA operation is hybrid; a stealth operation takes place in many geographies aiming at like-minded allies so that the US does not capture the significant danger. Rudd's assessment is accurate as the PLA has been developing a series of ports across the Indian Ocean region to support the long-term projection of Chinese naval power. This is consistent with the evolution of China's naval doctrine under Xi to protect Chinese overseas interests not just

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in the near seas but also in the far seas. Cambodia (Koh Kong), Bangladesh (Chittagong), Myanmar (Kyaukyu), Sri Lanka (Hambanthota), Djibouti naval base, and Gwadar port project in Pakistan are examples highlighted in Rudd's book. Further, assessing 'the long-term lease agreements in Koh Kong, Hambanthota, Gwadar, and Djibouti suggest that the Chinese navy will likely construct dedicated resupply, repair, and maintenance facilities to sustain a larger Chinese Indian Ocean naval presence into the future. If both the US and China fail to buy in as indispensable partners, such an order cannot take hold globally; the concern is the two giants are moving in opposite directions.'

"In the absence of a common narrative shared by the US and China, the two nations are likely to drift more rapidly apart. Trust builds on itself just as distrust builds on itself and compounds into deep enmity over time,"<sup>23</sup> says Rudd, who decided to scuttle the then-nascent Quadrilateral Security Dialogue in 2008 when he was in office. While the outgoing Prime Minister Scott Morrison took effort to "patiently restore trust and confidence following

the Rudd government's policy to disconnect from the Quad",<sup>24</sup> the new Prime Minister Anthony Albanese is from the same Kevin Rudd's Labour Party. Rudd discussed the Chinese military pact with Solomon Islands at the Quad summit, and expressed "the need for the Quad to engage more in the Indo-Pacific... push our shared values in the region at a time when China is clearly seeking to exert more influence".<sup>25</sup> The heightened Chinese belligerence with Australia, India and in Japan's immediate periphery will provide a clear window for the US to expand its security measures in the Indo-Pacific in the coming months. If Prime Minister Albanese were to request more influence, it would be natural since the US containment strategy has not minimized Chinese strategic expansion in the Indo-Pacific.

## IPEF and Quad

With 60 percent of the world's population, the Biden administration has prioritized the Indo-Pacific theater as the most prominent economic contributor to the US economy in the next 30 years. US foreign direct investment has nearly doubled in the last decade and was more than \$969 billion in 2020, supporting more than three million US jobs. In Tokyo, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF)<sup>26</sup> was

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launched by President Biden, partnering Australia, Brunei, India, Indonesia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Malaysia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. This grouping represents 40 percent of world GDP, and most nations have a large China BRI economic shadow and dependency on trade with China. The IPEF will assist in setting standards for many BRI countries struggling with Chinese opaque loans, corruption, bypassing environmental clearances, transparency in processes, and debt trap to strategic trap<sup>27</sup> concerns.

The IPEF has four pillars: *Connected Economy*, to set high-standard trade rules in the digital economy; *Resilient Economy*, for mapping and setting up an early warning system on supply chain disruptions; *Clean Economy*, for setting and following environmental standards; and *Fair Economy*, by strengthening anti-money laundering and fighting corruption. Sri Lanka and many other Indian Ocean littorals, including Maldives, Comoros, and Pacific littorals such as Solomon Islands, are facing issues in Chinese BRI projects and are saddled with unsustainable debt. The framework should not be limited to the initial countries but expanded to include nations from the Indian Ocean and Pacific theater. As Tanvi Madan and Dhruva Jaishankar argue, the Quad

should diversify its engagement with other like-minded partners. “Quad does not need to add more members to accomplish this; it could instead involve other countries in existing Quad activities based on their needs and comfort levels, or participate in their initiatives to enhance regional security and resilience.”<sup>28</sup> In the same way, IPEF could engage with many nations in the economic dimension.

Biden announced the most unpalatable crusade to China’s ears: persuading quadrilateral partners and US allies that the Chinese belligerence was an immediate threat, rousing them to be prepared to fight back. At the Quad summit, Biden pledged the US would ‘intervene militarily if China attempts to take Taiwan by force’,<sup>29</sup> a warning that appeared to deviate from the deliberate strategic ambiguity traditionally held by Washington’s one-China policy. Biden’s warnings on two geographical theaters, Ukraine towards Russia, and another in Taiwan to the Chinese, will step up towards a two-theater confrontation similar during World War II. Unlike in the past, the context is different given the advanced military configuration and stronger power

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axis of Russia-China, backed by Chinese economic muscle. Zhu Fenglian, China’s Taiwan Affairs Office spokesperson responded, “We urge the US to stop saying or doing anything in violation of the One China principle and the three China-US Joint Communiqués. ... Those who play with fire will certainly burn themselves”<sup>30</sup> — a direct warning for the comment not to be downplayed due to multiple partners in Asia taking China or Russia’s side as per their strategic, economic, and military dependence.

## **Quadrilateral strategic intelligence forum**

In September 2021, intelligence officials from the US, India, Japan, and Australia took part in a Quad strategic intelligence forum. This was an essential step since inter-agency intelligence sharing among the Quad had significant lapses in the past — triggering terror attacks, arms trade, and multiple security concerns in India’s immediate periphery. When Sri Lanka faced its largest terror attack in 2019, the interagency intelligence provided by India was not shared with the US prior to the attack. Had a multipronged Quad intelligence security architecture been in place, the terror attack in Sri Lanka could have been averted due to multiple channels signaling the Sri Lankan authorities. The Indian intelligence was not trusted and downplayed as mere talk by the Sri Lankan authorities. Given the political economic dysfunctionality in littorals, there is a growing security concern here which requires consideration.

## **Conclusion**

The Solomon Islands security pact with China has become a cause for concern due to the failure of Australian and US policy in the Pacific Islands. The quick reactive tactics in Washington to undo the Chinese agreement in Solomon Islands only depicts the Chinese strength and prior calculative victories in other areas, achieved in the Pacific Islands. The US requires a more

active and long-term robust policy in these littorals — such as targeting the supply chain competition. Willy C. Shih from Harvard Business School testifying before the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission<sup>31</sup> accurately posited that ‘step aside and see how China’s top-down model will work facing the challenges in the years ahead. Their zero Covid strategy provides a lot of insight... That also means we need to address our [US] weaknesses and penchant for watered-down short-term solutions...a little long-term planning would benefit us all.’ The US IPEF could assist the littorals in detaching themselves from supply chains entangled in China’s economic coercive tactics and allow them to reposition with the US.

The Quad and its like-minded partners require immediate diversified expansion to many Indo-Pacific nations, some undergoing economic distress. A broader framework such as IPEF is essential to pull these most vulnerable littorals towards the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision. Else, the US-China distrust will only widen with geopolitical flashpoints in these very littorals where PLA configurations of stealth hybrid civil/military activity are already multiplying. What is required is a proactive country-specific commitment towards IPEF/Indo-Pacific from nations like Sri Lanka and the Solomon Islands to set standards to align towards a global rules-based order.

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