

Great Power Confrontation in the Indian Ocean: The Geo-Politics of the Sri Lankan Civil War

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The support and positions of various foreign governments in regards to the diabolic fighting between the Tamil Tigers and the Sri Lankan military, which cost the lives of thousands of innocent civilians, says a great deal about the geo-strategic interests of these foreign governments. The position of the governments of India and a group of states that can collectively be called the *Periphery*, such as the U.S. and Australia, were in support of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam (LTTE) or Tamil Tigers, either overtly or covertly. Many of these governments also provided this support tacitly, so as not to close any future opportunity of co-opting Sri Lanka after the fighting was over.

In contrast, the governments of a group of states that can jointly be called *Eurasia* as a collective entity, such as Iran and Russia, supported the Sri Lankan government. The polar nature of the support by Eurasia and the Periphery for the two different combating sides in the Sri Lankan Civil War betrays the scent or odour of a much broader struggle. This is a struggle that extends far beyond the borders of the island of Sri Lanka and its region.

Why is this so? Much of the answer to such a question has to do with the formation of a growing alliance in the Eurasian landmass against the international domination of the U.S. and its allies. This Eurasian alliance was formed on the basis of the growing cohesion between Moscow, Tehran, Beijing, and their allies that has seen the animation of the Primakov Doctrine. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a security body with real military dimensions that has been called “the NATO of the East” within some foreign policy circles is a real symbol of this geo-political dynamic. In 2009, the last chapter of the Sri Lankan Civil War was very much a theatre within this process.

Enter the Chinese Dragon: The start of Sri Lankan Estrangement from the U.S. and India

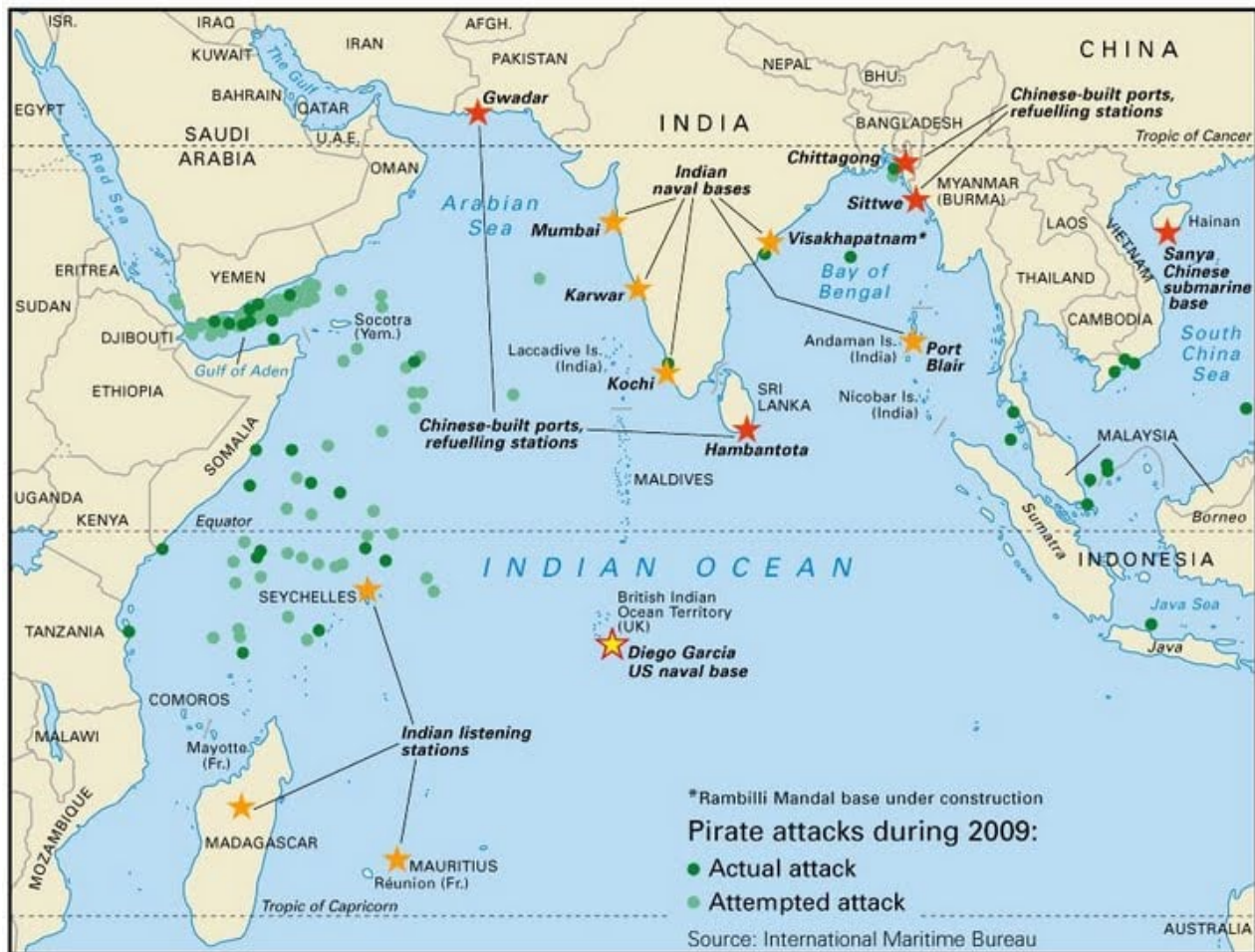
2007 was a milestone year for Sri Lanka. On March 12, 2007, Colombo agreed to allow the Chinese to build a massive naval port on its territory, at Hambantota. An agreement on the construction of the port was finalized and signed by the Sri Lankan Port Authority with two Chinese companies, the China Harbor Engineering Company and the Sino Hydo Corporation. [1] The Sri Lankan government’s decision was mostly formed on the basis of economic benefits and Chinese support to end the fighting on their island.

What followed was the estrangement of Sri Lanka from the U.S. and India. It has been a U.S. policy to encircle China and to prevent it from building any ports or bases outside of Chinese territory. As a result, the U.S. shortly cut its military assistance to the Sri Lankan military. [2] Indian support for the Tamil Tigers also increased through pressure on Colombo to make Sri Lanka a federal state with autonomy for the Tamils. Beijing threw its political weight

behind Colombo and also began sending large arms shipments to Sri Lanka. As an additional comparison, Chinese aid to Sri Lanka in 2008 was about a billion U.S. dollars, while U.S. aid was only 7.4 million U.S. dollars. [3]

It is from 2007 onward that Sri Lanka became a part of the alliance in Eurasia through its agreement with China and its subsequent estrangement from the U.S. and India. By the end of 2007, Sri Lanka had entrenched itself in the geo-strategic trenches with Russia, Iran, and China. These reasons and not humanitarian concern(s) are the primary rationale for support provided, in one way or another, to the Tamil Tigers by the governments of India, the U.S., Britain, Japan, Australia, Canada, and the European Union.

GREAT POWER COMPETITION IN THE INDIAN OCEAN



Sri Lankan Military ties to the Moscow-Beijing-Tehran Axis

Chinese military ties with Sri Lanka started in the 1990s, but it was in 2007 that Chinese and Sri Lankan military relations started to flower. According to Brahma Chellaney of the Centre for Policy Research in New Delhi, India: “China’s arms sales [were] the decisive factor in ending the military stalemate [in the Sri Lankan Civil War.]” [4] In April, just one month after the 2007 agreement between the Sri Lankan Port Authority and both the China Harbor Engineering Company and the Sino Hydro Corporation, China signed a major ammunition and ordnance deal with the Sri Lankan military. [5] Beijing also transferred, free of charge, several military jets to the Sri Lankan military, which were decisive in defeating the Tamil Tigers. [6]

Iran and Russia also began to rapidly develop their military ties with Sri Lanka after Colombo agreed to host the Chinese port in Hambantota. In this regard, Beijing, Moscow, and Tehran

all have cooperation and military agreements with Sri Lanka. The visits of Sri Lankan leaders and military officials to Tehran, Moscow, and Beijing in 2007 and 2008 were all tied to Sri Lankan preparations to militarily disarm the Tamil Tigers with the help of these Eurasian states.

China, Russia, and Iran all ultimately helped arm the Sri Lankan military before the last phase of the Sri Lankan Civil War. For the Eurasian alliance the aim of ending the Sri Lankan Civil War was to ensure the materialization of the Chinese port and to prevent any possibility of regime change in Colombo, which would ensure the continuity of a Sri Lankan government allied to China, Russia, and Iran. Along with Sri Lankan officials, the governments of Iran, Russia, and China believed that unless the Tamil Tigers were neutralized as a threat that the U.S. and its allies, in possible league with India, could make attempts to overthrow the Sri Lankan government in order to nullify the Sri Lankan naval port agreement with China and to remove Sri Lanka from the orbit of Eurasia. In this context, they all threw their weight behind Sri Lanka during the fighting in 2009 and in the case of China and Russia at the U.N. Security Council.

Associated Press (AP) reported on December 23, 2007:

In the wake of the United States Senate slashing military assistance to Sri Lanka, the Russian Federation has stepped in to fill the vacuum, sending the first ever top level military delegation to Colombo to discuss military cooperation. A high level Russian military delegation led by [Colonel-General] Vladimir Moltensky last week met Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, Army Commander [Lieutenant-General] Sarath Fonseka and Air Force Commander, Roshan Goonathilake and had visited several major military installations in the island. [Colonel-General] Moltensky, a veteran combat General in the Russian Army was formerly the operational commander of the Russian Forces in Chechnya. [7]

The Russian Federation, China, and Iran also all face their own separatist movements like Sri Lanka. All four nations see these movements as being supported by outside players for geo-strategic reasons. In 2007, not only did Moscow, like China, move in to fill the vacuum of military supplies left by the U.S. government after Sri Lanka agreed to build the Chinese naval port; the Kremlin also sent Colonel-General Vladimir Moltensky who oversaw the Russian military campaign against the separatist movement in Chechnya. Moltensky arrived in Sri Lanka as a military advisor to Colombo.

The aid of Tehran was also crucial for the Sri Lankan military. *The Island*, a Sri Lankan news source reported: "Iran had come to Sri Lanka's rescue (...) when an LTTE [or Tamil Tiger] offensive had threatened to overwhelm the [Sri Lankan] army in Jaffna [P]eninsula. Sources said that several plane loads of Iranian [military] equipment were made available immediately after Sri Lanka sought assistance from the Iranian leadership." [8] *The Island* also reported, before the arrival of a high level Iranian military delegation to Sri Lanka in 2009, that Iran, which is "widely believed to [sic.; be] a leading strategist in" the use of tactical boats, and Sri Lanka "have over the year developed strategies relating to small [tactical] boat operations." [9]

The extent of the help Iran, Russia, and China provided to Sri Lanka also included economic support within the framework of the Sri Lankan military preparations leading to the assaults

on the Tamil Tigers in 2009. *The Hindu* on September 21, 2009 published an article partially revealing the depth of the level and importance of the help that Sri Lanka had been receiving from Iran alone:

Iran has extended by another year the four-month interest-free credit facility granted to Sri Lanka after President Mahinda Rajapaksa's visit to Iran in November 2007, state-run Daily News reported on Monday.

It said that consequent to talks with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the Iranian government granted the facility from January 2008 to August 31.

In 2008, Sri Lanka imported crude oil under this facility to the tune of \$1.05 billion, nearly all of its requirements, easing the pressure on the country's foreign exchange requirements in a year of significance for the government's war with the LTTE [or the Tamil Tigers].

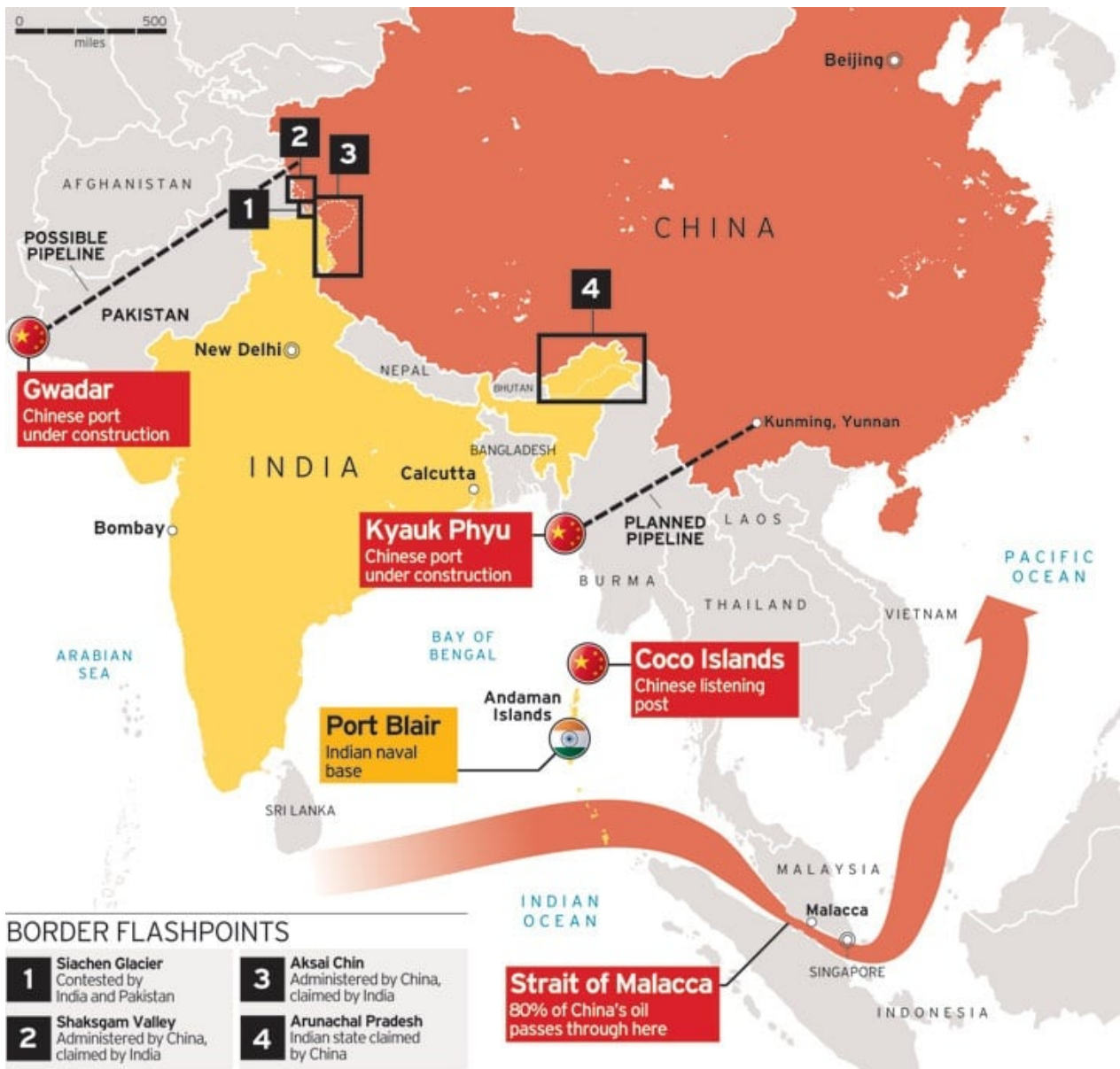
An additional three-month credit package at a concessionary rate of interest was also accommodated in Sri Lanka's favour on September 3 [2009] at a meeting between the representatives of the countries in Tehran. [10]

Chinese Naval Interests and Energy Security Concerns and Sri Lanka

Why a Chinese port in Sri Lanka? Why in Sri Lanka of all places? Sri Lanka is situated at a vital maritime corridor in the Indian Ocean. This position is at a vital juncture in the maritime shipping paths of the Indian Ocean that is important for trade, security, and energy supplies. This is why Moscow, Tehran, and Beijing stand behind Colombo.

The Chinese naval port under construction and at Hambantota is part of a New Cold War to secure energy routes. [11] Most of the energy supplies going to Asia pass the southern tip of Sri Lanka. It is for this reason that the Chinese have included Sri Lanka within their project of establishing a chain of naval bases in the Indian Ocean to protect their energy supplies coming from the Middle East and Africa. Myanmar (Burma) is also part of this project and in many cases the pressure on the governments in both states is linked to their agreements to build Chinese ports with Beijing.

In league with China, Iran also has naval ambitions in Sri Lanka and the broader Indian Ocean as part of an initiative to protect the maritime routes between itself and China. China and Iran have both been expanding their naval forces. This is part of a growing trend. The seas and bodies of water around all Eurasia from the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea, the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, the Persian Gulf, and the the Arabian Sea to the Bay of Bengal, the South China Sea, and the East China Sea have all been under heavy militarization over the years. In no point in history have the oceans seen such large numbers of warships at one time. This militarization process on the waves of Eurasia is ultimately tied to controlling movement and encircling the Eurasian landmass in a coming showdown.



Sri Lanka enters the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)

In 2009, Sri Lanka joined the SCO, as did Belarus. The entry of Sri Lanka into the Eurasian organization was announced at the SCO conference in Yekaterinburg, where the light was on Mahmoud Ahmadinejad following the election riots in Iran. While the SCO put its weight behind the re-election of the Iranian President, Sri Lanka thanked the organization for its collective support against the Tamil Tigers.

Both Sri Lanka and Belarus, which is also a member of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), entered the SCO as dialogue partners. [12] The entry of Sri Lanka into the SCO as a dialogue partner confirms its strategic ties and alliance with Russia, China, and Iran. Dialogue partner status in the SCO puts Sri Lanka under the umbrella of China and Russia. Although it is not spelled out in Article 14 of the SCO Charter, a dialogue partner can request protection and defensive aid under such a relationship. Dialogue partners are also financially tied to the SCO, which facilitates their integration into the coming *Eurasian Union* that will emerge from the cohesion of Russia, China, Iran, and their partners.

Sri Lanka and the Broader Conflict in Eurasia

In the so-called Western World double-standards were applied to the final chapter of the Sri Lankan Civil War. While the U.S. and its allies supported the military actions of Georgia to secure its territorial integrity by bringing South Ossetia and Abkhazia under its control through force in 2008 they did not do this in regards to Sri Lanka in 2009. In essence the actions of the Sri Lankan and Georgian governments were almost exactly the same: establishing government control of break-away territory through the use of military force. Yet, the reaction of the U.S. and its allies were contrastingly different in both cases. Georgia received support and Sri Lanka did not.

In addition, Georgia was legally obligated under international agreement not to use any military force to solve its internal conflict, but Sri Lanka was not. In legal terms, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, before the conflict, also enjoyed autonomous statuses within the framework of Georgia as a polity. This in no means justifies any of the deaths in Sri Lanka or the fighting in Georgia, but it does illustrate that double-standards were applied.

The reason that the U.S. and its allies supported Georgia and not Sri Lanka is tied to the encirclement of Eurasia. If there was no Chinese port being built in Sri Lanka or any ties between the Sri Lankan government and China the reaction of the U.S. government would have been much different. Most probably the American reaction would have been the same as when Israel acts against Palestinian civilians or when Saddam Hussein, as an American ally, gassed the Iraqi Kurds.

The people of Sri Lanka from the Tamils to the Sinhalese are in the cross-hairs of a much larger and all enveloping global struggle. In the scenario of a possible conflict with the U.S. and the Periphery the maritime route that passes by Sri Lanka would be vital as an energy lifeline to the Chinese. The U.S. and its allies would ensure that this sea route is less secure for the Chinese by taking Sri Lanka out of the orbit of China and its allies. Even the balkanization of Sri Lanka could lead to a Tamil state that would most likely be allied to the U.S. and India, which may grant them military bases that would be in close proximity to Chinese positions in Sri Lanka.

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NOTES

[1] Sri Lankan gov't, Chinese companies sign port building agreement, *Xinhua News Agency*, March 13, 2007.

[2] US out, enter Russia, *Associated Press (AP)*, December 23, 2007.

[3] Jeremy Page, Chinese billions in Sri Lanka fund battle against Tamil Tigers, *The Times* (U.K.), [May 2, 2009](#).

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] B. Muralidhar Reddy, Iran extends credit facility to Sri Lanka, *The Hindu*, [September 21, 2009](#).

[8] Shamindra Ferdinando, High level Iranian military delegation due in Colombo, *The Island*, October 9, 2009.

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] US out, enter Russia, *Op. cit.*

[11] Mahdi Darius Nazemroaya, The Globalization of Military Power: NATO Expansion, *Centre for Research on Globalization (CRG)*, [May 17, 2007](#).

[12] B. Muralidhar Reddy, SCO dialogue partner status for Sri Lanka, *The Hindu*, [July 18, 2009](#).

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