

Pakistan in Sri Lanka's Changing Foreign Policy

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Summary

On 23 February 2021, Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan visited Sri Lanka with Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi, Commerce Adviser Abdul Razzak Dawood, Special Assistant Syed Zulfikar Abbas Bukhari and 40 leading Pakistani businessmen. However, the visit was overshadowed by Colombo's challenges at the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council (UNHRC) where the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet submitted a resolution.¹ The Sri Lankan government rejected the UNHRC resolution and has sought assistance from China, Russia, Pakistan and other member states to defeat it. China has given its unconditional support to Sri Lanka. Regardless of the ultimate fate of the UNHRC resolution, what is certain is that the China-Sri Lanka axis will be further strengthened, and Pakistan's support will add extra weight to it. Khan's remarks reflecting his desire to connect the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) infrastructure to the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka suggests Pakistan's long-term ambition of generating more revenue from the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) than is currently being collected for the debt-ridden state. This 'infrastructural axis' between Pakistan, Sri Lanka and China will become fully operational when projects such as the CPEC are completed.

India, meanwhile, faces a 'triangular' security challenge after being surrounded by Chinese BRI infrastructure on three sides – with the CPEC in Pakistan, the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor in Myanmar and Hambantota in Sri Lanka. The recent Chinese power project in Sri Lanka, and the consequent objections it elicited from India due to its proximity to the mainland, offer clear signs of India's mounting concerns about China. Tensions are likely to grow, as there is no clear regional security architecture to mitigate mistrust and uncertainty. Pakistan's growing ties with China and India's strong relations with the United States (US) has triggered regional geopolitical competition by which the BRI and the Indo Pacific of the US are being executed simultaneously.

Sri Lanka rhetorically and politically supports both strategies. However, its allegedly 'balanced' foreign policy is experiencing a China tilt, as seen in its preference to bandwagon with China, as witnessed by recent decisions taken by the Gotabaya Rajapaksa government on the US Millennium Challenge Compact grant, Japan's Light Rail Transit and India's East Container Terminal. China's growing sphere of influence, bolstered through the help of Pakistan and Sri Lanka, will further heighten India's security concerns. Sri Lanka should recalibrate its foreign policy to 'balance' and benefit from both India and China while still strengthening its regional relationship with other nations such as Pakistan.

¹ The resolution allows the UN "to collect, consolidate, analyse and preserve information and evidence, and to develop possible strategies for future accountability processes for gross violations of human rights or serious violations of international humanitarian law in Sri Lanka, to advocate for victims and survivors, and to support relevant judicial and other proceedings." *Aljazeera*, 25 March 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/25/what-does-un-human-rights-resolution-mean-for-sri-lanka>.

Introduction

Pakistan – which is wedged between the four borders of India, China, Afghanistan and Iran – has its own unique geopolitical complexity that has contributed to levels of distrust by its neighbours. On its western border, “Afghans still view Pakistan with deep mistrust, blaming it for the resurgence of the Taliban and for giving the insurgents a safe-haven from which to operate”² while towards its East, on the border of Jammu and Kashmir, historical tensions with India continue.

Just like Pakistan, Sri Lanka, placed in a vital geostrategic location in the Indian Ocean, faces its own geopolitical challenges. The island is a part of the conceptual map of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the United States’ (US) Indo-Pacific Strategy. Indo-Lankan mistrust originates from pre- and post-civil war Indian intervention in Sri Lanka that sought to address Tamilian grievances, a concern that remains unresolved to the present day.

In addition, China is expanding its sphere of influence in both Sri Lanka and Pakistan. This has increased the bilateral trust deficit and has become a grave security concern for India. On India’s northern borders, a two-front confrontation with China and Pakistan is brewing. The recent US\$12 million (S\$16.2 million) Chinese energy project³ close to Indian shores has become a security concern for India. President Gotabaya Rajapaksa’s government approved the joint venture energy project with Chinese company MS/Sinosar-Etechwin. Weeks before this decision, an important tri-lateral agreement along with India and Japan on the Colombo East Port Terminal (ECT) was cancelled and repositioned to the Western Container Terminal. It was against this tense geopolitical backdrop that Prime Minister Imran Khan visited Sri Lanka in February 2021.

Khan’s Visit to Colombo and Sri Lanka at the UNHRC

Khan is the first head of government to visit Sri Lanka since the pandemic began. His arrival occurred at a significant juncture. Sri Lanka is facing international pressure from the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council’s (UNHRC) resolution against the country. While the government has rejected the resolution, it will require the support of the member states to defeat the resolution in the coming weeks. With 18 nations⁴ in support – along with China, Russia and Pakistan – Sri Lankan will need more votes to defeat the resolution. India’s vote will be decisive in understanding New Delhi’s political posture towards its domestic Tamil community in South India and how strongly it will seek to address the concerns of the Tamils in Sri Lanka.

² Rahim Faiez, ‘Pakistan’s Prime Minister Khan on ‘Historic’ First Visit to Afghanistan’, *The Diplomat*, 20 November 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/11/pakistans-prime-minister-khan-on-historic-first-visit-to-afghanistan/>. Accessed on 1 March 2021.

³ S Rubatheesan, ‘India fumes as China gets northern power projects’, *The Sunday Times*, 7 February 2021, <http://www.sundaytimes.lk/210207/news/india-fumes-as-china-gets-northern-power-projects-431894.html>. Accessed on 1 March 2021.

⁴ Mahinda Aluthgedara, ‘46th UNHRC Session: 18 countries pledge to support Sri Lanka’, *Daily News*, 25 February 2021, <https://dailynews.lk/2021/02/25/local/242500/46th-unhrc-session-18-countries-pledge-support-sri-lanka>. Accessed on 1 March 2021.

This time Sri Lanka will face firm resistance from many UNHRC member states, due to its failure since 2009 to fulfill its commitments of genuine reconciliation, aggravated further by the government's decision last year to withdraw from its co-sponsored resolution in 2015. The 2021 resolution highlights the minority concerns along with the country's growing militarisation.⁵ Pakistan's support will be an important in winning the Islamic members' support at the Council. The narrative against the resolution, as articulated by Sri Lankan foreign secretary, positions the Global North teaming up against the Global South, "We fear whether they (the Global North) will hijack the agenda of the UNHRC to target Sri Lanka",⁶ reflecting the government's alignment with its domestic ultra-nationalist voter base. Even if the vote is passed against Sri Lanka at the UNHRC, the government could effortlessly weaponise its ultra-nationalist agenda to satisfy the domestic majoritarian Sinhalese Buddhist constituency.

Khan's Parliamentary Speech and Forced Cremation

The last foreign leader to address the Sri Lankan parliament was India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his visit in 2015.⁷ Khan was initially scheduled to speak in the Sri Lankan parliament, but his address was cancelled. Between the announcement of the speech and the cancellation, another heated political development took place between Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa and his Pakistani counterpart. This involved Rajapaksa's comment in parliament granting permission to Islamic burial rights. Khan responded by tweeting, "We welcome Sri Lankan PM Mahinda Rajapaksa's assurance given in Sri Lankan parliament today allowing Muslims to bury those who died from COVID-19", endorsing the move as the right decision. This Sri Lankan government soon backtracked on its initial policy decision of forced cremation.

This backtracking further aggravated the sentiments of the Muslim community. Rauf Hakeem, Leader of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress and a parliamentarian, explained, "Our government embarrassed our own Prime Minister first. Now they are embarrassing the Prime Minister of another country visiting us. [T]his is pathetic. They [the government] are going back on their own positions and statements repeatedly, like they did with the assurance on burials. This sort of blowing hot and cold, especially in diplomacy, reflects a lack of maturity and could impact our relations with our long-term friends and partners."⁸ The consequence of the unpleasant environment caused by the forced cremation of Muslims could become a heated event in the parliament. Realistically, this could be the

⁵ United Nations Human Rights Council, '46th session of the Human Rights Council Report of OHCHR on promoting reconciliation, accountability and human rights in Sri Lanka', <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=26787&LangID=E>. Accessed on 1 March 2021.

⁶ Kelum Bandara, 'Core-group working on SL seeks consensual resolution at UNHRC – Foreign Secretary Admiral Prof. Jayanath Colombage', *Daily Mirror*, 25 January 2021, <http://www.dailymirror.lk/opinion/Core-group-working-on-SL-seeks-consensual-resolution-at-UNHRC-Foreign-Secretary-Admiral-Prof-Jaya/172-204396>. Accessed on 2 March 2021.

⁷ Meera Srinivasan, 'Modi's address a message to our govt: Wigneswaran', *The Hindu*, 8 April 2016, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/south-asia/modis-address-a-message-to-our-govt-wigneswaran/article6994042.ece>. Accessed on 2 March 2021.

⁸ Meera Srinivasan, 'Sri Lanka cancels Imran Khan's Parliament address a week ahead of visit', *The Hindu*, 17 February 2021. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/sri-lanka-cancels-imran-khans-parliament-address-a-week-ahead-of-visit/article33857707.ece>.

reason for cancelling the speech by Khan in the parliament and not the official announcement which cited COVID-19 preventive measures. The forced cremation of Muslims has also become a concern at the UNHRC, where Michelle Bachelet, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, has raised⁹ concerns regarding Muslim minority rights, questioning forced cremation in addition to past Tamilian rights. Human Rights Watch¹⁰ has made a clear reference regarding forced burial and suppression of minority rights in its latest report. In this regard, Pakistan's point of view and support will be essential for Sri Lanka to win the support of the Islamic nations in the battle at the UNHRC.

The same applies to India, where Tamil grievances are a serious concern. Since the end of the civil war in 2009, Sri Lanka has failed multiple times to deliver a solution to this problem. India has raised concerns in this regard, as exemplified by the visit of India's Foreign Minister S Jaishankar to Colombo in January 2021, where he stated that the Sri Lankan government needs to take a clear position on the devolution of power. There was silence on this matter from both the Sri Lankan president and prime minister, while its provincial council minister Rear Admiral (Dr) Sarath Weerasekera rejected¹¹ the 13th amendment and power-sharing arrangement, questioning India's moral right to intervene. This leaves little or no space for a constructive avenue to address Tamil grievances. Both Muslim and Tamil grievances depict the Sri Lankan state's continuous failure, due to its policy circle's postponement of the issue, to produce any comprehensive solution for the minority community, thereby leaving this dual-pronged concern for Sri Lanka's Muslim and Tamil communities unaddressed, and in the process offering little reason for the global community to support Colombo's rejection of the resolution. Pakistan's unwillingness to voice its concerns on forced cremation, unlike India's voiced concern for Tamil grievances, explains the former's passive foreign policy and desire to avoid becoming entangled in Sri Lanka's domestic affairs, much like China. Although in terms of rhetoric, by refusing to make the forced creation of Muslims an issue, the Pakistan government will be tacitly accepting Rajapaksa's tilt away from India towards China, perhaps opening a significant backdoor for it to provide military assistance to Sri Lanka in the future.

Pakistan-Sri Lanka Military Engagement

In 2006, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam attempted to assassinate Pakistan's High Commissioner, Bashir Wali Mohmand. He was the only high commissioner targeted by the rebels. The strong Pakistan-Sri Lanka military ties became a critical factor during the war. The Pakistan military arsenal, including fighter jets and multi-barrel rocket launchers, contributed to the government's victory in the war. During the Mahinda presidency from 2005 to 2015, the Sri Lanka-Pakistan military relationship grew strong. During Khan's recent visit, a US\$50 million (S\$67.3 million) credit line was offered to Sri Lanka for the purchase of military hardware, to strengthen bilateral partnership in combating terrorism and drug and narcotic trafficking and in intelligence sharing.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Human Rights Watch, 'Sri Lanka: Events of 2020', <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/sri-lanka>. Accessed on 2 March 2021.

¹¹ Zulfick Farzan, 'India has no right to interfere with internal affairs; Sarath Weerasekera', *News First*, 9 October 2020, <https://www.newsfirst.lk/2020/10/09/india-has-no-right-to-interfere-with-internal-affairs-sarath-weerasekera/>. Accessed on 2 March 2021.

Sri Lanka faced its largest-ever terrorist attack on a single day on Easter Sunday in 2019, galvanising the succeeding Gotabaya government to take a strong position by appointing a Presidential Commission of Investigations to bring the perpetrators to justice. Sri Lanka has also fallen victim to Pakistan's narco trade, where massive amounts of drugs were confiscated by the authorities during former President Maithripala Sirisena's administration as part of a full swing war on drugs¹² months before the Easter Sunday attack. Pakistan's assistance in intelligence sharing and combating terrorism and the narco trade will be essential to Sri Lanka, since drugs have been at the nexus of terrorism in the region and also contributed to facilitating acts of terror. Pakistan-Sri Lanka military engagement – from the training of military officers to weapons purchases – would continue uninterrupted under the present Gotabaya regime, just like during the Mahinda presidency.

One Billion Trade Target and SAARC

In addition to economic ties, several memorandums of understanding (MoU) were also signed between Sri Lanka and Pakistan in tourism, education, sports and technology. A target of US\$1 billion (S\$1.34 billion)¹³ on trade was set, which now stands at less than US\$500 million (S\$673.59 million). Both countries will need to invest more through conducive economic policies in order to fully reap the benefits of the Pakistan-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement which has been in operation since June 2005. However, on the contrary, Sri Lanka recently introduced heavy restrictions and more inward economic policies. With Sri Lanka's reserves dipping to US\$4.8 billion (S\$6.5 billion) in January 2021, and increasing concerns over pending debt repayment, the government has undertaken measures such as requiring exporters to immediately convert 25 per cent of foreign exchange proceeds into Sri Lankan rupees. These are being heavily criticised.¹⁴ This strictly regulated environment is likely to continue due to the ailing economy and it would impact trade with many nations, including Pakistan.

A joint communiqué was issued in Colombo projecting the success of the high-level visit and underscoring many areas, including resurrecting the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), where Pakistan and Sri Lanka's emphasised their "commitment to the principles and objectives of the SAARC Charter" and "stressed the need of SAARC member countries to build on convergences for the greater good" so as to "to take forward the SAARC process for further strengthening regional cooperation".¹⁵ Departing from bilateralism, Pakistan pushed for its South Asian neighbours to revive the SAARC process. Assessing Khan's visit to Afghanistan in November 2020, it is clear, a Pakistan foreign policy

¹² Meera Srinivasan, 'Sri Lanka's heightening war on the drug menace', *The Hindu*, 23 March 2019, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/sri-lankas-heightening-war-on-the-drug-menace/article26620057.ece>. Accessed on 2 March 2021.

¹³ Shafqat Ali, 'Pakistan Sri Lanka set 1 billion trade target', *The Nation*, 25 Feb 2021, <https://nation.com.pk/25-Feb-2021/pakistan-sri-lanka-set-dollar-1-billion-bilateral-trade-target>. Accessed on 12 March 2021.

¹⁴ Uditha Jayasinghe, 'Exporters decry CB order to convert 25% forex earnings', *Daily FT*, 20 February 2021, <http://www.ft.lk/top-story/Exporters-decry-CB-order-to-convert-25-forex-earnings/26-713543>. Accessed on 12 March 2021.

¹⁵ Foreign Ministry Sri Lanka, 'Joint Communiqué'. <https://mfa.gov.lk/joint-communicue-on-fm-24-02-2021/>. Accessed on 12 March 2021.

which is gradual, proactive and regional is in the making and that Sri Lanka was its second stop.

Connecting the CPEC with Hambantota

Sri Lanka and Pakistan established close strategic relations with China by partnering on the BRI from its inception. Altering Pakistan's geography through a 3,000 kilometre-long corridor slicing through the mountains, the BRI created a bridge with China through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) starting at Kashgar in China and ending at Gwadar port in the Indian Ocean. To compare, Sri Lanka possesses the Hambantota port (the Chinese built the port and Sri Lanka leased it back to them), which is located along the world's busiest sea lines of communications. As such, the BRI projects are marked to bring economic benefits to both nations. In addition, the twin projects have set the background for the expansion of the Chinese sphere of influence in the region and beyond, through the connections the CPEC will create with Central Asia. Both infrastructure projects carried out by China have raised India's security concerns. Further, the Myanmar China Economic Corridor from the eastern front of India would complete a surrounding *triangulation* of the Indian periphery by China's BRI infrastructure projects. Pakistan's growing ties with China and India's strong relations with the US are, therefore, creating regional geopolitical competition whereby two larger strategies are being executed simultaneously: the BRI of China and Indo-Pacific of the US. Tension between the US, China and India in Sri Lanka has heightened due to clear signs of the Sri Lankan government tilting its foreign policy towards China. In this competitive environment, the Pakistan-Sri Lanka-China infrastructure axis will connect and become fully operational when projects such as the CPEC are completed.

China's large sphere of influence, due its all-weather strategic partnership with Pakistan and the loans and economic assistance it provides to court the support of Sri Lanka, outweighs any other sphere of influence occupied independently by either nation. As testament to this, Khan proposed close collaboration between the two Chinese infrastructure projects: to "Pakistan is part of the One Belt and Road initiative of China, and [the] CPEC is one of its flagship programs, (which) ... means connectivity, and it will help enhance Sri Lanka's connectivity right up to Central Asia."¹⁶ With billions spent on these infrastructure projects, both Pakistan and Sri Lanka will be forced to find avenues to generate revenue, which has become a burden in the present context due to their struggling economic conditions to repay existing loans. Connecting the CPEC's port in Gwadar and Hambantota will also raise a security concern for India if the usage of ports is dual purpose, that is, for both civilian and military. A submarine port call incident in Sri Lanka¹⁷ is a clear example of such fears. When Modi visited Sri Lanka in May 2017, a Chinese submarine requested a port call in Sri Lanka, which the then-president Sirisena denied. The Chinese submarine was subsequently received by Gwadar in Pakistan. Pakistan and Sri Lanka's strategic partnership with Beijing could thus accommodate military submarines from the People's Liberation Army Navy, heightening New Delhi's security anxieties. The degree of pressure would increase as

¹⁶ Mohammed Rasooldeen, 'Pakistani PM urges Sri Lanka to join China corridor', *Arab News*, 24 February 2021, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1815371/world>. Accessed on 2 March 2021.

¹⁷ Shihar Aneez and Ranga Sirilal, 'Sri Lanka rejects Chinese request for submarine visit: sources', *Reuters*, 11 May 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sri-lanka-china-submarine-idUSKBN1871P9>. Accessed on 2 March 2021.

China's sphere of influence in the region continues to expand through the support of its allies. This is made even more significant due to the absence of any countervailing regional security architecture, thereby becoming a source of serious concern for all South Asian nations.

Due to heavy infrastructure debt and financial assistance, Sri Lanka has chosen to bandwagon with China rather than support India, the balancing power in the region. Its weak economic condition, with continuous loans like the US\$1,500 million (S\$2,021.35 million) recent currency swap¹⁸ loan from China, is one clear example of Sri Lanka's preference for China. As explained by Stephen M Walt in *the Origins of Alliances*, "the weaker the state the more likely it is to bandwagon rather than balance."¹⁹

Pakistan is also heading in the same direction. Weeks before Khan's visit, Gotabaya terminated an important trilateral agreement between India, Japan and Sri Lanka on the ECT which was secured in 2019. The tense protest by the 23 trade unions demanding an end to the earlier signed agreement by the previous Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government took centre stage. The cancellation was seen as a victory by the government in protecting its strategic assets and moving in a direction away from liberal economic practices. Against this backdrop, a simple public-private partnership could not be executed due to the ultra-nationalistic position taken. Alongside the domestic political concerns affecting the backtracking of the ECT, a popular local newspaper highlighted the China factor in the decision.²⁰

Failed Investigations of Chinese Projects

Pakistan and Sri Lankan leaders have raised concerns over Chinese projects in their respective nations – the CPEC in Pakistan by Khan's Tehreek-e-Insaaf (PTI) government and the Hambantota project by the Gotabaya government in Sri Lanka. The latter assured the public that it will "... make it a priority to revisit the already signed agreement"²¹ on the port deal signed by the previous government for 99 years.

Despite much hype and strident political rhetoric during both elections, there has been no sign of significant amendments to either of these projects. Khan had accused the government of then-Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif "of corruption in the management"²² of CPEC. "[In] November 2019, the PTI government appointed former military spokesman Lieutenant General Asim Saleem Bajwa as head of a new CPEC Authority, giving the military

¹⁸ 'Sri Lanka to get US\$ 1500 million from China', *News Wire*, 6 February 2021, <http://www.newswire.lk/2021/02/06/sri-lanka-to-get-us-1500-million-from-china/>. Accessed on 2 March 2021.

¹⁹ Stephen M Walt, 1987, *Origins of Alliances*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

²⁰ 'Jaishankar expressed concerns over China's 'influence' in Indian projects', *The Sunday Times*, 10 January 2021, <http://www.sundaytimes.lk/210110/news/jaishankar-expressed-concerns-over-chinas-influence-in-indian-projects-427885.html>. Accessed on 3 March 2021.

²¹ 'Vistas of Prosperity and Splendour, 2019', Manifesto of the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna, <https://gota.lk/sri-lanka-podujana-peramuna-manifesto-english.pdf>. Accessed on 12 March 2021

²² United States Institute of Peace, 'China's Influence on Conflict Dynamics in South Asia', December 2020, https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/20201216-chinas_influence_on_conflict_dynamics_in_south_asia-report.pdf. Accessed on 3 March 2021.

greater control over the management of the project”.²³ Similarly in Sri Lanka, former General Daya Ratnayake was appointed as Chairman to the Port Authority by Gotabaya. Recently, after terminating India’s ECT project, General Ratnayake commented in the media that the deal on Hambantota is in need of being revisited due to unclear clauses.²⁴ These appointments and the criticism of the Chinese, however, did not impact the Sino-Pak and Sino-Lanka relationship.

During Chinese President Xi Jinping’s maiden visit to Sri Lanka in September 2014 during the Mahinda’s presidency, Sri Lanka elevated its bilateral relationship to a strategic cooperation partnership²⁵ inking two dozen²⁶ agreements in Colombo. In the same manner, during Xi’s maiden visit to Pakistan in 2015 April, 51 MoUs²⁷ were signed with the Sharif government. Regardless of the change in governments, China has continued with the pre-signed bilateral commitments with both nations. The hostile position taken towards China during the elections, where the Chinese have been accused of corruption in their projects and infringing on nations’ sovereignty is toned down post-election. Both Khan and Gotabaya u-turned from the pre-election postures they took on Chinese projects, often involving the rhetoric of the need to revisit and strike a better deal to absolute silence. In his election manifesto, Gotabaya promised that “[Sri Lanka] would abandon the economy based on foreign loans”.²⁸ Yes, Sri Lanka continued to borrow more from China. The “frequency with which Khan u-turns”²⁹ has also gone up during his tenure. He criticised the previous administration for the proverbial ‘begging bowl’ syndrome of going out to the world with requests for loans. He too has been seeking funds from the International Monetary Fund, China and the Arab nations.

Conclusion

China has defended Sri Lanka in the international arena, including the UNHRC, and would continue to do so. This assurance was given during the high-level visit of Senior Ambassador Yang Jiechito Colombo, and was demonstrated in practice at the UNHRC through the resolution submitted by Chinese Permanent Representative in Geneva, Ambassador Chen Xu, explaining how “China oppose(s) politicisation and double standards on human rights, as well as using human rights as an excuse for interfering in other countries’ internal affairs”,

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Sulochana Ramiah Mohan, ‘Unclear Clauses in the Hambantota Port Deal – General Daya Ratnayake’, *Ceylon Today*, 6 February 2021, <https://ceylontoday.lk/news/unclear-clauses-in-the-hambantota-port-deal-general-daya-ratnayake>. Accessed on 3 March 2021.

²⁵ ‘Chinese President to visit Sri Lanka’, Foreign Ministry, Sri Lanka, 9 September 2014, <https://mfa.gov.lk/chinese-president-to-visit-sri-lanka/>. Accessed on 3 March 2021.

²⁶ ‘Xi Jinping on maiden Sri Lanka visit to boost strategic, economic ties’, *The Economic Times*, 16 September 2014, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/xi-jinping-on-maiden-sri-lanka-visit-to-boost-strategic-economic-ties/articleshow/42636694.cms?from=mdr>. Accessed on 4 March 2021.

²⁷ Irfan Haider and Mateen Haider, ‘Economic corridor in focus as Pakistan, China sign 51 MoUs’, *Dawn*, 20 April 2015, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1177109>. Accessed on 4 March 2021.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Hussain Haqqani, ‘Imran Khan’s populism clashes with Pakistan’s economics’, Hudson Institute, 11 August 2020, <https://www.hudson.org/research/16301-imran-khan-s-populism-clashes-with-pakistan-s-economic-realities>. Accessed on 12 March 2021.

mentioning “the clear lack of impartiality shown in the OHCHR’s report to this session on Sri Lanka”.³⁰

Regardless of the outcome of the UNHRC resolution, the China-Sri Lanka axis will be further strengthened through China’s unconditional support in this international forum. Pakistan’s support will also add extra weight to this axis. While China’s sphere of influence will benefit from this exercise, Sri Lanka and Pakistan will work to find avenues to connect China’s BRI infrastructure projects that, so far, have created huge economic burdens and less economic returns. Both Khan and Gotabaya have reneged from their pre-election promises regarding Chinese projects in their countries. The unclear civilian/military use of Sri Lanka and Pakistan ports will also further exacerbate India’s security concerns, which could also cause the Indo-Lanka and Indo-Pak relationship to deteriorate if India’s periphery concerns are ignored.

The absence of a regional security architecture is a concern for all nations in South Asia. Sri Lanka’s tilt, as evinced through its recent decisions on international projects away from countries such as India, Japan and the US, and the preference to bandwagon with China at the cost of its professed ‘balanced’ foreign policy posture would have direct ramifications for its Western allies. Sri Lanka should recalibrate its foreign policy to ‘balance’ and benefit from both India and China while strengthening its regional relationship with other nations such as Pakistan. Overall, the expected success of Khan’s visit to Colombo was overshadowed by Sri Lanka’s “critical turning point”³¹ at the UNHRC.

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³⁰ Marwaan Macan-Markar, ‘Sri Lanka assured of China’s help in burying post-war obligations’, *Nikkei Asia*, 28 October 2020, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Sri-Lanka-assured-of-China-s-help-in-burying-post-war-obligations>. Accessed on 4 March 2021.

³¹ Human Rights Watch, ‘Sri Lanka: UN Rights Chief Decries Mounting Abuses’, 29 January 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/01/29/sri-lanka-un-rights-chief-decries-mounting-abuses>. Accessed on 4 March 2021.