

The Belt Tightens:
China's Learning Curve on Employing
Soft Power in Sri Lanka



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Abstract

As China's ascendancy in the geopolitical order accelerates, lesser powers are increasingly critical to the growth of its economy, trade relationships and international prestige. Sri Lanka, long a useful entity for the Middle Kingdom, has benefited substantially from Chinese investment and cordial relations. During the hardline Rajapaksa regime and 26-year civil war in Sri Lanka, Chinese largesse allowed the island nation's power structure not just to sustain itself but to consolidate and to stand astride impressive development projects even as it faced sanctions from the West over its human rights record and authoritarian rule. Nine years on from the end of the destabilizing civil war, I examine how the Eastern embrace evolved from soft power into increasingly strategic hard power in Sri Lanka. I also consider the limitations of this success: Although it was clearly more effective than the more traditional hard-power economic sanctions from the West in achieving its goals, the still-evolving skills of China and Sri Lanka in converting resources into effective soft power have resulted in behaviors that are hardly projecting a glowing, attractive image of the City on the Hill.

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List of abbreviations

AAIB:	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
B&R:	Belt and Road
BRI:	Belt and Road Initiative
EBA:	Everything But Arms
MSR:	Maritime Silk Road
FDI:	Foreign Direct Investment
LTTE:	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam/Tamil Tigers)
NIO:	North Indian Ocean
OBOR:	One Belt and One Road
ODA:	Official Development Assistance
PRC:	People's Republic of China
SREB:	Silk Road Economic Belt
SLFP:	Sri Lanka Freedom Party
UNHCR:	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

1. Introduction

1.1 The issue

China's Belt and Road policies, which constitute a central component to the vision of President Xi Jinping, are described by his administration as a peaceful, benevolent build-up of trade and infrastructure in Central and South Asia, the Indian Ocean and Africa regions, invoking a return to the historic Silk Road network that also encompasses a vast maritime expansion effort that has in recent years been known as China's String of Pearls policy. The plan calls for land-based investments, and impressive development build-ups, facilities upgrades and construction and capacity expansion for ports on a historic scale. The overall effect has been a boon for nations and leaders who have found themselves the recipients of remarkably attractive aid and financing packages, which have the add-on effect of buffering or sheltering them completely from Western criticism and sanctions or political attacks from opposition figures within their own countries.

But with developments such as the awarding to China of a 99-year lease to operate Sri Lanka's Hambantota port – a massive development project that China also financed – along with the regular appearance of military vessels at Pakistan's Gwadar, another China-built and -funded entity, it has become increasingly clear to Western observers that the massive expansion plans are multi-phase operations that inevitably lead to a strategic shift not just in commerce and trade but in military power projection.

1.2 China and soft power

Soft power has been a key tool in China's policy kit throughout this process and one it has increasingly embraced since the term was coined by neo-Liberal theoretician and Harvard professor Joseph Nye in 1989. By offering generous development aid and financing plans while remaining consistently neutral or even sympathetic on issues of human rights and good governance, China has made strides that would be unthinkable in the West, where transparency and accountability to global public opinion would make such investments nigh on impossible.

How these soft power policies have worked in Sri Lanka and how they successfully supplanted Western aid, which was conditioned on a degree of moral accountability, is the subject of this study as are the effects, short-term and long-term of such a gargantuan helping

hand. The final costs to small nations who have accepted such aid are illustrative of China's growing deftness at translating soft power into hard power. But the clampdown on transparency, independent institutions, NGOs, the media and political opposition in recipient states such as Sri Lanka reveal much about China's limited grasp of the full potential of soft power. Certainly such repressive tactics do not coincide with the notion of winning influence over others with attractiveness, legitimacy and genuine appeal.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Geopolitics

The field of geopolitics as a special focus within the area of international relations has offered invaluable tools and methodologies for the analysis of the actions of states and peoples for generations, dating by most accounts to the work of Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjéllen, who gave the subject this name in 1899. At that time it referred principally to the study of the effects of geography (both human and physical) on politics and relations between states. (Devetak 2012: 492)

In its application to understanding Sri Lanka and the effects of a major global player such as China, geopolitics is particularly useful in that it generally refers to countries and relations between them but can also consider other kinds of states: de facto independent units that may or may not be internationally recognized. Geopolitics can also cover relations between sub-national geopolitical entities, such as states that make up a federation, confederation or a quasi-federal system. In classical international relations, geopolitics offers insights into the study of foreign policy in order to aid in the analysis, explanation and prediction of states' political behavior when considering geographic variables that may include area, climate, access and barriers, topography, demography, natural resources and applied science of the region. (Evans 1988: 148)

In the case of island nations such as Sri Lanka, clearly geographic factors are crucial in understanding both its relations with other states and with sub-units of its own territory and geopolitics offers insights as a method of understanding the dynamics of political power in relation to geographic space. Territorial waters and land and their relations to diplomatic history are excellent sources for geopolitics analysis in classical academic study also, with more insight still offered by factoring in history and social science. Outside academia, stakeholders ranging from NGOs and institutions to private players and investors all make use of geopolitics, as have many of the parties who have determined the course of Sri Lanka's development.

2.2 Refinements

Over the course of geopolitics' development as a field of study the major shifts and refinements of theoreticians and writers including Alfred Thayer Mahan, Halford Mackinder, Nicholas J. Spykman and Karl Haushofer have given rise to more nuanced understandings of

power, geostrategy and subjects of study and have strongly influenced the foreign policy of both empires and states. Ideas about the role of the sea as both a defense and as a highway leading to more global interconnections, as laid out in Mahan's seminal 1890 publication *The Influence of Sea Power on History*, whether for the benefit or to the detriment of a small island nation, are also relevant.

Although the study of geopolitics per se struggled to re-establish itself in academia following WWII, largely due to the embrace of one interpretation of Haushofer's *Lebensraum* theories under Nazi Germany's fascination with Geopolitik, the area has since proven its worth in a changing world. Major Cold War figures and foreign policy leaders such as Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski have done much to revive a widely held acceptance of the value of geopolitics.

Traditional Realist arguments on hard power influences, which include notions of military might, capability and projection, along with the use of force, whether military or economic, to cut off supplies, trade and access to institutions, have been historically helpful in predicting many outcomes in cases of war threats, sanctions or boycotts. The case of the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 and the US response, which succeeded in getting the Soviet Union to reverse its strategic armaments buildup in the Caribbean, stands out as a classic example concerning another strategic island – although the US agreement to remove missiles from Turkey in exchange for the Soviets' pulling them out of Cuba arguably dilutes the reasoning that threat of force alone succeeded for the Kennedy administration.

2.3 Soft power relevance

But while classical geopolitical and IR schools of Realism and Liberalism have aided in the understanding of power dynamics and in forces for mitigating the threats of an anarchic world, later refinements including work by Neo-liberal theoretician Joseph Nye have given rise to a better understanding of soft power and its importance in influencing state behavior. Nye's classic soft power theory aids in understanding the effects of China's policies toward Sri Lanka as well, particularly in the areas of technical and financial support for the government and foreign direct investment, as I will detail further in this study. (Nye 1989: 21, 1990: 47)

Soft power ideas have helped explain the effects of pull rather than push – attracting power as opposed to threat of force or punishment – as a powerful influencer that may change the

actions of states. An example cited is when Frederick the Great of Prussia was saved in 1762 because the Russian Czarina Elizabeth died and her son, who idolized Frederick, took power and ordered the prevailing Russian troops home. (Nye 2011: 81)

Likewise, the success of free markets and liberal trade in the West resulted in phased liberalization of poorly performing centralized state economies in China starting in 1978 under Deng Xiaoping, resulting first in limited agricultural incentives, later in the gradual introduction of Special Economic Zones and permission for Hong Kong to act essentially as an autonomous free market friendly to international private enterprise.

Indeed it now seems that Chinese elites, well aware of the might of soft power, have set about deliberately trying to foster it. As Xi Jinping was preparing to assume leadership from General Secretary Hu Jintao in 2011, the 17th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party devoted an entire plenary session to the issue of culture and issued a press release declaring that it was a national goal to “build our country into a socialist cultural superpower.” Then in 2014, Xi announced, “We should increase China’s soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China’s messages to the world.” (Shambaugh 2015)

2.4 Elements of soft power

But Nye makes the case that factors such as credibility and integrity, can be critical elements in establishing the influence to get others to do what you want, which stands as one widely accepted definition of power. This will be elaborated more fully in the section of this study on the limits of China’s effectiveness with soft power but a basic illustration is readily at hand in the example of Russia’s invasion of Georgia. Because the latter country’s leader was fluent in English and more adroit with Western media, he created a sympathetic perception of his plight in the West, while Russia was only able to sell their actions in 2008 on the domestic front. Nye makes the case that one of a nation’s most powerful resources is often its culture, which can make its policy tools more effective: The production of soft power by attraction depends upon both the qualities of the agent and how they are perceived by the target. The ability to convert resources into influence depends on many factors, such as not being seen as malign, manipulative or incompetent.

Three clusters of qualities of the agent and action that are central to attraction are benignity, competence and beauty/charisma. The first of these, an aspect of how the agent relates to others, can generate sympathy, trust, credibility and acquiescence. (Nye 2011: 89-92)

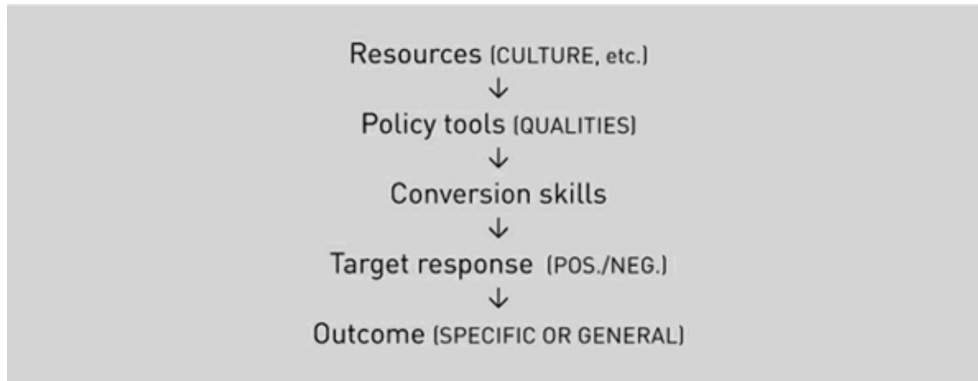


Figure 2: Varied elements make for effective soft power with skillful conversion

Source: Nye (2011: 99)

Nye also points out that non-state actors, including the media, academic institutions, the private sector and NGOs, may be as important as state policies in influencing targets and persuading them to change their behavior. This dynamic will also be explored later in this report, which will illustrate the priority that both Sri Lanka and China place on controlling these entities.

But Nye's work on attraction and co-opting a target, which factors in not just the direct actions of the agent wanting to influence but also the importance of indirect actors not always under the control of the agent, pertains to a great degree to the subject of this study and has been used as a guide in understanding events described here. (Nye 2011: 95)

2.5 Direct v indirect soft power

China's influence in Sri Lanka illustrates sharply several of the nuances Joseph Nye speaks of in his advocacy for the soft power school as a useful tool in understanding geopolitics. Having forwarded the notion that the non-military actions of a state can generate as much or more influence than threats or punishing behavior, such as sanctions, Nye has since the late 1980s

refined his arguments to help address the many cases when influence grows as the result of soft power combined with hard power. This he called smart power in his 2004 book *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*.

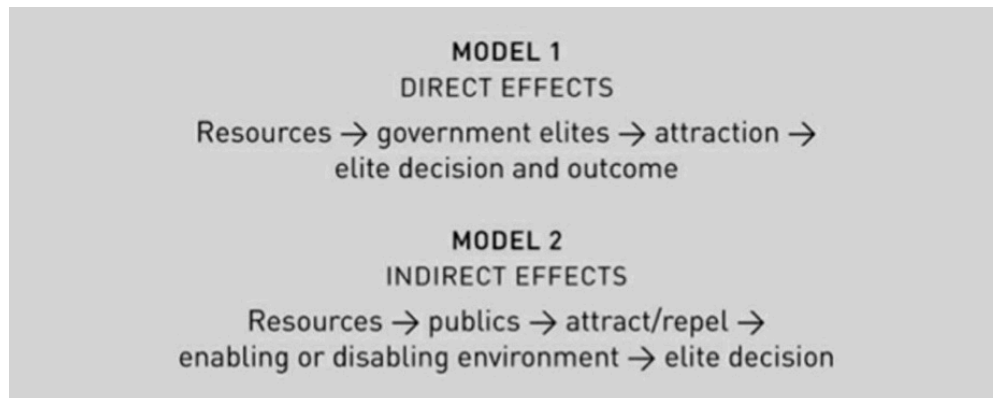


Figure 1: Influence of non-state entities and indirect effects

Source Nye (2011: 95)

But often states also flex influence effectively from a kind of power that doesn't fall clearly into the classic understandings of either hard or soft power. He cites the example of US officials in the mid-1970s communicating with French counterparts their intelligence information that indicated Pakistan was planning on weaponizing plutonium that it would be processing in a power plant being provided by the French – after telling France that it was for the development of peaceful nuclear power. The Gerald Ford administration tried to buy off Pakistan with new fighter jets but they weren't dissuaded. Then the Jimmy Carter administration tried to get France to cancel the sale but they refused, insisting the processing plant sale was a legitimate transaction of technology for civilian purposes. Finally, high-level American intelligence showing Pakistan's real plans were shared with a key French official, which convinced him to get the plant deal cancelled.

This, Nye argues, could only happen if France found the US intelligence credible and believed the Americans were reliable in their intelligence gathering, sources and analysis. Being held in that kind of esteem is an important source of soft power and in this case achieved results more effectively than sticks or carrots.

Hard power, of course, has a critical role in the tool kit, as he points out, but even then armies are often most effective at helping a state get what it wants when they are not fighting since the cost of making a show of force short of war is far lower than launching a war. Battle ships lined

up along the Persian Gulf can also easily be withdrawn once the goal of the powerful state that has sent them as been achieved. Wars are not so easily and tidily reversed and ended as recent history in Iraq and Afghanistan clearly shows.

But in the case of US intelligence influencing France to limit Pakistan's ability to process of nuclear fuel, the prestige and credibility of the US, a key component of soft power, resulted in the hard power move of France withholding the processing plan in order to block the target from developing nuclear weapons. Although the missile capability was later developed, the strategic military technology was delayed as a result of US influence with France (when combined with that country's hold over Pakistan).

3. Method of analysis

3.1 Observational research design

This study employs principally an observational research design based on a single case study, which I believe is optimal because the subject of inquiry exists within a single relatively small area, both geographically and in the scale of time. This kind of research model draws a conclusion by comparing subjects against a control group in cases where the researcher has no control over the experiment, which surely applies to what we can learn about the power dynamic between China and Sri Lanka. With time, a more quantifiable subject may yet be discerned for measuring the impact of China's soft power on the island nation and hopefully this study will help establish some good candidates for such a formal study.

Two general types of observational design are combined: direct observations in which people know that you are watching them; and indirect observations in which they do not. The latter consist mainly of reports generated by media and other institutions based on their experiences and observations on the ground in Sri Lanka and from contact with formal state organizations and with state-backed enterprises. These bodies will have had some knowledge that they were providing data to third parties but it is not possible to ascertain how much of the information in, say, a *New York Times* report was derived with the knowledge of the source and how much from unobtrusive observation.

An observational study allows useful insight into a phenomenon and avoids the ethical and practical difficulties of setting up a large and cumbersome research project, which would have been unfeasible for this subject. (Denzin and Lincoln 1994: 248-261, Quinn 2002 and California State University Fresno 2006)

3.2 Scarcity of formal data

In addition, existing thorough and exhaustive formal studies, both qualitative and quantitative, are sparse as of yet. Such a limited data sample means that meaningful general observations focused on larger contexts and trends cannot be drawn with certainty. Instead, the single case methodology is well suited to exploring in significant detail what the many impacts of China's largesse are on Sri Lanka, offering a more holistic approach. Because of the limited data available – the very restrictions imposed on transparency and independent reporting described in this report severely limit the amount of objective information available about

China's financial and strategic relationship with China at the granular level – I have chosen the single case study design. Its advantages over the goal of theory making or testing seem clear and this approach appears more feasible than setting out to make predictions of events or behaviors based on a theory. (De Vaus 2001, Stephen 2013)

I believe the observational design is also optimal because, while detailed official data is scarce, both the subjects of both China's One Belt and One Road (OBOR) policy and Sri Lanka's final-phase civil war and post-war actions have been thoroughly covered in the international media and by relevant institutions abroad and, to some extent, within Sri Lanka. Thus, despite data limitations, I am able to present and analyze a richly detailed, holistic picture of events. I am also approaching an ongoing, contemporary situation that is very much still in flux, which presents another reason for adopting a single case study approach. I believe the strength of this approach is in generating an understanding of a complex issue through detailed contextual analysis of a limited number of events or conditions and their relationships. This method also allows for a variety of methodologies and sources to investigate a research problem and this study can extend the experience of prior researchers and add strength to what is already known about the China-Sri Lanka power dynamic.

3.3 Limitations of research design

A trade-off, of course, is that such a study based on a single case, aside from generating conclusions that are not generalizable also may be affected by the biased interpretations of a researcher who has been immersed in a subject with intense exposure to study. Such a design also does not facilitate an empirical assessment of cause and effect relationships and it is possible that vital information may be missing, making the case hard to reliably interpret. The single case also may not be representative or typical of the larger problem being investigated. In addition, this design allows for no conclusive establishing of cause and effect since nothing is manipulated. Information sources may not all have the same degree of credibility and sources who are aware they are being studied are likely to behave in ways they might not if not observed. Despite these potential hazards, I believe this approach remains the most feasible one for considering China's recent history with Sri Lanka. (Gerring 2004: 341-354, Yin 2003)

My questions and findings are inductive in that I observe, look for patterns, and make conclusion based on those observations. Qualitative analysis has been adopted here in order to

draw and construct the most solidly reasoned conclusions possible from the broad, deep body of writing and reporting that has been dedicated to my subject in recent years.

The monographic approach, focused on one case, is generally best suited to the observation and processing of documents focused on such a limited subject – in classical social studies this might be a family, a company, a city or village or a criminal case. It usually employs a detailed description of this single subject and does not offer sufficient grounding for making general conclusions based on the results. (Payne 2004: 158-162, Williams 2008: 562-563)

3.4 Elements of observational research

Such an approach should feature the following elements:

- A subject understood as a whole (a statistical model would choose just one aspect)
- A subject is chosen deliberately (whether to illustrate a normal or abnormal case)
- The research procedure studies a phenomenon in natural conditions (not isolated from real world variables and not in laboratory conditions)

Data collection technique used should include:

- Observation (direct or indirect or both)
- The study of documents (usually not primary ones, since these are not available, limiting the extent of qualitative and quantitative data at hand)

Data collection technique used in this approach would not include:

- Thorough discussions, exhaustive polls or the formulation of a formal empirical experiment, the proof of structure, links, dependencies and comparison

The organization of the research should be as follows:

- Establishing a clear goal for the research inquiry

(In this case, to observe China's soft power methods and results in Sri Lanka)

-Collecting what existing data is available on the phenomenon

-In-depth research on the topic (Rosenbaum 2010)

Based on this framework I have chosen a monographical procedure built upon on the observation and collection of data from high-quality secondary sources including journalism by long-established publications with extensive expertise in the subject of study, academic papers by experts in the region, personal observation of events on the ground in Sri Lanka and recorded interviews with subjects directly involved. From these elements, I have constructed this study's plan.

3.5 Genetic method

Finally, this approach employs the genetic method; that is, I explore how did China's soft power influence in Sri Lanka transform into hard power and why this happened. It also uses the logical method; that is, I present how I prepared the research, how I made the observations and how I processed the results.

Such exploratory research design when no formal studies are available is still useful for establishing how best to study further information on the issues raised.

Possible insights include: Familiarity with basic details, settings and concerns; a well-grounded picture of the situation being developed; the generation of new ideas and assumptions; the development of tentative theories or hypotheses; determination of whether a study is feasible in the future; refinement of issues explored, leading to the formulation of new research questions; the establishing of direction for future research and techniques to be developed.

3.6 Research question:

1) How has China's soft power has been effective in Sri Lanka at achieving its goals even to the extent of hard power expansion and influence?

Secondary questions I explore are:

2) What are the limitations to China's success with soft power as positive feelings toward it diminish in Sri Lanka and abroad with its transitions to hard power influence?

3) How has the backing of foreign powers affected rival parties in Sri Lanka and what is the trade off for such an alliance?

4. Historical context

4.1 Early Sri Lanka influences

Ceylon's lush terrain, rich soil and location on lifeline trade routes of South Asia linking the Middle East and Asia have ensured it was always in the sites of a variety of peoples from afar with varying agendas.

Variouly enriched by and invaded by outsiders, Ceylon has also represented strategic ground for anyone wanting to dominate the region. This position was barely diminished by the area's separation from mainland India after 5000 BCE, after which time a land bridge connecting it to the continent disappeared. (thecommonwealth.org 2017)

Fiefdoms in Ceylon have been recorded as far back as the 3rd century BCE, as has internecine warfare, tribal rivalries and the rise and fall of dynasties well acquainted with the traditional notions of hard power dynamics. But the soft power of attractive ideas and culture clearly held sway from the earliest days too, as attested by the growth of imported religion and culture.

The chronicles of the Mahavamsa, Dipavamsa, written by Buddhist scholars, recorded the political rise and fall of several dynasties and the Culavamsa details the earliest known settlements, covering the time from the founding of the Kingdom of Tambapanni in the 6th century BCE. The Mahavamsa also records the arrival of a prince from India named Vijaya, a figure the Sinhalese have often seen as the founder of their civilization in the island. (Geiger 1930: 228, Gunasekara 1995: iii and Holmstrom 1996)

The first Sri Lankan ruler of the Anuradhapura Kingdom, Pandukabhaya, recorded in the 4th century BCE, preceded by a century the introduction of Buddhism by Arhath Mahinda, son of the Indian emperor Ashoka. When Alexander the Great arrived in the region in around 327 BCE, a trading center was already thriving at Māntai (modern-day Tirukketisvaram). By that time Anuradhapura had grown into one of the largest cities in South Asia and Buddhism had been adopted by the city's rulers.

The Anuradhapura Kingdom was taken over by a Tamil ruler, Elara, an invader, in the second century BCE. By 250 BCE Anuradhapura was a city-state that extended its control over more of the island triggering struggles over the next two centuries as power passed back and forth

between successors of the Buddhist Devānampiyatissa and rulers identified as ‘Damila’ in the Mahāvamsa, who mainly came from the south of India. The region’s steady monsoon rains were efficiently channeled toward agriculture by an irrigation system by 100 CE, which became the most elaborate in South Asia.

4.2 Early China influence

It wasn’t long before China’s influence became established: The Chinese Buddhist monk Faxian traveled to Sri Lanka in 410 and resided there for two years before returning home in a merchant ship. The *Karanamudra Sutra* and *Vimuttimagga*, two Buddhist texts in Sri Lanka, were then translated to Chinese in 489 and 505 respectively. Amoghavajra, another powerful Buddhist monk in Chinese history traveled to Sri Lanka and is chronicled as the person responsible for translating the *Karandamudra Sutra* into Chinese and taking it back home in the 8th century. Meanwhile Buddhist nuns from Sri Lanka traveled to China and vice versa in 429 and 433. (Elman and Chao-Hui 2017)

Several million people lived in the northern Dry Zone by 500 CE, an area centered around Anuradhapura – making up the vast majority of the island’s population. As society, trade and power developed and wrestling with foreign influence, whether for the benefit of Ceylon or posing threats, became second nature to islanders – as did a culture of tribal factions and royal rivalries. Time and again, kingdoms were established, developed and grew, fell into conflict with neighboring ones and violence broke out – with regular occurrences of at least one player making use of the influence or strength of a power from abroad.

4.3 Zheng He: Hard and soft power

Following the collapse of the Byzantine Empire, which drove development of the maritime Silk Road, Ceylon encountered its most seminal influence from China. Although the landings of Ming Dynasty’s most celebrated naval explorer, the eunuch admiral Zheng He (1371–1433 or 1435), date back to the 15th century and pre-date the forces of colonialism that later shaped much of Sri Lanka’s collective culture and memory, those observing contemporary events Zheng continue to cite this landmark moment for perspective. Zheng may not have violently invaded or turned the island nation into a plantation to make the Chinese rich, they acknowledge, but the admiral arrived with a complement of 27,000 – 28,000 soldiers, crew, translators and administrators and when he found a local chieftain Alagakkonara troublesome,

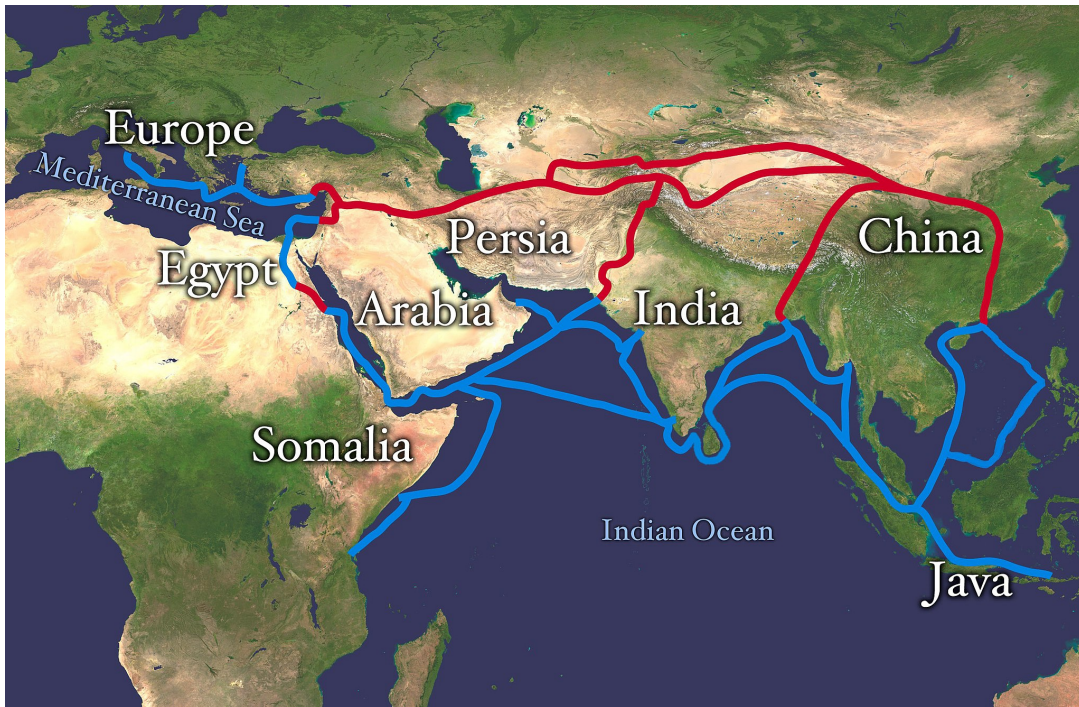
he was hauled back to the Middle Kingdom to kowtow to the emperor, as many Sri Lankans will recall.

The long relationship between the two countries long pre-dates Zheng He's command of the Ming Dynasty's Treasure Fleet on seven expeditions spanning Southeast Asia, South Asia, Western Asia, and East Africa from 1405 to 1433. But He had charge of a fearsome fighting force with the largest of his ships carrying hundreds of soldiers on four decks. The largest ships — called *baoshan* or treasure ships — were likely 440 to 538 feet long by 210 feet wide with an estimated displacement of 20-30,000 tons, roughly a third to half the displacement of modern American aircraft carriers. Each had nine masts on its deck, rigged with square sails that could be adjusted in series to maximize efficiency in different wind conditions. (Pollard 2015: 409)

While historians still debate the dimensions of the ships, whose scale seems to defy credibility for wooden ship construction of that era, it is generally accepted that Zheng had charge of the greatest and most powerful armada in naval history up to that point. It consisted not only of at least 62 *baoshan* but also of 185 troop carriers, supply ships, diplomatic junks, cargo and support craft.

The Ming military strategy behind the immense operation, into which vast resources had been invested, is not conclusively clear to modern researchers, largely owing to the destruction of records of the expedition's exploits after his death.

But at least one eye-witness account survives in some form, thanks to the journals of a member of the armada. A highly detailed account of Zheng's triumph on the Strait of Malacca is chronicled in *The Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores*, published in 1451 by Ma Huan, a Chinese Muslim from Zhejiang who spoke Arabic and was working as an interpreter on at least three of the voyages.



Land and sea Silk Road: The post-Byzantine networks.

Source: Whole world – land and oceans: NASA/Goddard Space Flight Center, commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Silk_route_copy.jpg, accessed Dec. 29, 2017

The historic expedition has also been written about extensively in China, memorialized in poetry, literature, sculpture and myth. The facts known about four military conflicts over the course of the project also aid in understanding both strategy and tactics of Zheng, who was clearly an adroit tactician – but also an able diplomat and negotiator. The record of conflicts, including one in Ceylon, show he was capable of a variety of responses when confronted with enemy forces.

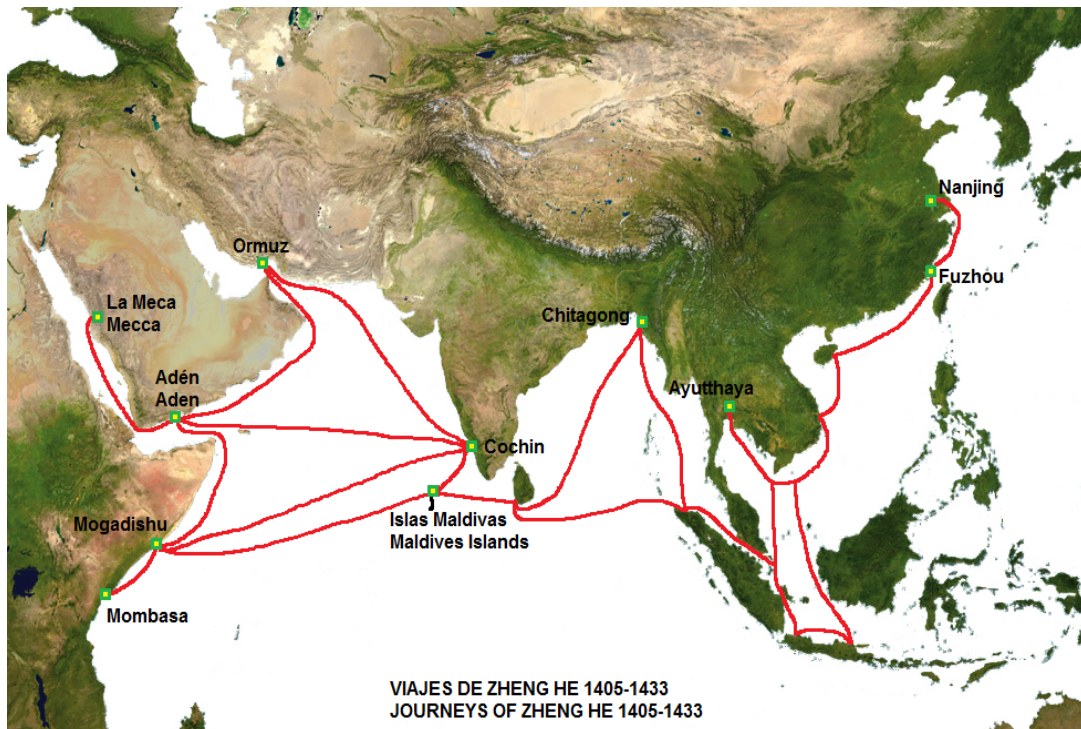
From the beginning the Treasure Fleet mixed business with exploration and diplomacy, carrying more than a million tons of Chinese silk, ceramics, and copper coinage on its westward runs, to be exchanged for tropical spices, fragrant woods, precious gems, animals, textiles, and minerals. And from the beginning it sailed troubled waters. Over the course of his seven expeditions Zheng He would be drawn into several regional conflicts.

4.4 Non-colonial expansion

But history suggests the mission was not primarily out to subjugate or decimate the forces of foreign kingdoms and empires. We also know from stele discovered in the southern port city of

Galle that Zheng made impressive tributes to local temples. The Galle Trilingual Inscription was discovered in 1911 and is now kept at the National Museum of Colombo. It's inscribed in three languages: Chinese, Tamil and Persian and the inscription praises Buddha and chronicles the fleet's donations to the revered Tenavarai Nayanar temple of Tondeswaram, an important religious site to both Hindus and Buddhists. (Association for Asian Studies 1976)

While a compelling analysis could be done based primarily on how Zheng's diverse tactical moves illustrate the Ming Empire's strategic priorities, its concepts of power projection and its motives for use of overwhelming force, the scope of this thesis is to consider the longer-term dynamics of China's relationship with Sri Lanka. Still, the historic memory of the armada's arrival and effects are telling. Specifically, the fleet's remarkable reserve in use of force communicates much.



The route of the voyages of Zheng He's fleet.

Source: Wikimedia Commons, commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Zheng_He.png, accessed Dec. 29, 2017

Deep ambivalence was felt about the powerful visitor and on his third visit to Sri Lanka, Zheng He, also recorded by some historians as Cheng Ho, "was obviously endeavouring to

persuade Sri Lanka to accept the supremacy of the Ming Emperor of China. His action falls in line with the foreign policy that was being pursued then in China. But the manner in which Cheng Ho attempted to establish the supremacy of the Chinese emperor was provocative and in spite of the fact that gifts were bestowed on the king of Sri Lanka, understandably and naturally, he showed an unfriendly disposition to the Chinese admiral,” as one study puts it. (Bastiampillai 2017)

King Alagakkonara, believing that the Ming emperor’s “peaceful and friendly means of persuading neighboring rulers and foreign countries to pledge their allegiance to China” posed a long-term influence threat, planned an attack on Zheng in 1411 but was out-maneuvered by the Chinese admiral, who had enlisted useful intelligence from within the Sri Lankan king’s own ranks. Alagakkonara was captured and taken back to the imperial court in China along with his family and his own court. The Chinese emperor pardoned the upstart king but decided to replace him with someone else as ruler of Sri Lanka and asked the captives to select “a virtuous person from among their tribe or race to be appointed king.”

Zheng’s armada was certainly not above war making, having used force in Japan and few accounts were more storied than Zheng’s 1407 encounter in the Strait of Malacca with the well-established Cantonese pirate Chen Zuyi. With the narrow passage between Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula so essential to international trade, Zheng was forced into action when he encountered Chen Zuyi’s total domination of the area. Operating out of Palembang, a city on Sumatra with a large Chinese population, the pirate’s his heavily armed junks intercepted almost every convoy that passed, including those of the Ming armada.

Zheng boldly demanded Chen’s surrender and the pirate, oddly enough, quickly signaled agreement—while preparing for a surprise pre-emptive strike. But details of his strategem were slipped to Zheng by a local Chinese informant, and in the fierce battle that ensued the pirate fleet was destroyed and 5,000 of its men killed. Chen was captured and held for public execution in Nanjing. (Viviano 2005) In another lesson in the fortunes of those who cooperate, the informant was installed as Palembang’s new ruler. Like many others, he was incorporated into what developed into a far-flung system of allies who acknowledged Ming supremacy in return for diplomatic recognition, military protection and trading rights. By the end of the Yongle reign, the kings or ambassadors of more than 30 foreign states had paid official visits to

the emperor bearing tribute. They were ferried to China in luxurious staterooms on the *baochuan*, Nanjing's legendary shipyard.

This limited willingness to engage in warfare seems to suggest a foreign policy goal that was wholly apart from the goals of colonization that drove the subsequent naval invasions of the region from Europe. Certainly, the experience of the island nation with China contrasted greatly with the coming European invasions.



Comparison of the size of
Admiral Zheng He's treasure ship
and
the ship used during the voyage of C. Columbus

Source: Quora.com, www.quora.com/How-come-that-the-Ming-Dynasty-can-defeat-a-Western-navy-unlike-the-Qing-Dynasty

The Ming Chinese clearly understood naval power projection; one might have expected them to dominate the region instead of the European colonists since their marine communications links and networks were in place so much earlier than those of Westerners. Instead they turned for home after a few short years, never to return. The withdrawal of the Chinese fleets is generally put down to a change in policy on the home front.

With the principle goal to set up tributary states and to impose order – it was a strategy that could be withdrawn from without changing fundamentally the Chinese self image.

There was never a need for systematic conquest and permanent domination through force, which was rarely employed in great scale, as opposed to the European colonists, who were brutal and built local regimes, institutions and monuments to themselves on occupied land in quick order – and who built vast economies importing raw goods from the colonies to enrich themselves and build prestige and power for themselves in the world. The Treasure Fleet's notable discipline and focus on trade suggests that the Ming Empire was after trade and tributary relationships with peoples of Southeast Asia, the North Indian Ocean and East Africa.



Geographia by Francesco Berlinghieri, 1482.

Source:
[commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Francesco_Berlinghieri,_Geographia_incunabolo_per_niccol%C3%B2](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Francesco_Berlinghieri,_Geographia_incunabolo_per_niccol%C3%B2_di_lorenzo_firenze_1482_38_ceylon_02.jpg)
 B2_di_lorenzo_firenze_1482_38_ceylon_02.jpg, accessed Dec. 29, 2017

4.5 Colonial lessons

Forming alliances with important external powers had always proven a strategic imperative for Ceylon but the lessons from colonialism seem to have been burned deepest into cultural memory. One fascinating source on this dynamic from the Tamil perspective suggests this ancient people, whom the Sinhalese have often considered outsiders themselves, were well aware of the importance of building an economy as autonomous as possible from their ethnic counterparts to the south.

Calling the race for power and influence even today “the looming ‘great game’ that will be played out in the Indian Ocean,” one author argues that grasping the importance of economic independence holds an essential lesson for Tamils. Stable economic growth is at the heart of any sensible global and regional policy network, one article suggests. And, if Tamil leaders want to effectively argue for and advocate “the devolution model” they must learn the lessons of Tamil history during colonialism in Ceylon. (Eelapalan 2017)

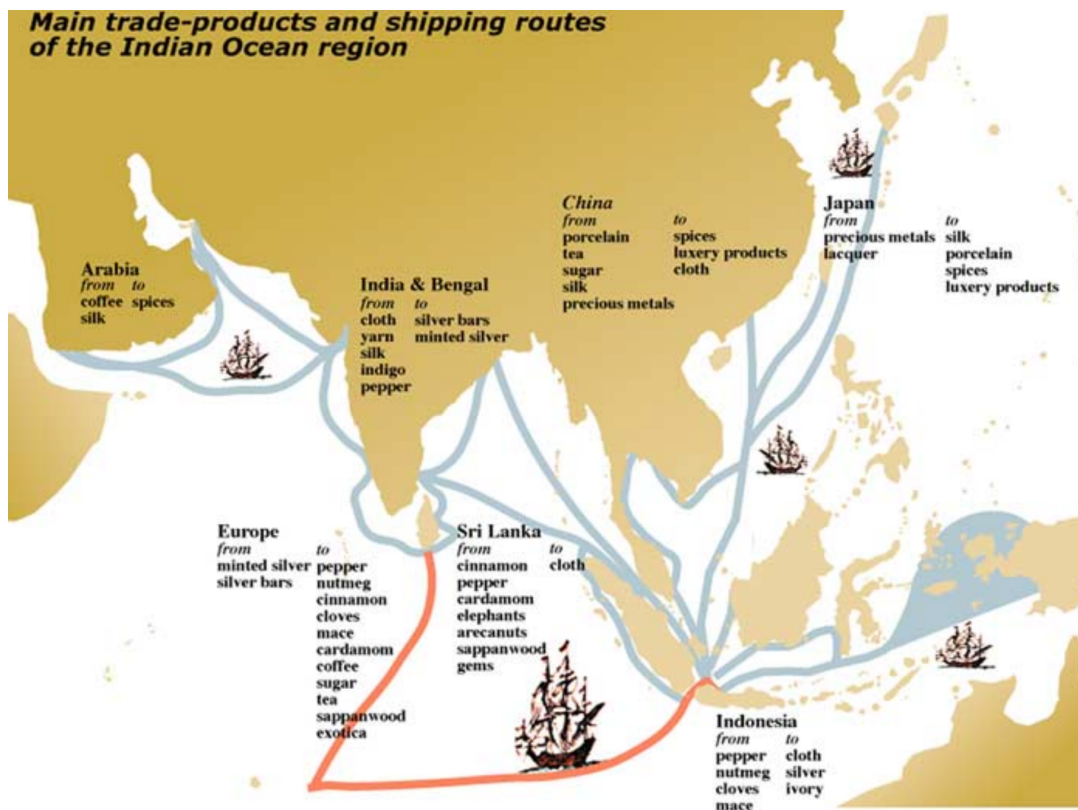
The impact the colonial rule had on the Tamil economy is significant. The way of life and concept of trade irreversibly changed for the Eelam Tamils. This macro economic change had started under the Portuguese rule, aided by the Dutch, and then accelerated under the British.

In the ancient times, India was the hub of the spice trade. Ceylon benefited by proximity to India and to the Indian Ocean trade route. This trade route was in the hands of the Egyptian and Turk navies. Those navies engaged in trade but not in conquests. And the trade itself was a Royal monopoly both in India and in Ceylon. Records show the Sinhala kings primarily sold Cinnamon while the Tamil king sold Elephants and pearls. The Tamil trade was heavily tied to the kingdoms in the Coromandel coast through the narrow ocean path. There was minimal people to people trade with the neighbouring Sinhala kingdoms.

4.6 Role of local rivalry

From the time of the arrival of the Portuguese in 1505, who used Ceylon as a base for their attacks on the Maldives to commander Arabic spice trading ships, both the Tamils and Sinhalese lost some control of their trade freedom, as would be expected. At that time the island was divided into three kingdoms: Jaffna in the north, Kandy in the central highlands and Kotte, the most powerful, in the south-west. Benefits also accompanied the occupation as the southern ports of Colombo and Galle were fortified while in the northern Tamil areas, the Mannar and Point Pedro ports witnessed expansions and growth.

And the trade in elephants, seasonal pearls, areca nuts, palmyrah and coconut products as well as tobacco was still largely carried out by Tamils independently from the cinnamon, betel nuts and gemstones trade that occupied much of the traffic in the southern ports of Colombo and Galle. Using northern and eastern ports of Jaffna and Point Pedro, the Tamils strived for economic self-sufficiency. (Ibid)



Source: Ilankai Tamil Sangam, Association of Tamils of Sri Lanka in the USA, sangam.org/sri-lankan-grid/, accessed Dec. 29, 2017

In addition, Tamils benefited somewhat from Dutch rule later when the Dutch East India company made profits selling pepper, arca nuts and copper, among other commodities, from the Tamil areas. The company also tried to establish linen manufacturing and dye making techniques among the Tamils, using technology and skills borrowed from the Indian centers of Tutucorin and Coromandel so that finished goods could be sold back to India with 20 percent duty tacked on.

Throughout Portuguese rule and then that of the Dutch, the Tamils continued to strive for maintaining a degree of independence in their production, agriculture and trade. (It's also worth noting that in the 140 years of Dutch rule, the colonial powers struggled repeatedly for control of the Central Highlands and Kandy, again underlining the constant shifts in domestic versus foreign power). However, under British colonial rule, which began in 1796, the making of Ceylon into a crown colony before India had such status changed the status quo for good. As the British took over all trade from Ceylon under one administrative system, Tamils lost control over their production base and were forced to move into mainly mercantile and civil services work. From this time on they were integrated into the larger economy of the island nation as a whole.

The late colonial period, in which tea and coffee plantations came to predominate the production and export spheres, again saw alliances with foreign powers used strategically as Tamils brought in the agricultural skills needed for highland terrace cultivation of tea.



European colonies in 1689

Source: (Brief) History of European-Asian Trade, iro.umontreal.ca/~vaucher/Genealogy/Documents/Asia/EuropeanExploration.html, accessed Dec. 29, 2017

But things got worse for the Tamils in modern times, as one northern settlement whose trade was still thriving was forced under the control of the southern power base: “Sinhala Buddhist rulers took over from the British in early 1930s. Driven by a siege mentality, they worked to criminalize the attempted Tamil trade between Valvettithurai and India instead of regulating it. This may have led to the early friction between the state apparatus and the Tamil people and made that town the hub of early resistance. Would Tamils ever be able to exercise independence in the economic policies that impact them?” (Ibid)

The Tamil/Sinhalese conflict, of course, dates back centuries and fortunes have favored both sides in various times, although Tamil’s have often found themselves the victims of aggression or exploitation from the south. Under the British Empire, as was their wont, the English used Tamils in key positions in the tea industry, in which they excelled since the technology and expertise required were brought in from India, where the province of Tamil Nadu is a major population and commercial center. Sri Lankan Tamils have long been part of an extended global

ethnic network, with many connections to North America. One reason they were able to hold their own for the 26 years of the Sri Lankan civil war was the financial and strategic strength of this network, which served as a crucial source of support during the war (Sandilya 2016).

The strategy was a continuation of the one that often has determined the winner in Sri Lankan regional conflicts: Teaming with a large, external power in order to dominate an opponent who is not as well connected. When the tide finally turned against the Tamils in 2009 with their final defeat, it was again because of an alliance with a foreign power – but this time it was the Sinhalese government forces and their budding relationship with China that made all the difference.

5. China and Sri Lanka today

5.1 20th Century role

In modern times Sri Lanka has been divided into nine provinces: Central Province, North Central Province, Northern Province, North Western Province, Eastern Province, Sabaragamuwa Province, Southern Province, Uva Province and Western Province. In 1987 the Northern and Eastern provinces merged into a single unit, the Northern and Eastern Province but a 2006 Supreme Court ruling declared the union unconstitutional and separated the area again. From 1987 to 2006 the terms North and East were commonly used to refer to the areas that belonged to the former Northern Province and Eastern Province. All areas have seen the effects of China's investments, whether in peaceful development or on the winning side in Sri Lanka's civil war.

China's influence on Sri Lanka in the 20th Century has grown from the time the People's Republic of China (PRC) was founded in 1949, when Sri Lanka was one of the first nations to formally recognize the country. Since then the two countries have regularly exchanged high-level visits resulting in a variety of agreements and China has provided economic, military and technical assistance to Sri Lanka. Estimates of the total investment in Sri Lanka's infrastructure from 2004 to 2014 alone are at \$7 billion. (Parashar 2014)

Aid from China has been widely considered a key component to the Sri Lankan government's final success in the civil war, accounting for tens of millions of dollars in advanced weapons technology and the supply of six F7 fighter jets for the Sri Lankan air force. China also encouraged its ally Pakistan to sell more arms and train pilots to fly the planes. The aid came at a time when the US had ended direct military aid for the Sri Lankan government over rising concerns about its human rights record. (Popham 2010)

5.2 Shielding Sri Lanka

China prevented the UN Security Council from putting Sri Lanka on its agenda and a Chinese veto prevented the UNSC from even debating the issue of treatment of Tamil civilians and prisoners of war and was also barred from sending monitors to investigate. Foreign journalists were banned both from the conflict zone and the prison camps set up for Tamil survivors, as was David Miliband, then British foreign secretary, who flew in to try to find out what was going

on. “Local journalists critical of government action were terrorized into silence.” Ultimately, China triumphed where the West failed. (Ibid)

The support from China above and beyond financial guarantees and investment was useful politically, of course; Beijing has long defended Sri Lanka’s dubious human rights record, something it continued well after the close of the civil war and Rajapaksa’s refusal to allow international war crimes inquiries. (Reuters 2014)

During the civil war, Sri Lanka’s economy did surprisingly well, at least in terms of growth, in large part due to military spending, again, which soared to 139 billion rupees (\$1.25 billion) in 2007 toward the final phases of the conflict. It was then predicted to increase by 28 percent in the final intensification of its battle and security deployments. Even as spending boomed, economists predicted a crash in the wake of such largesse, which they believed was unsustainable for such a limited economy. Economic growth, which had rushed to 7.4 percent in 2006, helped along in significant part by deficit financing and tsunami aid, dropped to 6.2 percent in the first half of 2007. Meanwhile the government made rosy predictions of full-year growth of 6–7 percent. But the budget deficit of 8.4 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), combined with a massive public debt of 93 percent of GDP did not bode well. Sri Lankan consumers were hit hard by these state-manipulated fiscal policies and what one report called “the lack of discipline in financial management. For example, inflation is at 17 percent, while real wages have fallen in agriculture and the service industries.” (Wickramasinghe 2008: 191-197)

Prices of essential consumer goods, the report continued, including petrol, powdered milk and bread rose fast, with the government responding, “by encouraging people to eat more rice and drink natural milk – the production of which does not meet the demand. Tourism witnessed a huge slump because of security advisories issued by most Western countries for their citizens traveling to Sri Lanka and the rise in the cost of insurance protection for those tourists.”

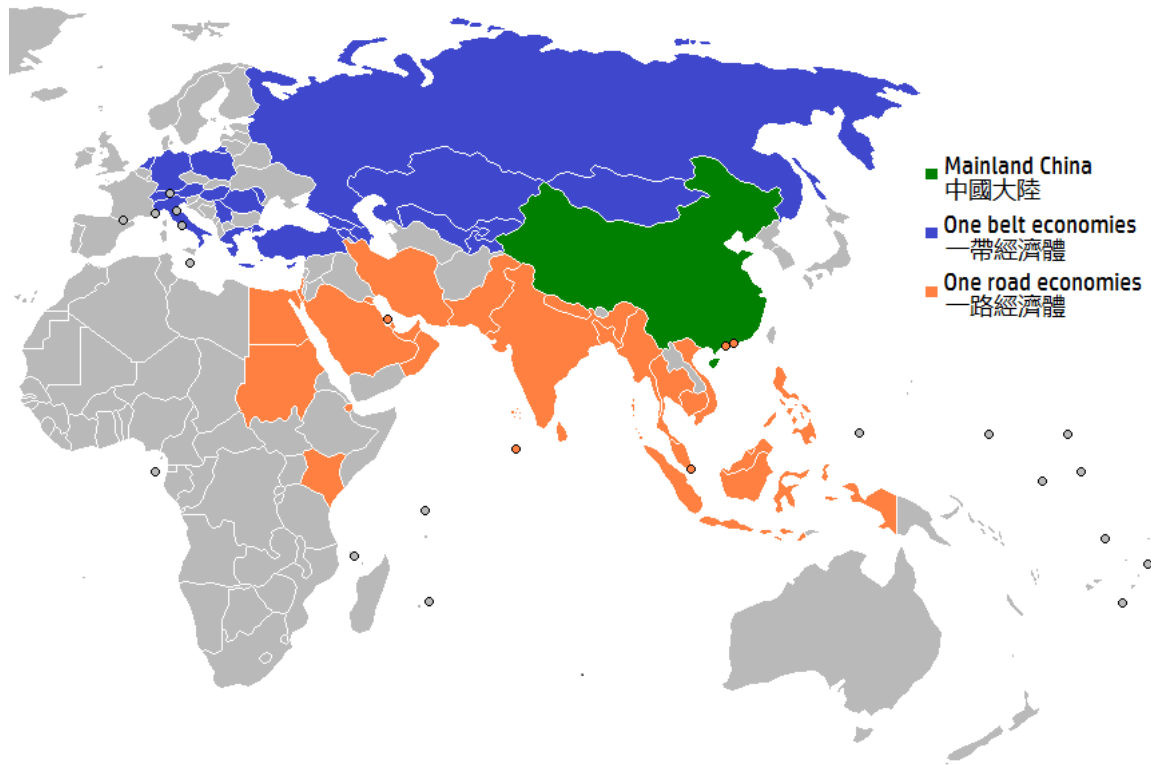


Source: EuromoneyCountryRisk.com,
<http://m.euromoneycountryrisk.com/wikicontent.aspx?cid=e586c775-c65a-4ad0-9e88-3cf933be2cf1>, accessed Dec. 29, 2017

Foreign direct investment (FDI) also fell as a by-product of the instability and violence, which drove down employment and the creation and opportunities, “leading to the increased migration of unskilled workers to the Middle East and a brain drain of trained professionals to developed countries.” Remittances sent home by Sri Lankans workers abroad were essential in helping families meet their daily needs and helped mitigate “potential widespread social discontent. To raise revenues, the non-state sectors are taxed heavily in order to pay the salaries and pensions of state workers and support the luxurious life- styles of politicians.” (Ibid)

5.3 Foreign investment

In one of president Rajapaksa’s more strategic efforts to draw in a foreign capital boost, he also made overtures to India seeking greater investment in Sri Lanka including tenders for offshore oil exploration. The move illustrated what some have seen as the island’s shift in focus from a long history of fostering capitalist development through strong ties with the West. Instead, “a major shift was discerned through 2007 in terms of a greater emphasis on interaction with other Asian countries, particularly India, China, and Japan. This shift has important implications for international engagement in state reform, human rights, security, and the nature of economic development in Sri Lanka.” (Ibid)



Source: Creative Commons, commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:One_Belt_One_Road.png, accessed Dec. 29, 2017

Arguably, China's most closely watched major initiative in recent history is the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road, better known under the collective title One Belt and One Road Initiative (OBOR) but also referred to as the Belt and Road (B&R) and/or the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This long-term vision for a development strategy embraced by president Xi Jinping was formally announced in September and October 2013, focusing on connectivity and cooperation between Eurasian countries, primarily the People's Republic of China (PRC), states along the land-based Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and those along the Maritime Silk Road (MSR). China's push to assume a larger role on the global stage is seen to be the driving force behind the initiatives, along with the rise of China as the center of this trading network (*Social Science Research Networks 2017*, www.ejinsight.com 2016)

Also backed and promoted by Prime Minister Li Keqiang during a state visit to Asia and Europe, the plan is extensively played up *People's Daily* in 2016. Initially billed as *One Belt and One Road*, then later distilled into the *Belt and Road Initiative*, the concept has focused mainly since 2014 on infrastructure investment, construction, railways, highways, the automobile sector, real estate, power grids, and iron and steel. Belt and Road is structured along six

corridors, and the maritime silk road, linking Central and South Asia and the Mediterranean to China and encompassing some 60 countries. Oceania and East Africa are also included with cumulative investment over an indefinite timescale estimated at \$4-8 trillion (The Economist 2016). Accordingly, Chinese strategic interest and investment in Sri Lanka has since grown steadily. It is clear from a brief look at the island nation's major developments since 2009 that China has been the primary agent of growth long after Chinese-made multi-launch rocket systems, provided as government aid, were put into storage.

Significant trade deals were, in fact, in place between China and Sri Lanka long before the civil war commenced. But in recent years, the relationship has warmed and grown steadily in scale. Since 2009 China has built highways, ports and an airport in the south, making it by far the dominant partner, dwarfing India's investments. The ambitious capital city project, funded by Chinese state-owned company China Communications Construction, is the single largest foreign investment in Sri Lanka in recent history. Aside from Colombo, a \$360 million port project, 85 percent funded from China's Export-Import Bank, was the massive Hambantota port expansion at Sri Lanka's southern tip, also touted as a major prize by the Rajapaksa regime. (Gauri 2016)

5.4 China emerges out front

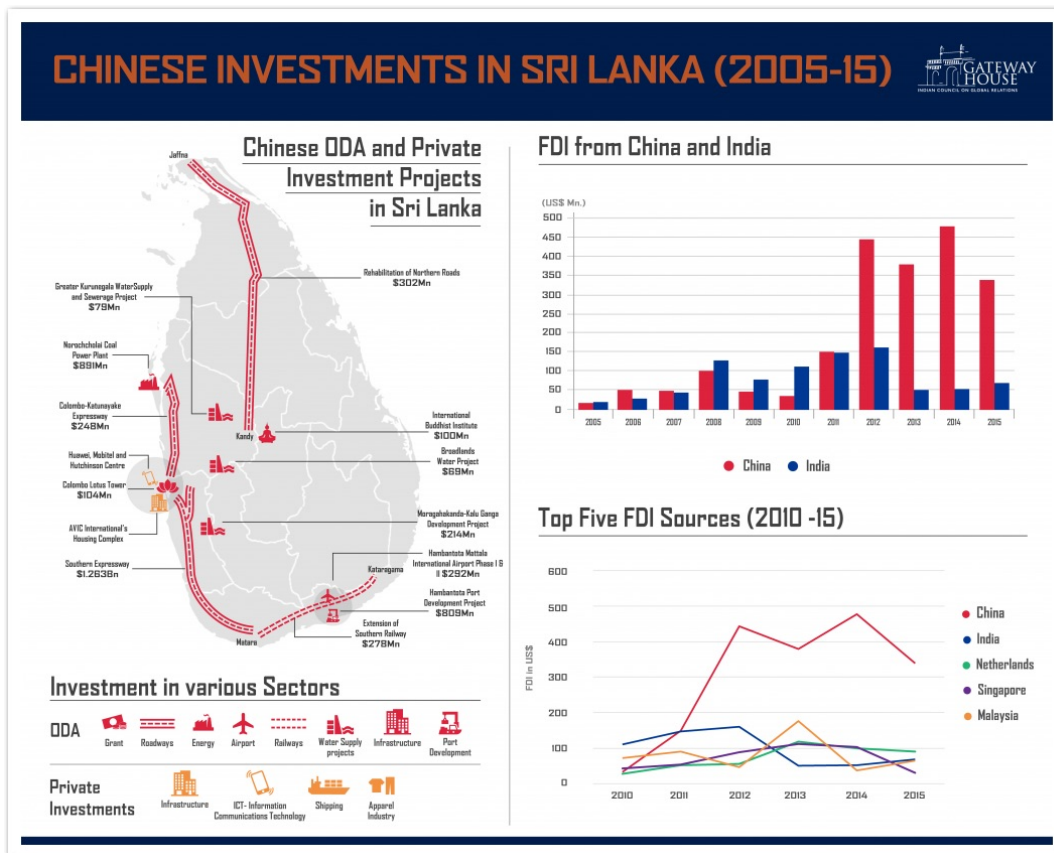
In the decade from 2005, China has emerged as the leading source of Official Development Assistance (ODA) and FDI in Sri Lanka, with a total of \$14 billion. ODA loans and grants comprise the majority of that, with \$12 billion in sectors such as energy, infrastructure and services. Meanwhile private Chinese investment makes up \$2 billion and is growing.

The Hambantota Port Development and the Colombo Port Project were both supported by loans with much of the infrastructure project funding coming via Chinese government companies. The \$1.3 billion Norochcholai Coal Power Plant is being built by the China Machinery Engineering Corporation and Hambantota's \$1 billion in loans comes from the China Harbour Engineering Company Ltd and Sino-Hydro Corp, both of which are building the port. Such mega-projects facilitate Beijing's goals of drawing Sri Lanka into its 21st Century Maritime Silk Road project, all part of the One Belt, One Road initiative. (Colombo Property Investment & Management Group 2017)

Much of the Chinese private money, largely from Hong Kong, makes use of Sri Lanka's cheap and productive labor in addition to the island nation's access to the South Asian, EU and American markets. Prominent investors are mostly Hong Kong billionaires, including Lai Weixuan's AVIC International Hotels Lanka, which has put \$250 million into luxury housing in

Colombo, Robert Kuok's Shangri-La Hotels Lanka, which has \$16 million in a five-star hotel in Colombo, and Li Ka-Shing's Hutchison Telecommunication with a \$20 million investment in improving its already large mobile network in Sri Lanka. China's FDI has far outpaced that of other countries. In 2005, China's FDI was \$16.4 million, or just under 1 percent of total Sri Lankan FDI. In 2015 Chinese private investments reached \$338 million, making up 35 percent of Sri Lanka's total FDI. By comparison, the Netherlands' share of FDI was 9 percent, India's and Malaysia's were both 7 percent and Singapore's 3 percent.

Such heavy private investments have enabled Chinese companies to gain local market dominance and also a leading role in development assistance. In 2005, ODA from China was \$10.5 million – just 1 percent of total ODA to Sri Lanka, far behind that of the major ODA provider then, Japan, with \$238 million or 23 percent of ODA. India at that point trailed with \$7.4 million. By 2015 China had become the largest provider of ODA to Sri Lanka with \$12 billion and a long lead over India's \$1.9 billion, and Japan's \$175 million. (Ibid)



Source: Colombo Property Investment & Management Group (Pvt) Ltd, colombopropertyinvestment.com/page36, accessed Dec. 29, 2017

5.5 Development context

China's focus on two large-scale port projects in Sri Lanka is also part of a larger pattern of billions of dollars in investments regionally building up its maritime strategic capabilities in addition to commercial expansion for shipping purposes, according to veteran observers. Just one example on an ancient connecting marine route, Pakistan's Arabian Sea port of Gwadar "is perched on the world's energy jugular. Sea lanes nearby carry most of China's oil imports; any disruption could choke the world's second-largest economy," the Financial Times has reported.

Like Sri Lanka's projects, the Gwadar facilities were financed and built by China but these are owned outright by Chinese companies. Built in a strategic location, the project was described for years by both Islamabad and Beijing as a strictly civilian operation with no military plans for the harbor, billed as a purely commercial project to boost trade. (Kynge 2017)

As Gwadar becomes more active, Chinese traffic that is both commercial and naval will grow to the region, according to comments from a senior foreign ministry official in Islamabad. "There are no plans for a permanent Chinese naval base. But the relationship is stretching out to the sea," he said.

Gwadar is part of President Xi Jinping's much bigger plans to develop China into a maritime superpower, as evidenced by an analysis of the past six years of progress toward that goal. Investments into a network of harbors across the globe have made Chinese port operators world leaders, with its shipping companies carrying more cargo than those of any other nation. Five of the top 10 container ports in the world are in mainland China, another is in Hong Kong and its coastguard has the world's largest maritime law enforcement fleet. China's navy, meanwhile, is the world's fastest growing among major powers and its fishing armada numbers some 200,000 seagoing vessels.

China understands maritime influence in the same way as Alfred Thayer Mahan, the 19th century American strategist. "Control of the sea," Mahan wrote, "by maritime commerce and naval supremacy, means predominant influence in the world; because, however great the wealth of the land, nothing facilitates the necessary exchanges as does the sea."

If Sri Lanka is hardly alone in winning favorable treatment from China, as Ken Miller has written in *Foreign Affairs*, its situation also typifies a foreign policy expansion goal based primarily based on two tenets: "accumulating foreign currency reserves and sending money abroad in the form of FDI, aid, assistance and loans," adding that Sri Lanka is a prime example of the second strategy. (Goodman 2014)

5.6 Free trade

Indeed, a Free Trade Agreement has been under negotiation between the two countries for years and is expected to be finalized in the near future. (Bilaterals.org 2016) Sri Lanka currently has FTA status with India, Pakistan, Iran, Egypt, Singapore and Israel, while China concluded its first FTA in the region with Pakistan, a model that is to provide the framework for the Sri Lanka pact.

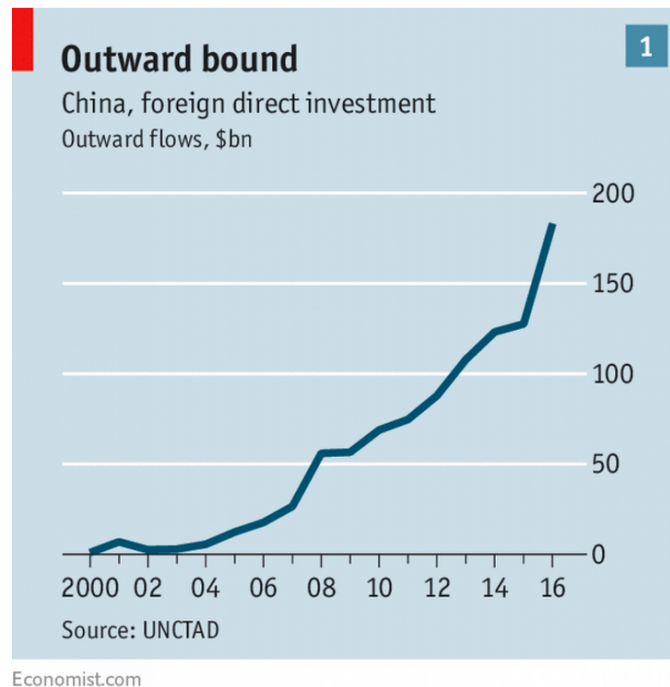
Controversy over the China FTA, even in Sri Lanka's own press, has not had much effect in slowing plans for the pact. The proposed deal has been called "not an economic agreement but an agreement with a very clear political nature" by top policy adviser Dr. Ganeshan Wignaraja, who spoke in November at the Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute of International Relations and Strategic Studies. He also predicted China would also want a rules based order for the future investments in Sri Lanka, adding "you don't negotiate with China if you're a small country the way we are and China being the large market." (Lanka Business Online 2017)

The most recent form of the pact, known as an Everything But Arms (EBA) agreement, would ideally allow Sri Lanka access to China's market for ten years before China obtained access to Sri Lanka's, Wignaraja said, describing an type of accord that is an initiative of the EU under which all imports from the least developed countries are duty-free and quota-free, with the exception of armaments.

But that ideal seems remote from reality: Some 42 percent of Sri Lanka's total imports in 2016 originated in China at a value of 4.2 billion dollars, with bilateral trade with China at 4.4 billion dollars. Sri Lanka's exports to China last year were mainly Ceylon Tea, coconut, footwear parts, apparel, and rubber tires, with growth shown in tea over the last five years.

Though Sri Lankan exports to China declined in 2016 to \$199 million from the previous year's \$293 million, exports have been trending upward, increasing from \$35 million in 2007. Top imports from China in 2016 were mobile phones, boats and vessels, handmade fabrics and petroleum. (Ibid)

5.7 Energy security



Source: *The Economist*. Dec. 14, 2017, www.economist.com/news/briefing/21732545-and-stealthily-trying-shape-public-opinion-its-favour-how-chinas-sharp-power-muting, accessed Dec. 29, 2017.

Complicating matters has been the scarcity of affordable oil for Sri Lanka. The country's only refinery, at Sapugaskanda, is a mid-20th-century facility that has long been calibrated to process light crude from Iran, a major supplier covering almost 93 percent of Sri Lanka's needs (with Iran also supporting the Rajapaksa regime, presumably as an important client, during the civil war with military aid). (Ameen 2013)

With Sri Lanka importing 39,000 barrels a day, prices ratcheted up severely when sanctions against Iran, first imposed in 1979, were expanded in 1995 to include firms dealing with the Iranian state. In 2006 the *UN Security Council* added more after Iran refused to suspend its uranium enrichment program.

This forestalled a massive modernization commitment of \$1 billion for Sapugaskanda promised by Iran and Susantha Silva, managing director of the state-run Ceylon Petroleum Corporation, said that shipments from Iran had to be reduced by nearly a third. (Ibid)

Oil payments made up a quarter of Sri Lanka's \$20 billion import fees in 2012, about equivalent to all the remittances sent home by Sri Lankan workers with jobs in the Middle East. Neither were bank credits available to Colombo for buying oil, prompting Iran to lend the country the funds needed to pay for it. Substitute sources in Oman, Saudi Arabia, Singapore and Vietnam were found but at far higher prices and without the same low-sulphur quality as Iran's, which seemed the only crude not to jam up the Sapugaskanda facility. (Ibid)

China's global strategy regarding oil is shifting rapidly as domestic energy demands rise inexorably, making in an increasingly competitive importer. With net imports of oil at 150 million tonnes in 2004 and 220 million tonnes in 2009, making up some 55 per cent of the country's total oil consumption for that year. Projections hold that China will be importing 400-500 million tonnes by 2020, causing China to overtake the United States as the largest net importer of oil. The rise in this demand has been dramatic: In 1980 China's energy demand was just one-quarter of that of the countries that now make up the EU, accounting for 6 per cent of world energy use. By 2006 China was consuming the same amount of energy as the EU and in 2009 it was on a par with the United States as the world's largest consumer of energy, accounting for 20 per cent of global energy demand. (Dannreuther 2011)

In 2006, China also became the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases through energy use. Despite these soaring energy needs, 90 per cent of China's overall energy demand in 2010 was satisfied from domestic supplies, which include the third largest reserves of coal in the world. As the need for energy security comes to the fore, China's expansionist policies abroad have caused increasing anxiety abroad that this will help drive its path to hegemon status.

Indeed, the modernization of China's naval fleet can be seen as driven at least in part by the need to guarantee energy security as have oil deals increasingly made throughout Asia. Strategic balancing of power by integrating oil networks with Russia are further evidence of long-term reforms and restructuring. Diplomatic support for 'rogue' nations that are oil suppliers such as Iran are also adding to the mix of new alliances that are setting many Western observers on edge. (Ibid)

India's concerns over Chinese investment in Sri Lankan ports and infrastructure have much basis in the view that they are part of its energy-driven growth plan. (Pehrson 2006)

5.8 Mounting debt concerns

Others who have followed China's overtures to Sri Lanka and other small nations in past years are also concerned that the development deals leave such recipients over a barrel in the long

term, even if they represent attractive-sounding infrastructure aid in the short term. This last aspect makes them especially appealing to government leaders who are struggling with economic problems such as Sri Lanka's war debts and who would be unable to win financing for such projects under normal circumstances. (Schultz 2017)

The Hambantota port project in particular signifies a diminishing of Sri Lanka's close relationship with India in favor of one more integrated with China, according to journalist Kai Schultz, which has been the trend in recent years. As Western nations accused former president Rajapaksa of grievous human rights abuses during the final stages of Sri Lanka's civil war, "China extended billions of dollars of loans to Mr. Rajapaksa's government for new infrastructure projects."

In July, the state-controlled China Merchants Port Holdings Company signed a deal with the Sri Lanka Ports Authority to control a 70 percent stake Hambantota, and in December the Sri Lankan parliament voted to grant tax concessions to a joint venture led by China to develop the port. The government then "completed the handover of the port to two state-controlled entities run through China Merchants Port Holdings, which has already made its first payment of \$300 million to the Sri Lankan government."

Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, appearing to be putting a positive gloss on the handover, addressed parliament, telling them that the move was the first step in paying back Sri Lanka's massive debts, adding that a planned economic zone and industrialization in the area "will lead to economic development and promote tourism."

In the bigger picture, according to economists, the Sri Lanka move sets a precedent that could well predict the future of other countries that owe money to China in which they will be forced to accept deals that involve the signing over of territory. Ironically, when the original port deal was signed in July, Namal Rajapaksa, a member of parliament and son of the former president, asked on Twitter whether the government was "playing geopolitics with national assets." (Ibid) Meanwhile, trade with Sri Lanka is also drawing the two nations closer together as increasing ties form. Bilateral trade exceeded \$3 billion in 2013, with China just behind India as a source for Sri Lanka's imports. (Bilaterals.org 2016)

The FTA pact is in line with China's regional strategies, following such agreements with smaller economies including New Zealand, Switzerland and Iceland, but with growing focus on more significant ones in Australia, South Korea and Japan. And a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman said in 2014 that his country was planning greater maritime cooperation with Sri Lanka, to help build a "21st-century Maritime Silk Road." (Ibid)

China's funding for the \$1.4B Port City project in Colombo, begun in 2014, shored up Sri Lanka's financial crisis at least temporarily. Rajapaksa's successor, president Sirisena, despite campaigning on a platform of keeping a closer watch on Chinese influence in Sri Lanka in 2015, became seemingly resigned to economic realities and allowed China to return to pole position among FDI sources, announcing the reversal in Beijing on a state visit that appeared intended to symbolize warming relations. And Sirisena asked for an equity-for-debt agreement in hopes of sorting out Sri Lanka's \$2.4 billion trade deficit with China. (BBC 2015)

Among the changes adopted to get the project back on track were applying a 99-year lease to the land rather than allowing China to buy it outright and ensuring that Sri Lanka's government has a role in managing the project. (Evans 2016)

China's investments and long-term strategy in Sri Lanka over the past few years are hardly outliers. They fit into a well-established pattern in which the country increasingly is building its FDI portfolio. (The Economist 2017)

As for Sri Lanka, national debt remains a serious issue. In recent years debt from infrastructure investments has soared to the point of near bankruptcy, requiring a bailout from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In May 2016, Krystal Tan, an Asia economist at Capital Economics, said, "Without an IMF loan, Sri Lanka would have been in a precarious position," adding that "foreign exchange reserves only covered around 80 percent of short-term external debt." (Shaffer 2016)



Source: *N.R. Ravindra Deyshappriya, London School of Economics*, based on data from Export Development Board, Central Bank and Sri Lanka Customs, May 22, 2017, blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2017/05/22/sri-lanka-china-trade-relations-time-to-focus-on-unexplored-chinese-markets/, accessed Dec. 29, 2017

The IMF had agreed to provide a \$1.5 billion bailout loan in April 2016 after Sri Lanka provided a set of criteria intended to improve its economy. *But while the government is aiming to partly address this by raising its low revenue collection, partly through an increase in the value-added tax rate, the country has a spotty record on tax collection.*

By the fourth quarter of 2016 the debt was estimated at \$64.9 billion. Additional debt had been incurred by state-owned organizations and this was estimated at \$9.5 billion. Since early 2015, domestic debt has increased by 12 percent and external debt by 25 percent. (Shepard 2016)

6. Limits of China's soft power

6.1 Indirect influence role

The role of non-state institutions and the media are significant in China's relations with Sri Lanka and likely more significant is the independence of such actors. Nye (2014: 101) describes the role of non-state institutions as key players in soft power, constituting a kind of public diplomacy. Indeed, when a message issues forth not from a government but from a third party, such as *Medicins sans frontiers* or the BBC, it is likely to have more credibility than state-crafted agitprop, he argues. The state faces a trade-off in allowing non-profits and independent media to express their views and to conduct highly visible activities because their views and expressions will not always align with the government's - indeed they may have totally different goals. But the state wins credibility and prestige by allowing them to operate independently even if they are critical of the government. And when they reinforce the state's position, they have more influence than would messages originating from the state.

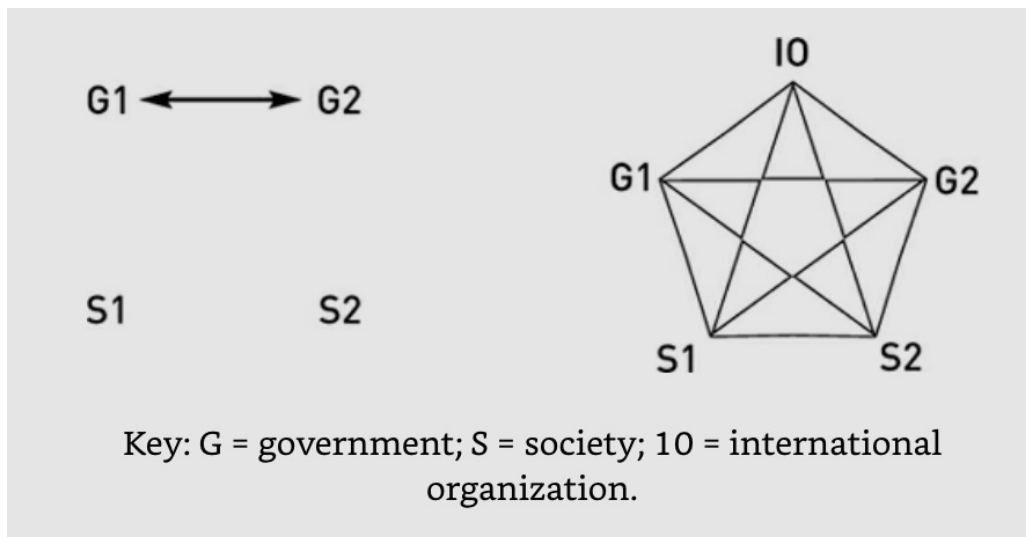


Fig. 3: Two models of diplomacy

Source: Nye 2014: 101

6.2 Blocking outsiders

Certainly the Sri Lankan government has proven time and again that it understands well the lack of control it will have if NGOs and the media are given a free hand. During the last years of the war, as 280,000 Tamils surrendered to control by the regime forces from the south, they

were herded into camps where the media was barred. So too were international aid organizations including *Medicins sans frontiers*. (Suntharalingam 2009: 1448)

At that time, official estimates were that these masses of war prisoners would be held for three years and conditions were grim to the point there malnutrition was limiting the healing process for war wounds – and this in a people who had already been enduring the privations of war and were not well nourished even before surrender.

“In 2008 all international NGOs working in the northern region of Vanni, including *Medecins Sans Frontieres*, were ordered out,” wrote Suntharalingam, a visiting British doctor and Tamil. “It became a war without any witnesses.”

In addition, during the last three years of the war, according to this account, just a handful of doctors remained on, with the more than 300,000 Tamils in need of care; three of these doctors also acted as sources of scarce and blocked information for the outside world, describing what they saw to the British media and to international humanitarian organizations.

The three were later arrested and held incommunicado and their whereabouts were a mystery at the time of this account by the British doctor, who had volunteered her services before foreigners and NGOs were barred from the Tamil regions.

6.3 Image control

The Rajapaksa regime’s efforts to control the image while neutering any independent institution’s access were extensive – and sometimes rather creative while at the same time deeply cynical. As one point in 2007, in the wake of a mass flight of civilians who had fled the Batticaloa area to escape intensive fighting, the Sri Lankan government created special economic zones “to portray a sense of normalcy to donor agencies and to lure them into funding development of the Eastern Province.” (Wickramasinghe 2008: 191-197)

These development schemes often tended to displace local Tamils in order to obtain valuable properties for investment speculation. The area today is dotted with luxury beachfront hotels and resorts built on land once belonging to Tamil families. (Tizard 2012)

The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) at the time reported that violence had sent thousands fleeing, with estimates of internally displaced people in the Eastern Province placed at 50,136. Many of these refugees were living in rudimentary camps or occupying schools and temples as they awaited the dim hope of eventually returning to their homes. The international community’s efforts to raise awareness of the crisis and effects of the war on civilians focused on the Sri Lankan military alliance with Vinayagamoorthi Muralitharan, also

known as Colonel Karuna, and his TVMP, a faction of the Tamil Tigers (LTTE) which had split off to join with the government. These forces, like the LTTE, had a record of recruiting child soldiers into its ranks. But the government dismissed most criticism of its human rights record as “propaganda disseminated for partisan purposes by local and international human rights activists.” (Ibid)

Another illustration of the government’s resistance to outside involvement was its response to the “Play by the Rules” campaign launched that year by Amnesty International to tie in with Sri Lanka’s reaching the finals of the World Cup in cricket. It referred to the findings of a U.N. Special Envoy Allan Rock, which revealed “the large-scale recruitment of child soldiers by the LTTE as well as by Karuna’s faction – with the connivance of the Sri Lankan army, which gives Karuna’s men protection and uses them against the LTTE.” (Ibid)

Although the report was refuted by the government, independent observers reported daily disappearances and “suspicious deaths caused by security forces, especially in the Northern and Eastern Provinces. The count so far is over 300 deaths as well as disappearances and abductions, even in the city of Colombo.”

6.4 Rejection of international norms

The Rajapaska regime was equally unwilling to comply with calls for an independent international inquiry into the disappearance of 17 local employees of a French NGO, Action contre la Faim (Action Against Hunger) in August 2006, “thus giving credence to suspicions that the military had a hand in the killings.” These extra-judicial actions were part of a wide-ranging sweep of violence that was never independently investigated, including the shooting deaths of five youths on a beach in Trincomalee.

Neither were educational institutions, even local ones, permitted to feel free from interference. Eastern University Vice Chancellor Professor Sivasubramaniam Raveendranath, abducted in a high-security zone in Colombo in December 2006, was never found. (Ibid)

There can be little argument that Sri Lanka or China, which strongly backed the island government’s policies and military moves at the close of the war and beyond, are likely to benefit from any independent media or NGO report. Nor is the essential soft power element of attractiveness a part of their tool kit – and certainly not beauty or charisma, as Nye describes (2014: 92)

In the case of Sri Lanka as China’s target nation, soft power worked well enough as long as development projects, roads, infrastructure improvements and construction jobs kept islanders

busy and able to buy increasingly expensive consumer goods. But it's unclear whether good feelings about China will persist now that it has won all but ownership of the Hambantota port, an eventuality many Sri Lankans feared. China's being awarded a 99-year lease to oversee and operate the mega-port facility has already generated much critical press abroad and even a trace of it at home. The port's channels, which were dredged on an extensive scale with very little of the constraint that would normally be necessary because of environmental impacts, are deep enough to allow for the docking of major vessels, including military naval ships. The two Chinese submarine dockings in Sri Lanka, along with China's use of military ships at its port project in Pakistan, which followed assurances that the facility was strictly for commercial use, seem a reliable indicator of what's to come.

Despite the current Sri Lankan president, Sirisena, having successfully campaigned against Rajapaksa by arguing that too many concessions had been granted to China, the new president has now also fallen into line.

6.5 The debt trap

It's now clear that the Chinese holds sufficient power via their loans and investments in Sri Lanka development projects to assure that any new regime would pose little threat to their plans. A rising chorus (Schultz 2017) is now decrying a tactic described as China deliberately getting weak states into a financial hole by offering them easy credit for prestige projects that will win the leaders of target countries favor with their domestic populations and, by extension, the opportunity to extend or solidify their regimes even if their economic or governance policies are shaky.

Another dimension to China's influence abroad, described as sharp power by one correspondent (The Economist 2017), may also be seen in Sri Lanka.

China's approach could be called "sharp power". It stops well short of the hard power, wielded through military force or economic muscle; but it is distinct from the soft attraction of culture and values, and more malign. Sharp power is a term coined by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), a think-tank in Washington, DC, funded mainly by Congress. It works by manipulation and pressure. Anne-Marie Brady of the University of

Canterbury in New Zealand refers to China's intrusions as a "new global battle" to "guide, buy or coerce political influence".

The result is different from the cold war—less dangerous, but harder to deal with. Whereas the Soviet Union and the West were sworn enemies, China is a keenly courted trading partner that is investing huge sums beyond its borders. This naturally gives it influence, which it is using to shape debate abroad in areas where it wants to muzzle criticism, such as its political system, human-rights abuses and expansive territorial claims. It especially wants to stifle discussion of the Dalai Lama, Falun Gong, an outlawed spiritual movement, and the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989.

China's loans and ambitious development plans, not surprisingly, come with strings attached. They are also part of a well-developed strategy for co-opting smaller nations that lie in key positions along the Belt and Road design. But the Asian giant's image is hardly being burnished as it muscled its way into a new regional power, having already earned the sobriquet "Debt trap diplomacy." (Chellaney 2017).

Another experienced observer recently reported that pop culture in China is, for the first time, beginning to play up images of the country emerging as a world leader even to the extent of Rambo-like heroes in mass-hit action films stepping in while the Americans are nowhere to be seen. (Osnos 2018). Thus, if China's soft power skills remains limited, its ambitions are far less so. And the world will have to count on the emergence of a new power either way.

7. Conclusion

7.1 Smart power elusive

Although it has been one of the world's most celebrated islands ever since Marco Polo heaped praises upon it, Sri Lanka has never developed in isolation. Its status as a rich, strategic, tropical prize has both blessed and cursed its people and its fate. But what is happening in the land of tea plantations and elephants is not an aberration – Sri Lanka is just one pearl on China's string, according to well-attuned observers. Not everything that China has wrought there has been for China's own benefit, argue some, and certainly no one misses the 26 years of war that this major player largely brought to a close. Far more troubling are the mass deaths, the press shutdown and the threats and violence toward international agencies who have tried to take a closer look at these events.

Indeed, it's troubling that the even what created China's first great opening into backing the Sri Lankan government was the withholding of aid during the war by the West over their concerns about human rights issues. Whether Sri Lankan elites were de facto rewarded for their brutality or simply found a sponsor who was less concerned about such things can and will be argued.

What remains clear is that the soft power touted by Xi Jinping, for the present, only goes so far. It's not surprising that those to whom you have made massive, generous loans will sing your praises. Whether larger audiences beyond the island agree may not matter so much for now if the goal is simply to continue an epic development scheme in the region. But if the goal is the exercise of real soft power, then China would be wise to consider the same challenge that other nations, including the United States, have faced in presenting an attractive face to the world.

Smart power, or the balancing of soft and hard power in the correct proportion – something that Nye (2014: 95) has always advocated, although under different labels – can work to its full potential only if both sides of the coin are effective. And shifting from coercion to attracting others by your example is the real test in both East and West, he argues. It is a high bar: it is, after all, the move “from exporting fear to inspiring optimism and hope.”

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