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THE 'TAMIL NADU FACTOR' IN CHINA'S NAVAL BASING AMBITIONS IN SRI LANKA¹

By Mark J. Gabrielson and Joan Johnson-Freese

Following a 33-year career in business, Mark J. Gabrielson is currently a graduate student at the Harvard University Extension School. He holds two simultaneous research internships at the US Naval War College, one in National Security Affairs working with Prof. Joan Johnson-Freese, and one in the Department of Maritime History with Prof. John B. Hattendorf. He is a graduate of Princeton University with a degree in Politics, concentrating in International Affairs. He is a USCG-licensed Master, Merchant Marine.

Dr. Joan Johnson-Freese has been a Professor of National Security Affairs at the Naval War College since August 2002, serving as Department Chair from 2002-2010. Previously, she was at the Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies in Honolulu, HI, the Air War College in Montgomery, AL, and the University of Central Florida. She is a Fellow of the International Academy of Astronautics; a member of the International Institute for Strategic Studies; on the Space Studies Board of the National Research Council; the Editorial Board of China Security; and has testified before Congress on multiple occasions regarding space security and China.

China's capabilities for naval force projection in the Indian Ocean are dependent on closer Sino-Sri Lankan relations, relations not benefitting India given long-standing Sino-Indian disputes. The Sino-Indo-Sri Lankan geostrategic relationship, in turn, is curiously dependent on the political influence of domestic Tamils in New Delhi. Tamils living in India, motivated by continuing animosities over Sri Lankan Tamil rights, are complicating New Delhi's policies towards Colombo by narrowing India's Sri Lanka foreign policy options. Hence, domestic political dynamics are compromising India's ability to counter China's deepening relationship with Sri Lanka, including the Chinese navy's utilization of the new port at Hambantota, Sri Lanka, thereby ultimately impacting the balance of naval forces in the Indian Ocean.

The state of Tamil Nadu is in southeast India, separated from Sri Lanka by the narrow Palk Strait. It is a large and economically important state.² US Secretary of State Clinton acknowledged Tamil Nadu's political importance by a 2011 visit.³ The majority of the state's residents are ethnic Tamil Hindus, compatriots of the suppressed Tamil minority in Sri Lanka.

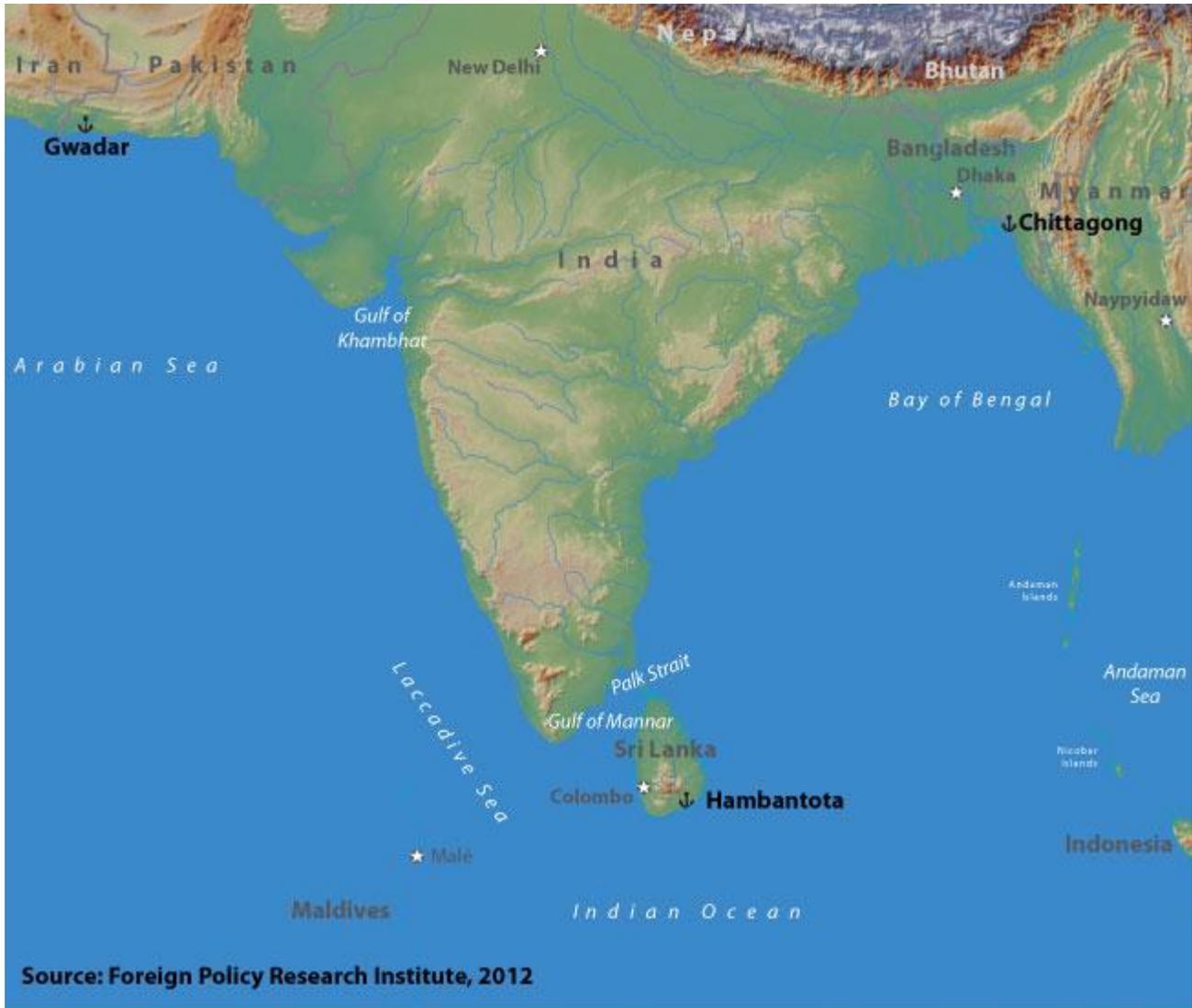
Sri Lanka lies directly north of the busiest shipping routes in the Indian Ocean, routes supporting both Indian and

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² In India, states are considerably more autonomous as compared to other federal structures, including the United States. As Mitra wrote: "The call for a federal division of powers, advocated by the Indian National Congress in the 1920s when it organized its provincial committees on the basis of linguistically contiguous areas, originated from the need to safeguard regional and sectional identity. But economic policy, especially in a country with formidable problems of development, required central coordination. Out of these contradictory needs has emerged what is known as the 'cooperative' federalism of India." Subrata Mitra, *Politics in India: Structure, Process and Policy* (London, Routledge, 2011), 89.

³ *The Hindu*, July 20, 2011, <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-international/tna-briefs-china-on-tamils-concerns/article4007569.ece>.

Chinese industrialization and growth. Eighty percent of China's hydrocarbon imports from the Middle East pass within 50 nautical miles of the island.⁴ Chinese trade with South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) nations through the Indian Ocean littoral increased from approximately \$3.0 billion in 1995 to over \$65 billion in 2008.⁵ Chinese trade with Africa reached \$160 billion in 2011, up 60% over 2009.⁶ This trade all flows past Sri Lanka's southern coast.



China is now the largest foreign aid provider to Sri Lanka, rising from 17.7% of foreign aid commitments and credits in 2007 to 44.2% in 2009.⁷ China has pledged more than \$3 billion for infrastructure development, maintenance and other projects.⁸

To counter China's increasing influence, India has deployed Airborne Warning and Control Systems and Agni-III missiles with a range of 3,500 km in its northern region. Additionally, the Indian Navy has plans to base an aircraft

⁴ Amit A. Pandya et. al., *Maritime Commerce and Security: the Indian Ocean* (Washington, DC, The Stimson Center, 2011), 42 and elsewhere.

⁵ SAARC currently includes Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

⁶ BBC News.

⁷ Sri Lanka, Ministry of Finance and Planning, Department of External Resources, *Foreign Aid Review*, 2007 – 2009, and 2010

⁸ BBC, Sinhala Service. November 21, 2010.

carrier in the Bay of Bengal, north of Sri Lanka.⁹ For its part China is pursuing a “string of pearls” strategy by strengthening facilities and access arrangements in the Indian Ocean, including new ports on the Pakistani coast at Gwadar, Chittagong in Bangladesh, and Hambantota in Sri Lanka.¹⁰

China’s activities in Sri Lanka indicate that China, according to one Indian naval officer, is ready to “drop anchor at India’s southern doorstep.”¹¹ The port at Hambantota in southern Sri Lanka is being constructed and funded by China. Hambantota’s three wharves lining the interior turning basin are each approximately one-quarter mile in length, comparable to the single wharf constructed at Gwadar, Pakistan and to the longest wharf at US Naval Station Norfolk. This basin will be capable of handling three Panamax or two Capesize merchant ships. They also offer sufficient space to dock Kiev-class sized aircraft carriers like those currently being developed and deployed by China.

Two political parties—the DMK (Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam) and the AIADMK (All India Anna Dravid Munnetra Kazhagam)—dominate Tamil Nadu politics. Each competes for votes by the degree to which they support Tamil nationalism and rights, both in India and Sri Lanka. The DMK is a critical coalition member of the governing, but shaky, United Party Alliance (UPA) in New Delhi.¹² The UPA holds only 262 of 500 seats in the lower house of Parliament. The DMK accounts for 18 of those seats.¹³ DMK members have a history of joining and departing coalitions. DMK’s withdrawal from the UPA would reduce the UPA’s seats to below the 251 seats required for a majority, possibly forcing early elections.¹⁴ Harvard University history professor Sugata Bose noted: “It is inconceivable that India could have a stable central government without the support of the Tamil in India”.¹⁵ Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu, from the Centre for Policy Alternatives (Colombo) has said that India’s policy alternatives towards Sri Lanka are limited by “...the signal fact that...the political pressure from Tamil Nadu exerted on politicians in New Delhi, India must strive to support Sri Lanka’s Tamils, even as it competes with China and Pakistan for friendship with Colombo’s Sinhalese authorities.”¹⁶

India’s response choices to gradually deepening Sino-Sri Lankan relations are limited. It can stay the current course; which means do nothing, likely resulting in the gradual capture of Sri Lanka into a tighter Chinese orbit and the eventual visiting, perhaps even basing, of Chinese naval assets in Hambantota. The second is to present a more belligerent face towards Sri Lanka and its Chinese benefactors. That could accelerate Sri Lanka’s move towards China in an effort to offset India’s grasp for regional hegemony. The third would be to aggressively develop closer relations with the Sri Lankan government through a dramatic expansion of aid, cultural exchange and economic integration (including a long-planned bridge across the Palk Strait). However, given the strong anti-Sri Lanka government sentiments in Tamil Nadu and the disproportionate leverage held by Tamil Nadu coalition members in New Delhi, this is highly unlikely to occur within this election cycle. Hence the domestic political complications imposed on New Delhi by the Tamil Nadu political faction is heightening the likelihood that Chinese warships will be visiting or based in southern Sri Lanka in the near future.

FPRI, 1528 Walnut Street, Suite 610, Philadelphia, PA 19102-3684

For more information, contact Eli Gilman at 215-732-3774, ext. 255, email fpri@fpri.org, or visit us at www.fpri.org.

⁹ Tridib Chakraborti in Sagarika Dutt and Alok Bansal, eds., *South Asian Security: 21st Century Discourses* (New York, Routledge, 2012), 88.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 92.

¹¹ Robert Kaplan, *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power* (New York, Random House, 2010), 195

¹² *The New York Times*, September 19, 2012.

¹³ Election Commission of India, 2009 General Election Report.

http://eci.nic.in/eci_main/archiveofge2009/Stats/VOLI/13_PerformanceOfStateParty.pdf.

¹⁴ The next regular national elections in India will be held in 2014.

¹⁵ Sugata Bose, interview conducted November 20, 2012.

¹⁶ Kaplan, *Monsoon*, 209.