

South Asia and Evolving Geopolitics of Indian Ocean



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of Indian Ocean**

Keynote Address

By

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Contents

Experts	3
About the Speaker	6
1. Introduction	8
2. Keynote Address by General (Retired) Daya Ratnayake	10
3. Discussion Session	20

About the Speaker



General (Retired) Daya Ratnayake is currently serving as the Secretary to the Ministry of Industries, Government of Sri Lanka. He is the former Chairman of the Sri Lanka Ports Authority (SLPA) and was the 20th Commander of the Sri Lanka Army (2013-2015) with a distinguished record of service.

He was enlisted to the Regular Force of the Sri Lanka Army on February 6, 1980, as an Officer Cadet and upon commissioning, he followed a number of military and nonmilitary training and academic courses including Junior Command and Senior Command Courses in India, Governance and Management of Defence Course at Cranfield University, UK, Higher Level Security Studies Diploma Course and Advanced Communication Skills Course in Asia-Pacific Centre for Security Studies in Honolulu, Hawaii, USA. He also graduated from Defence Service Command and Staff College, Bangladesh, National

Defence University, China and Army Intelligence School, Fort Huachuca, Arizona, USA.

General (Retired) Daya Ratnayake has held many command appointments in line with his rank. His role as the Commissioner General of Rehabilitation in rehabilitating more than 14500 LTTE ex-combatants has been widely acknowledged.

He has the distinction of being one of the most decorated officers of Sri Lanka Army. His exceptionally unique performances in many daunting military operations have been well-recognized as a battlefield veteran and he has been decorated with more than twenty-six gallantry and service medals.

Currently, he is reading for his PhD at General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University, Colombo, Sri Lanka.

South Asia and Evolving Geopolitics of Indian Ocean

1. Introduction

Geopolitics of the Indian Ocean has been sharply influenced by the ongoing intensification of U.S.-China competition. One of the direct outcomes of this intensification has been the heightening of geopolitical contradictions in South Asia. While great-power competition has not succeeded in radically changing the overall bipolar character of South Asia, it has certainly presented new opportunities to regional states for dealing with their geopolitical compulsions.

While the nature of interstate interaction in geopolitical terms has remained traditional by and large in South Asia, new forms of economic coordination and development strategies have been in evidence in the region in the last couple of years. The combination of geopolitical traditionalism and developmental drive augurs a high degree of future geopolitical fluidity. This fluidity would create new opportunities especially for states in the Asian continent to change their existing power status. It is premature to say what precise direction or exact shape any significant change in the redistribution of capabilities in the region would take.

To understand better the impact of the ongoing great-power competition on South Asia and explore how states in the region could cope with it in peaceful ways, NUST Institute of Policy Studies (NIPS) organized the keynote address by General (Retired) Daya Ratnayake, Secretary, Ministry of Industries, Government of Sri Lanka and the former Commander of the Army (Sri Lanka), on Thursday, April 28, 2022, so that seasoned insights could be brought to bear on the subject.

The veteran Sri Lankan military commander adopted an interesting perspective during his talk. Using the historical experience of Sri Lanka, General (Retired) Ratnayake explained the strong potential of small states for promoting greater regional stability, peace, and cooperation. He highlighted the need for active consideration of the concerns and interests of small states in the geostrategic calculations of major powers as one of the solid guarantees for regional stability and peace. While the speaker noted the abiding tendency of great powers to think and act reflexively, he nonetheless stressed the need for greater inclusiveness in the strategic vision of great powers in order to deal with challenging issues peacefully.

The address was followed by an equally insightful discussion session in which enthusiastic participation of veteran military commanders and diplomats, seasoned experts, senior academics, security analysts, think tank executives, scholars, and researchers took place. This report is derived from the keynote address by General (Retired) Daya Ratnayake and the discussion that ensued.

2. Keynote Address by General (Retired) Daya Ratnayake

Contemporary South Asia happens to be characterized by a bewildering complexity. Sharp asymmetries in the distribution of capabilities exist in the region. States of varying sizes sit side by side, not always comfortably. Though there are some similarities in culture across the region, yet this similitude is neither great nor significant enough to overshadow marked material, political, and ideological divergences. Amidst this challenging regional diversity of world-views and differences in power and size of states, the question of regional security and stability is being shaped by a number of geostrategic drivers. These drivers consist of the rise of India, the influence enjoyed by China over minor states of South Asia, U.S.'s dominant involvement in the region under the aegis of its Indo-Pacific strategy, increasing nuclear activism in India, China and Pakistan, and growth in terrorism.

Historically, the Indian Ocean was sailed by Roman in pre-Christian antiquity. Cholas dominated it during the Middle Ages between 9th and 13th centuries CE. The Chinese ventured into the waters of the Indian Ocean through Ming dynasty voyages between late medieval era and the opening century of the early modern period. From the 16th century onward, Western empires engaged in a global strategic struggle to establish their dominance over the Indian Ocean. The emergence of the British Empire as the ultimate victor in this grand maritime contest led to the transformation of the Indian Ocean into a "British lake." This historical preoccupation of great powers with the Indian Ocean may be considered one of the historical constants in the region.

With this historical and geopolitical backdrop, post-Cold War South Asia has once again attracted the attention of world's major powers. Foremost amongst these major powers in the current international system has been the United States. The fact that concern has traditionally underlain this interest is borne out by the characterization of South Asia as the "most dangerous place on Earth" by the former U.S. President Bill Clinton. It is interesting to note that Clinton was alarmed at the potential of asymmetric players in the region to render the situation more dangerous and complex amidst the robust nuclearization of India and Pakistan.



This alarm, then as now, was not entirely unrelated to the capacity of South Asia's development and security landscape to change at a remarkable pace under the pressure of circumstance. This speed of change forms one of the major aspects of regional developments, irrespective of the domain in which they occur. This fast-paced process

of change is responsible for many new and evolving features of the regional security complex. Owing to the nature of intense interstate interaction and strategic architectonics in the region, South Asia qualifies to be treated as a unique region.

This uniqueness makes the dynamics of the contemporary strategic competition in the region an interesting case study. Robert D. Kaplan's best-selling modern classic, *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power* (2010), presents the detailed geostrategic context of the region, including the identification of its enduring salient features and emerging new trends that are driving the geostrategic maneuvers of major powers in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). These include the great-power competition between the US and China, China-India competition, the American containment of Iran, and the fight against terrorism in the Middle East.

South Asia figures as a critically important piece in the Indo-Pacific framework, owing to its economic and strategic dynamism. Three issues can be identified in the region in terms of an economic perspective, namely, impact of the war in Ukraine on the region's economic outlook, the role of the U.S. in the achievement of regional prosperity and a cooperative approach, and – focusing on Sri Lanka in view of its recent economic throes – the role of the U.S. in Sri Lanka's macroeconomic fundamentals.

With respect to the last issue, it is important to understand and regard the aspirations of the small states in the region. It would not be amiss to state that small states like Sri Lanka expect at the very least a comprehensive new economic agenda. This agenda, in order to be inclusive, should aim at seeking the support of great states and their partners for solving Sri Lanka's ongoing economic crisis and reaping

dividends of its strategic location. In general terms, strategic jockeying or great states bringing their superior capabilities to bear on smaller states in the pursuit of their strategic goals is not uncommon in the regional geopolitical competition.



The U.S. traditionally enjoys dominance in the region. The redesign of its regional strategy, including the reshaping of the U.S. Asia Pacific Command to the Indo-Pacific Command, reflects its resolve to maintain its preeminent strategic position in the region. This strategic shift, aimed at safeguarding its traditional status in Asia Pacific, is inspired by the preference for sea-power projection over a land-based strategy for the purpose of counter existing and emerging threats. This means that the U.S. has the ability to influence behavior by virtue of its political, economic, military, and technological strengths.

Since 2013, China has offered the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a global development strategy, involving infrastructure development and investments in nearly 70 countries in Africa, Asia, and Europe. It has engaged most of the littoral states of the Indian Ocean to work closely in terms of their future economic development.

However, the U.S. and India consider that China will eventually manipulate the strategic assets of those states to upset the status quo. Therefore, the growing Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean has generated anxiety in the U.S. and India. The U.S. attempts to counter BRI have included, among other things, Better Utilization of Investments Leading to Development (BUILD) Act in 2018, and, more recently, the proposed Build Back Better World (B3W) initiative. The 2018 BUILD Act was intended to bolster U.S.'s international development finance cooperation as a countermeasure to China's BRI.

These U.S. has identified Sri Lanka as a state vulnerable to the strategic jockeying of China. The 2019 Indo-Pacific Strategy Report highlights that "a Chinese state-owned enterprise purchased operational control of Hambantota Port for ninety-nine years, taking advantage of Sri Lanka's need for cash when its government faced daunting external debt repayment obligations" (p.9). In 2008, Sri Lanka had sought a Chinese loan to develop Hambantota port, when other countries had refused to bid for the project due to commercial risk.

According to a 2019 Bloomberg article by Anusha Ondaatjie and Asantha Sirimanne, the precarious economic situation of Sri Lanka in 2017 impinged upon the government's ability to service its debt obligations. These circumstances compelled the Sri Lankan government to renegotiate the port deal. The final agreement was to consist of 70 percent equity and a 99-year lease of the port.

Anti-China powers have some concerns about the port of Hambantota. The port project has often been interpreted as a part of the so-called Chinese debt-trap diplomacy. Security concerns have been raised about the future use of the port, including increased concerns of India over a possible dual use. Some analysts, like Maria Abi-Habib in an article published in the New York Times in 2018, consider that the port could be converted to a military base with minimal effort. It could be used for naval vessels and utilized as a landing strip for military aircraft. Critics claim that this might have been the reason behind China's willingness to invest to gain strategic benefit, despite the poor commercial value of the port.

However, it can be confirmed that China has no military footprint in Sri Lanka. But concerns persist in New Delhi over Hambantota's use as a second-strike platform against India. Under this scenario, the transformation of Hambantota into a Chinese military base will be a serious threat to the American and Indian security interests in the Indian Ocean. This could lead them to consider the port as a legitimate counterforce target away from the Chinese soil.

Incidentally, it also merits mention that Sri Lanka's Trincomalee harbor, world's second-deepest natural harbor, is another strategic asset. The famous Admiral Horatio Nelson is said to have visited Trincomalee in the 18th century and praised it as the finest harbor in the world. In some areas, its depth has not yet been measured, but it is estimated to exceed 4000 meters. The massive natural size and the immense depth of the inner and outer harbors make it an ideal anchorage for nuclear submarines to avoid sonar detection. This makes it a perfect place for holding nuclear second-strike capability.

This question of the geostrategic importance of small states is related to the question of the direction and the nature of great-power competition at any time in the interstate system. The question will be a pressing one in periods of intense strategic competition.

In this sense, it is important to mention here that Quad or the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, initiated in 2007, is the attempt by the U.S. and its allies in the Asia Pacific to contain China. However, one of the key challenges confronting Quad is its lack of cohesion. Considering the existing engagements, it is important to think about what would happen to smaller states, if they are coerced to join such dialogues or if they do not respond affirmatively to become a part of such initiatives.

Therefore, Quad 3.0, the latest summit-level coordination between the U.S., Japan, Australia, and India, has to be different from both Quad 1.0 defined as the original coming together of these major states to deal with post-2004 Tsunami rehabilitation efforts, and Quad 2.0 defined as the quadrilateral coordination aimed expressly at countering China during the Trump administration. This difference should consist precisely in the inclusion of China into the Indo-Pacific narrative, as inclusiveness is tantamount to expanding the opportunity for cooperation and coordination.

It is important to weigh the policy implications of both the collective approach including China and that of countering China. It is my belief that economic security should be prioritized over the formation of military alliances. Broad-based collaborations in areas such as health as well as security will bring countries to the table. This is important because if we were to take the case of South Asia, it would become clear that the risk associated with the capacity for mass destruction and

public fear linked to different nuclear scenarios cannot be ruled out. Non-nuclear states adjacent to nuclear-weapons states are more vulnerable to third-party effects of nuclear catastrophes or nuclear smuggling than those non-nuclear states distantly located to nuclear-weapons states.

This consideration is of critical importance, since it appears that the Indian Ocean has become a place to hide nuclear weapons in the contemporary context. In surface domains such as ships, it is at least possible to guess what type of weapons are on board. However, it would not be possible for non-nuclear countries like Sri Lanka to efficiently monitor submarines and the type of weaponry they carry.

It has to be realized that it is not only regional states like India and Pakistan that are using the Indian Ocean for strategic purposes. In fact, all the great powers including China are using the Indian Ocean for the benefit of their national interest. It is possible that they could use the Indian Ocean to both hide their nuclear missiles and enhance their second-strike capability.

Concerns have been raised by many regarding the security issues that could arise from the establishment of Kudankulam and Kalpakkam nuclear power plants on India's Coromandel Coast. It is advisable that a full-scale research study should be undertaken to understand the possible spillover effects of the South Indian power plant leak, giving Sri Lankan authorities an idea about the required scale of future preparation in case of a nuclear disaster or accident.

The proposed study should lead to periodic environmental audits, data from disaster scenario drills, meteorological data, security threat assessments, an assessment of the existing disaster management capacity of Sri Lanka. However, no such scientific study has been

conducted either by the Sri Lankan government or any other regional or global research organization to find out the short-, medium- and long-term consequences of living in proximity to nuclear power plants.

In so far as different levels of interstate interaction in the region are concerned, Sri Lanka has consistently maintained neutrality between China, the U.S., India, and Pakistan. I tend to agree with the insights of Barry Buzan and Ole Weaver in their book, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (2003), on the South Asian Regional Security Complex (RSC), especially with reference to the interaction between Sri Lanka, India, and Pakistan. The authors maintain that India's involvement in the Tamil minority problem in Sri Lanka was the main factor that securitized the issues between emerging powers in the region. India has political interest in the matter, owing to the long-standing cultural linkage between India's Tamil population and Tamil minorities in northern and eastern Sri Lanka. Pakistan provided assistance from time to time to Sri Lanka in the latter's war against the Tamil terror groups. However, their relationship with Sri Lanka never became the cause for a clash between India and Pakistan.

The need of the hour is to understand the sensitivities of small nations in the region or anywhere in the world for that matter. Not much has been mentioned about the island nations in the Indo-Pacific Strategy. It needs to be understood that island states share a common perception and preference for staying away and observing the developments related to the Indo-Pacific Strategy.

It must be stressed that the biggest concern right now is the destabilization of security and the expanded naval competition. It has to be understood that the naval competition between major states will inevitably undermine legitimate concerns of small states related to

climate change, illegal fishing, etc. While small island states have gained from strategic competition between major powers, yet it has presented them with the challenging prospect of making choices. Small states would prefer to remain neutral and adopt a strategic hedging policy. The U.S. needs to look carefully at small states, and, in contrast to its current blanket policy, it should understand the nuances of the concerns of small states.



In sum, an inclusive approach, based on coordination in areas of common concern, and responsiveness to concerns of small states can go a long way toward ensuring stability in the region and the Indian Ocean at large.

3. Discussion Session

The address was followed by an extensive discussion session, including exchange of views on U.S.-China competition, Indo-U.S. strategic cooperation, China-Pakistan cooperation, China-India relations, regional stability and security, regional cooperation, and shared development.

The participants appreciated the insights shared by General (Retired) Daya Ratnayake, and agreed with him that the 21st century manifestation of great-power competition had pushed the region to the center stage of global geopolitics. They thought that this prominence had made it incumbent upon the regional states to demonstrate a high level of comprehension and skill in dealing with great powers. They highlighted that different countries demonstrated varying levels of this understanding and skill in the current interstate system. They experts were also of the opinion that the development of individual states in the region was linked to some extent with how good they were in dealing with great powers.

One expert stressed that there was a need to be aware at all times of the fact that the U.S.-China strategic competition was bound to affect South Asia and Asia Pacific relatively more than any other region of Asia for the simple reason that China was next to one and located in the other. It was pointed out that while this caveat seemed trite, it really was a key to acquiring a deeper understanding of the direction, trends, intensity, and the overall tendency of the ongoing great-power competition.

They also concurred with the speaker that it was especially important for great powers, especially China and the U.S., to show a nuanced

understanding of the concerns and interests of small states, but they cautioned at the same time that it was equally, if not more, important for small states as well as middle powers to accurately assess the motivations, concerns, interests, and behavior of great powers, not only in abstract terms but with specific reference to each great power that was currently active in South Asia and the Indian Ocean.



A veteran diplomat remarked that small and regional powers did not have a wide margin of choice at the present juncture of the great-power competition between the U.S. and China. He realized that though the task was Herculean, yet the efforts of middle powers and small states in South Asia had to be focused on ensuring that their actions and choices lessened rather than heightened the possibility of friction in the region. He observed that this effort was likely to be frustrated by the very logic of self-interest. The seasoned foreign policy expert shared that the moment of truth when states would be compelled to choose

between China and the U.S. seemed to be fast approaching. He revealed that the arrival of this moment in the current interstate system would mean the end of concomitance in which a state could enjoy cordial relations with both the global powers with little or no cost.

However, a think tank expert insisted that small and middle powers needed to stay away from international camp politics as much as possible to focus on their domestic development. Another discussant countered with the suggestion that joining the very camp politics could also be a robust means of furthering domestic development. It was suggested that China's peaceful development in the current era had not only been beneficial for China exclusively but also for the rest of the world.

One of the scholars present during the discussion argued that geopolitical calculations occupied a lot of policy attention in some developing countries, while short shrift was traditionally given to the cardinal national goal of seeking self-reliance and self-dependent development, with little or no actual prioritization of science, technology, and innovation, beyond policy declaration, as strategic support force for high-quality development.

The proponent of joining camp politics said that one of the benefits of taking sides in the great-power struggle was the preferential access to the advanced S&T resources possessed by great powers. An expert remarked that this was true perhaps for the inner circle of allies or partners of major powers, but not for every country rallying behind competing sides in great-power competition.

A discussant suggested that the possibility, no matter how slender, of building links with technology markets led by China and technology markets led by the U.S. should not be discounted, since there were

countries – such as South Korea, Taiwan, Japan, and Singapore – which had a proven track record and the future capability of building and sustaining such linkages. The discussant stressed that it could be done if Pakistan could create a successful start-up ecosystem and high-tech development value chain.

The experts pointed out that South Asia was home to multiple small powers together with two major regional powers namely, Pakistan and India, which was a key structural feature of South Asia. The discussants conceded that this made the regional order bipolar, with the question of the region's functionality fundamentally becoming reduced to the nature of the interaction and relations between the two major regional powers.

While appreciating the role of Pakistan and Sri Lanka in working toward greater regional connectivity and collaboration, they did realize that as long as India was not involved constructively, the region could not move forward comprehensively as a whole.

The participants agreed that the actual historical expression of India's great-power aspirations had been detrimental for healthy regionalism in South Asia, but they did point out that other countries in the region had also not made any concerted efforts to promote intra-regional cooperation on a consistent and urgent basis to surmount the Indian challenge to regional connectivity. They further drew attention to the fact that not many countries in the region will be able to resist the pull of India's deep pockets. They unanimously considered that the evolving dynamic of U.S.-China competition seemed set to aggravate this trend.

One of the participants considered that China could become a new major player in driving multilateral cooperation in South Asia forward,

However, other participants noted that China was focusing currently on bilateral cooperation in South Asia, and it did not seem interested in regional multilateralism in South Asia. A dissenting observation stressed that China was simultaneously interested in bilateral and multilateral cooperation. The case of BRI was highlighted as a relevant example in this regard. Another participant advanced the thought that perhaps China was particular about non-interference not only in bilateral terms but also in regional terms.

An expert put forward the thought that China, like any other great power, would consider the costs and benefits of bilateral and multilateral coordination, and would prefer multidimensional cooperation on a bilateral basis rather than multilateral cooperation, if regional dynamics supported the former rather than the latter.

A senior security analyst stated that China-India competition may develop in proportion to the intensification of U.S.-China competition. The analyst said that the U.S. was masterfully dealing with the acute Indian awareness of power asymmetry vis-à-vis China. The analyst remarked that India was also aware that it was not realistically possible for it to compete on its own with the tremendous momentum of China's peaceful development. The expert said that this had created a partnership driven by text-book concerns centered on balancing, the immediate motivation for which, on India's part, was provided by China's overwhelming strategic and tactical superiority during the India-China standoff in Ladakh in May-June 2020.

Another participant argued that South Asia's regional bipolarity, unlike the global bipolarity of the Cold War, tended to make regional geopolitics more rather than less unstable, and had historically caused

the alignment between regional bipolar competition and the global great-power competition.

A few experts observed that increased correspondence between the domestic conditions of states and interstate interaction had become a salient feature of regional geopolitics, especially as a result of the situation in Afghanistan and the increased domestic brutalization of minorities by the Hindutva regime in India. This correspondence heightened the risk of instability in the region.



Many participants considered that the thrust of the Indo-Pacific Strategy seemed to be to counter China's transition from being the biggest economic player in Asia Pacific to becoming the comprehensive leader across major domains in the current international system.

One expert remarked that China's defense modernization and its increasingly confident posture in the South China Sea had been interpreted in Washington as the sign of China's future's intentions. He pointed out that the press of historical events that accompanied the transition of the U.S. into a great power during 1890s-1900s led it. to translate its economic strength into military power. He said that perhaps the biggest fear of the U.S. was that China would in time go on to become the net security provider in Asia Pacific or even in the whole of the Asian continent.

Some participants believed that the dominant tendency of the U.S.-China competition in the domains of security, trade and economic cooperation, and science, technology, and innovation would be exclusive multilateralism. An expert furthered this viewpoint by indicating that perhaps, exclusive multilateralism, as defined by the Chinese doyen of International Relations Prof. Yan Xuetong in his article in the July-August 2021 issue of the Foreign Affairs magazine,



was an attempt on U.S.'s part to reassure allies like Japan and South Korea in order to foreclose the possibility of their seeking bilateral accommodation with China.

There was a general consensus during the discussion that the implications of the Indo-Pacific Strategy for Pakistan will be mixed. The discussants considered that the regional imbalance created by the U.S.'s bolstering of India's defense capabilities will be offset by continued China-Pakistan cooperation.

However, they did not rule out the possibility that even Washington may take some compensatory action in its efforts to maintain a reasonable relationship with Pakistan. They said that the U.S. was deeply interested in the restoration of its leverage with Pakistan. This, they considered, could lead to increased trade and investment and greater high education exchanges between the U.S. and Pakistan. The experts also noted that both China and the U.S. would prefer to deal with countries in South Asia on a bilateral basis.

The participants considered the intriguing question of how the interim regime in Afghanistan would evolve in response to the multiple regional ramifications of the U.S.-China competition. It was pointed out that the regional geostrategic chessboard would become considerably complicated for Pakistan, if the interim regime in Afghanistan were to behave as governments in Kabul had traditionally behaved in the last 70-odd years.

Other interesting points that came up during the discussion included the possibility of the birth of new initiatives and new international organizations as a result of the ongoing great-power competition, birth of new schemes of regional cooperation and integration such as the formation of wide-spread cooperation between Central, South and

West Asia, the revitalization of existing organizations for regional cooperation, the intensification of quadrangular diplomacy - including the U.S., China, India, and Pakistan - in South Asia, increased opportunities for the transformation of middle powers into great power in Asia such as the case of contemporary Indonesia and growth in the challenges of regional powers, and the likelihood of improvement in U.S.-China relations in the wake of Russia-Ukraine conflict.



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