

Wang Yi's Visit to Sri Lanka: Importance as a Maritime Nation

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Summary

After several setbacks in 2021, China-Sri Lanka relations began with a renewed sense of friendship in 2022 with the visit from Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi to Sri Lanka. While the visit was marked by the launch of events in celebration of diplomatic anniversaries and strengthening ties, it also proved Sri Lanka's importance to China as a maritime nation.

Introduction

The year 2022 began on a positive note for China-Sri Lanka relations with the visit of Foreign Minister Wang Yi to the island nation. Continuing with the tradition of Chinese foreign ministers starting every new year with a visit to Africa, he began by visiting Eritrea, Kenya and the Comoros, followed by stopovers in the Maldives and Sri Lanka. The choice of the South Asian island states is marked by the celebration of diplomatic anniversaries. (Sri Lanka commemorates 65 years of bilateral ties with China as well as the 70th anniversary of the Rubber-Rice pact while China and the Maldives complete 50 years of diplomatic relations). These two island states are crucial legs in China's maritime trade in the Indian Ocean and partners of Beijing's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Wang Yi's visit to Sri Lanka highlighted the importance of Colombo to its Indian Ocean maritime agenda. This is further consolidated by his proposal for a [forum](#) on the development of Indian Ocean island countries in which Sri Lanka could play an important role.

Sri Lanka: An Important Partner in China's Indian Ocean Agenda

Having shared warm relations for decades, the two countries have strengthened their economic and development partnerships significantly since the early 2000s. Sri Lanka was among the first nations to endorse and join China's ambitious BRI project.

Sri Lanka's geographical location in the Indian Ocean provides [the impetus](#) for China to commit to massive development and infrastructure projects there. Beijing's investments in large ports, airports and power plants have led international critics to associate Colombo with Beijing's "String of Pearls" strategy and debt-trap diplomacy. However, such criticism has not swayed China or Sri Lanka from pursuing closer ties. In pursuing its maritime trade objectives, China's state-owned China Merchant Ports Holdings is operating Hambantota Port in the South and a terminal in the Colombo Port. These have significantly contributed to raising Sri Lanka's profile as one of the fastest-growing ports in the region. The only official BRI collaboration between the two countries, Colombo Port City, is a port-related real-estate project next to Colombo Port. China Harbour Engineering Company, the same company involved in the construction of Colombo Port City, obtained the contract to construct the second phase of the Colombo Port's East Container Terminal last November.

In recent years, China has extended its maritime partnerships with Sri Lanka to collaboration on marine and oceanography research. In August 2015, the China-Sri Lanka Joint Center for Education and Research (CSL-CER) was [inaugurated](#) as a collaboration of the University of Ruhuna, Sri Lanka and South China Sea Institute of Oceanology. Amongst its varying research activities, the Center undertakes an annual scientific expedition to the eastern Indian Ocean. Following the [X-Press Pearl disaster](#), CSL-CER facilitated Sri Lankan authorities in [evaluating](#) the scale of the pollution caused by the debris and the extent of the spread of the chemicals. Separately, in January 2017, the National Aquatic Resources Research and Development Agency of Sri Lanka and the Second Institute of Oceanography of China [signed](#) a memorandum of understanding to collaborate on marine scientific research. These initiatives prove China's growing interest in the Indian Ocean beyond its sea lanes of communication. As such, China's suggestion for a forum on the Indian Ocean island countries hardly comes as a surprise.

The Indian Ocean region is not short of multilateral platforms to promote regional solidarity and discuss common issues. Several key multilateral [platforms](#) such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), Indian Ocean Maritime Affairs Corporation and Indian Ocean Commission promote Indian Ocean solidarity at the regional and sub-regional level. China is not a member of any of these platforms; it only holds observer status in the IORA. On invitation, China has participated in a Sri Lanka-initiated security dialogue, the Galle Dialogue and the Indian Ocean Conference organised by India, Sri Lanka and Singapore. While China's interest in the Indian Ocean region is proliferating as an external player and a latecomer to the region, it feels vulnerable in dealing with regional adversarial powers. Thus, its Indian Ocean agenda has always targetted at strengthening its position and building alliances. The proposal for a forum for Indian Ocean island states might arise from its need and interest in playing a leadership role in Indian Ocean affairs.

Given the centrality of the Indian Ocean in its strategic environment, Sri Lanka has always played an active and engaging role in Indian Ocean affairs. Having taken a leadership role in the Indian Ocean Zone of Peace during the Cold War, Colombo has garnered recognition as a small Indian Ocean island state that punches above its weight in maritime affairs. In recent years, Sri Lanka recalibrated its national and international policies to [reclaim](#) its Indian Ocean identity, which took a backseat during the three-decade protracted conflict. Thus, China's suggestion for Sri Lanka to take a central role in the Indian Ocean island states forum is a recognition and an acknowledgement of the latter's position as an influential island nation in the region. In proposing the forum in Sri Lanka during his discussion with his counterpart, G L Pieris, and inviting Sri Lanka to take a central role, China, is seemingly sending a message to its adversarial partners that no third country's influence may dissuade China from closer partnership with Sri Lanka.

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