

The growing Sri Lanka- China – Pakistan economic and military relationship poses threat to India

Sri Lanka has signed a \$1.1bn (£837m) deal with China for the control and development of the southern deep-sea port of Hambantota. Under the proposal, a state-run Chinese company will have a 99-year lease on the port and about 15,000 acres nearby for an industrial zone. Sri Lanka's government says money from the deal will help repay foreign loans. With the island nation's total debt standing at \$64 billion (Rs 41,000 crore), almost 95 per cent of all government revenue goes towards debt repayment.

The deal had been delayed by several months over concerns that the port could be used by the Chinese military. The government has given assurances that China will run only commercial operations from the port, on the main shipping route between Asia and Europe.

Opponents of the project said they feared the area being turned into a Chinese colony. There were also concerns that the Chinese navy could use the port as a base. For now, Colombo insists that the Sri Lankan navy will be in charge of security at the Hambantota port and no foreign navy will be allowed to use it as a base. Sri Lanka has a crucial geographical location, at the cross-roads of oil tanker shipping lanes in the Indian Ocean and immense natural resources.

Hambantota port, overlooking the Indian Ocean, is expected to play a key role in China's "One Belt, One Road" initiative, otherwise known as the new Silk Road, which will link ports

and roads between China and Europe. In recent years, China has helped to build a network of ports or facilities in South Asian countries such as Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Myanmar and secured docking rights in Seychelles. In 2016 it announced its intention to finance and develop jointly with the host nation companies two commercial ports in the Indian Ocean-, the Maleka Gateway in Malaysia and Dquam port in Oman. China is also developing key ports in Kenya and Tanzania in East Africa. However, Experts have questioned the economic viability of many of these projects and point out that they have more to do with military rather than commercial interests.

Chinese nuclear submarines have made several visits to Sri Lanka in September and November 2014, despite strong displeasure from the Indian government. The presence of Chinese nuclear attack submarines in the Indian Ocean reinforces Beijing's aggression in competing with India for dominance in a region strategically vital to India's security.

The political and military relations between Pakistan –Sri Lanka are also growing strong. Sri Lanka will become the first foreign country to acquire Pakistan's multi-role combat aircraft JF-17 Thunder, and the Pakistan Air Force will begin delivery of the fighter to Sri Lanka from 2017, a report said. The relationship between both Pakistan and Sri Lanka, who are also members of SAARC, which are generally warm have gone into strong tie recently.

In March 2017, Two warships from the Pakistan Navy (PN), PNS Nasr and PNS Saif, made a port visit to Sri Lanka's Colombo port during their overseas deployment to South East Asian countries, said a statement by the Pakistan Navy. The PN flotilla conducted exercises with Sri Lankan warships in the Indian Ocean for enhancing interoperability and operational coordination between the two navies, added the statement.

The relationship also fosters on strong mutual Sino-Pakistan

and Sino-Sri Lankan relationship, as China maintains strong mutual interest in the economic and military development of Sri Lanka and Pakistan.

Sri Lanka –China Relationship

China has pumped millions of dollars into Sri Lanka's infrastructure since the end of a 26-year civil war in 2009. Chinese funds have been channeled into roads, airports, and sea ports, the two highest profile initiatives being the Hambantota Port Development and the Colombo Port Project.

Relations between both countries during the rule of Sri Lankan president, Mahinda Rajapaksa, resulted in many agreements and saw closer relations due to Rajapaksa's pro-China stance.

Under current Sri Lankan president, Maithripala Sirisena, relations remain strong with Sirisena interested in balancing both Chinese and Indian influence in the country. Despite this, recent developments have shown a "pro-China" slant to Sri Lanka's current foreign policy evident in the continued Chinese investment in Sri Lanka and country's support of China's position in the South China Sea dispute.

Growing China Sri Lanka Defense ties

In October 2016, the Chinese government announced it would offer military aid to Sri Lanka to help them purchase Chinese made military equipment.

China has been a continuing source of military equipment to Sri Lanka, and is helping to modernize and expand the Sri Lanka Armed Forces. China exports military equipment to the Sri Lanka military including: ammunition, anti-tank guided missiles, rocket launchers and shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles, deep penetration bombs and rockets, mortar

ammunition, night vision devices, artillery, armor, mortars, security equipment, tanks, jets, naval vessels, radars, and communications equipment. China also aids in the training of Sri Lankan military personnel.

China National Aero Technology Import-Export Corporation is helping the Sri Lanka government to create an Aircraft Maintenance Centre. However, the location has not yet been finalised, but Katunayake, Mattala and Trincomalee are possible locations.

Sri Lanka Pakistan

Sri Lanka recently acknowledged Pakistan's "decisive role" in consolidating the country's integrity during the civil war with the LTTE as Pakistan's Navy chief Admiral Muhammad Zakaullah called on its top leadership. The Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Hussein A. Bhaila of Sri Lanka, after the defeat of Tamil Tigers, said: "The government and the people of Sri Lanka have considered Pakistan as a true friend of Sri Lanka, which has always stood by it in times of need..."

Sri Lanka started buying arms and ammunition from Pakistan in a big way from 1999. With India reluctant to sign a Defense Cooperation Agreement with Sri Lanka and unwilling to supply it with the kind of weapons it is looking for, Colombo has turned increasingly to Pakistan.

The total purchases until December 2007 were worth \$50 million while there has been a sudden jump in the quantity of merchandise ordered in 2009 and the amount has been tripled. In May 2000, President Musharraf of Pakistan supplied millions of dollars of much-needed weapons to the Sri Lankan government, when separatist Tamil Tiger rebels were about to recapture their former capital of Jaffna.

In May 2008, Lt. Gen Sarath Fonseka of the Sri Lanka Army held

talks with his Pakistan Army counterparts regarding the sale of military equipment, weapons and ammunition. The supplies of 22 Al-Khalid MBTs to the Sri Lanka Army was finalized during these talks in a deal worth over US\$100 million.

In April 2009, Sri Lanka requested \$25 million worth of 81 mm, 120 mm and 130 mm mortar ammunition to be delivered within a month. During a state visit by President Asif Ali Zardari to Sri Lanka in Nov 2010, Sri Lanka evinced interest in purchase of Pakistani al-Khalid Main Battle Tanks, light weapons and ammunition, and the Sino-Pak joint venture product JF-17 Thunder aircraft. Pakistan has also offered to train Sri Lankan spies for intelligence gathering purposes. Apart from traditional military assistance to Sri Lanka, Pakistan has also offered to train Sri Lankan police and intelligence service officers.

In April, 2015 Sri Lanka signed a nuclear energy deal with Pakistan, snubbing a similar offer from India. The snub is thought to come in the wake of India's vote against Sri Lanka on the Tamil issue at the UN human rights council. Sri Lanka also avoided joining the boycott of the SAARC summit that was scheduled to be held in November 2016 in Pakistan.

India Sri Lanka

India has sought to counter the growing Chinese influence in Sri Lanka, by strengthening ties with the Colombo government through economic cooperation as the Indian Ocean island nation assumes increasing importance as a regional trading hub in one of the world's busiest sea lanes.

India's importance to Sri Lanka is beyond question: it is the island's largest trading partner and has provided over \$2.5 billion worth of development assistance. Over 70 percent of the cargo handled in Colombo port is transshipment cargo to and

from India. The two countries are keen to upgrade their existing FTA by signing a new trade pact called the Economic and Technology Cooperation Agreement (ETCA), which would enhance commercial ties between Sri Lanka and India's fast-growing southern states.

References and Resources also include:

<http://thediplomat.com/2017/05/india-and-chinas-tug-of-war-over-sri-lanka/>

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