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How China is Winning the ‘GO’ Game in the Indian Ocean Region: An Analysis of Sri Lanka’s Policy Framing

Carmen Rodríguez Escalada



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“Whoever controls the Indian Ocean will dominate Asia. This ocean will be the key to the seven seas in the 21st Century. The destiny of the world will be decided on its waters”.

Alfred Thayer Mahan, Admiral in the U.S. Navy, as cited in *The Influence of Sea Power in History 1660-1783*.

Introduction

According to the Chinese Language Institute official website (2018), “GO,” pronounced (围棋) wéiqí in Chinese, was invented around 40 centuries ago. The original purpose of the game was to teach strategic thinking. This intention becomes apparent when translating the Chinese word “wéi qí,” which means “the surrounding” or the “encircling game.” Regarded as a highly elitist game due to its intellectual complexity, GO’s original objective was not only to teach strategic thinking but also to somewhat emulate real-life concepts and lessons –o much so that GO can arguably be considered the universal game. According to Silvia Lozeva (2019), GO’s real –world teachings can be seen through three examples. First, through the creation of web- like connections and the possibility and necessity to create these links among different groups. Second, as a way of mutual understanding among the different groups. Lozeva (2019) describes GO as a “way of communication, a conversation by hands that encourages a level of harmony within the variations.” And third, in the wéiqí board, all stones have the same value, which means that there is a principle of equity and inclusion among opponents.

Regarding the first point, the creation of these connections occurs whenever a threat presents itself to the groups –being composed of white stones on one side and black stones on the other. It is these connections that will guarantee their survival. According to James Davies’s (1975) book *Life and Death*, GO players refer to groups as living or dead, depending on the situation. What makes a group alive is not the largest number of, for instance, physical black stones on the board. Instead, it is the space within the groups that characterizes it as alive. Lozeva (2019) adds how the space within the group of stones can be seen as the “common value that is shared through social connections that sustain and maintain those groups rather than the number or the size of these connections.” Applying the framework of GO logic in the international world, countries are dependent bodies seeking to form meaningful alliances with other countries for their own survival and for the longevity of these alliances against other countries and their own coalitions. In this case, what matters is not solely the number of partners a country has but the values and principles that sustain and hold these alliances together.

The second point highlights how GO is a powerful tool for communicating different ways of thinking. It is vital for each player to reach a middle ground when dividing the space in the board and act upon mutual respect and understanding. Both opponents understand that the wéiqí board offers a vast number of possibilities due to its 361 intersections. In other words, for both players, it is evident that controlling the entire board is impossible. Lozeva (2019) notes that this knowledge challenges the traditional Western perspective of strategic games. Most strategic games in the West entail destroying the opponent’s pieces and the opponent’s territory. It is the desired outcome and usually the only way to determine a winner. However, undermining your opponent and attempting to dominate the entire board will not be a successful strategy in the GO world. On the contrary, it is important to recognize the need for the opponent to coexist to create its own space on the board. This is stated in the first Ten Golden Rules of GO formulated by Wang Jixin: “The greedy do not get success” (Sensei’s Library, 2015). Within the framework of GO logic, it can be speculated whether China has diverged from this second pillar through the creation of ambitious initiatives and expansionist policies that, in recent years, seem to have backfired with the rise of numerous countries criticizing China’s lack of transparency in its international relations and accusing it of using “debt trap diplomacy” on weaker countries for its own geopolitical and geoeconomic benefit (Chakravarty, 2023; Condon, 2023; Wang, 2022).

Regarding the final point, as stated before, all stones are of equal value. This means that each player's move can have equally significant or insignificant outcomes in the short and long term. Usually, GO players rely on their long-term vision to place each stone. As each stone is of equal value when placed in the right place on the board, it has the potential to overturn the entire result, even in the endgame, something unlikely in other strategic games. If we apply this third point to the idea of an international balance of power, the same observation is deduced. For instance, when former Chancellor of Germany Helmut Kohl traveled to China back in 1984 on a mission to organize a century-long modernization effort, while his prophecy that China held the key to prosperity for the West was somewhat true, what was not considered was the long-term vision of what to do if Beijing used the key to lock them into an unbalanced power relationship (Karnitschnig, 2020). This overlook was most likely due to Germany –an economically and politically powerful country– undermining China's potential in the long run.

When observing these pillars of strategic guidance, Dugain (2022) highlights in the journal *Les Echos* how China is not playing chess like us Westerners but a game of GO that aims to gradually 'encircle' the designated adversary. Contrary to many Western narratives, what China is planning is not the 'great replacement' –where China takes over the U.S. international order– but the great overthrow of domination through a series of well-planned strategies and policies. Strategies that involve the aforementioned wéiqí universal rules: form a few alliances that are well grounded in economic values (first point), where China does not interfere in a country's internal matters and allows coexistence (second point), resulting in China gradually creating web-like connections, eventually encircling the current power hegemon (final point).

Considering this, most academic and research papers have mainly focused on how China has been engraving a geoeconomic and geopolitical footprint in Europe and how the European Union must address this systemic challenge (BusinessEurope, 2020). Furthermore, many other news reports and journal articles have centered their attention on the growing tensions arising between the United States and China in the South China Sea due to Beijing's adamant decision to impose itself in nearly the entirety of the whole sea –by creating artificial islands and organizing military drills– at the expense of the other countries claim around it (Deo, 2023). As a result of Chinese endeavors in the South China Sea and the rise of other economic security concerns in Europe and the U.S., there has been, to an extent, an undermining of the importance of the Indian Ocean region to China's geostrategic interests. The U.S. and China Economic Security Commission (2021) highlights how the Indian Ocean is a key trading route for China's imports and exports, making it also the center stage of future vulnerabilities (p. 211). China is well aware of this weak spot. In fact, Baruah (2022) states how, following a wéiqí-like technique, "Beijing has quietly deepened and strengthened its engagements across the entire region, from the western to the eastern Indian Ocean, through economic, diplomatic, political, and now military engagements."

As a result, different countries have shown increasing concern about China's foreign policies. The most debated issue is China's 'Belt and Road and Maritime Initiatives,' which has allowed it to significantly spread its influence across various continents in recent years. A particular point of concern is the so-called Chinese 'debt trap diplomacy,' which is best depicted in Sri Lanka's case (Business Standard, 2022; Tharoor, 2022). Although Sri Lanka is crucial for China's String of Pearls project, it has plunged into a deep debt crisis where recovery seems a long way ahead. The alarming matter is not only that Sri Lanka has become heavily indebted to China –due to a series of failed infrastructure projects– but that China now has sovereignty over certain vital sectors of Sri Lanka's economy, namely its Hambantota Port. This has led countries like the U.S. and India to speculate whether this was part of China's plan all along and, most worrisome if this strategy will be used to control and weaken other countries and even regions of the world.

Considering the ongoing debate, this paper aims to understand China's strategic approach to effectively surrounding its main rival, India, in the contested Indian Ocean Region. Specifically, it analyzes how China has maintained a solid economic and political hold over Sri Lanka, which is geographically one of the most significant "pearls in the string" for trade and, allegedly, military activities. To do so, this paper aims to answer the **research question**: How has the position of Sri Lanka towards China changed over time? By answering this question, this paper aims to understand how China, through various strategies, expands its sphere of influence across the littoral countries that form the String of Pearls and, in turn, see how the targeted countries, –in this case Sri Lanka– react to such advancements. In other words, how Sri Lanka has played a role in China's arguably success in keeping it under its sphere of influence. In this manner, shining some light on the type of connections and alliances China creates and,

in turn, what consequences this may entail in the balance of power in the Indian Ocean Region. Three hypotheses determine the structure of this paper:

- **Hypothesis 1:** China is taking an ‘encircling’ strategy in the Indian Ocean Region for purely commercial vulnerabilities caused by the Malacca Dilemma.
- **Hypothesis 2:** Sri Lanka’s debt crisis occurred due to China’s increasing involvement in the country’s economic development.
- **Hypothesis 3:** Despite India’s concerns, it has similar objectives to China in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

Each chapter of the paper discusses the relevant information needed to form an answer to these hypotheses and thus reject them or prove them right in the conclusion. The first chapter is a literature review and analysis of China’s strategy in the IOR vis-à-vis India and Sri Lanka. Here, three points are analyzed: First, China’s prevalent use of sharp power to encircle countries and regions of interest and its entailing ‘long game’ strategy. Second, the Malacca Dilemma is studied to contextualize why China has shown a particular interest in the IOR. Third, it examines how China responds to this concern and if there are obscure national interests in developing the String of Pearls that go beyond the economic and commercial realm. This takes us to the second part of the analysis. The second chapter applies a Policy Frame Analysis to understand how Sri Lanka, a pawn in the ‘board’ for China’s more extensive interests, has framed China’s increasing presence throughout the years. This form of analysis is chosen as it allows for a more heterogeneous examination of Sri Lanka’s evolving stance towards China as it considers economic, political, and cultural circumstances. Frames are selected representations of social phenomena, and in this case, they encompass the rise of Chinese involvement in Sri Lanka’s infrastructure development and the escalating debt crisis. Radulova (2009) explains that through frames, policymakers can direct attention toward salient issues and divert attention from other problems they wish to downplay (p. 3). To achieve this shift in attention, the salience of an issue needs to be defined, which can be accomplished through repetition and association with cultural symbols.

Policy frames encompass not only different policy visions and actions but also different values and meanings. According to Radulova (2009), they serve three functions: identifying a social condition as problematic, explaining the problem, and proposing policy actions or non-actions (p. 3). These frames can be categorized into four dimensions: normative, constitutive, cognitive, and policy. The normative dimension evaluates a social reality based on attached values, such as assessing the impact of economic and political crises or foreign investments on Sri Lanka’s national security and stability. The constitutive dimension frames the problem as a general or public concern, such as a security or economic issue. The cognitive dimension describes the factors contributing to the problem, including the lack of transparency in Chinese involvement and Sri Lanka’s internal political corruption. Finally, the policy dimension outlines potential solutions to the perceived problem.

By applying this analytical framework to statements made by Sri Lankan political figures, business owners, and other sources, it becomes possible to identify Sri Lanka’s motivations and interests concerning Chinese investments, track the shift in its position over time, and understanding its response to China’s increasing presence. To make this analysis possible, this paper has selected three specific timeframes: from 2009-2010 during the end of the civil war and Mahinda Rajapaksa’s regime, from 2015-2016 during Maithreepala Sirisena’s presidency, where a more anti-China stance was taken, and finalizing with the current relationship (2022-2023) between both countries under Ranil Wickremesinghe –who has taken further measures to decrease dependence on China and foster collaborations with other global powers.

In this manner, we gain a different perspective from other academic works, where usually the actions of only the stronger State are analyzed, disregarding how the targeted State has played a role in the success of the stronger State and, in the case of Sri Lanka, its own downfall. The final chapter adopts a wider future-oriented lens and analyzes the response of the two most relevant hegemony in this conundrum: India and the United States. On the one hand, this paper examines India’s recent anti-encirclement strategy against China called the Necklace of Diamonds –a direct response against the String of Pearls– while on the other hand, this paper highlights the U.S. initial disregard to the increasingly important Indian Ocean Region. Lastly, the conclusion summarizes the findings, contributions, and possible further research needed.

Chapter 1: ‘GO’ Relevancy & China and India’s Current Placement in the Wéiqí World Board

As previously mentioned, “GO” is pronounced wéiqí in Chinese. This Chinese character combination suggests a piece, 棋 qí, is being surrounded, 围 wéi, by another piece or perhaps doing the surrounding itself (Chinese Language Institute, 2018). Thus, we have a “surround piece” game in which the aim is to surround more territory than your opponent. As previously mentioned, the GO game is complex and rich with philosophical as well as geopolitical significance. In China, it is believed that when a person learns to play, they simultaneously learn the meaning of harmony (Lai, 2004, p. 29). References to GO can be found in Chinese texts as early as 2 500 years ago. Indeed, it left a notable footprint in Chinese culture, so much so that the game was considered one of the four essential arts of a cultured Chinese scholar, along with music, calligraphy, and painting (China Online Museum, 2016). In this game, each stone plays offense and defense simultaneously. Meaning that, even if a player is keeping a defensive stance, this can swiftly change into an offensive attack using the other player’s momentum (Lai, 2004, p. 14). In brief, both opponents seek to control the majority of the board, and by doing so, they unceasingly disrupt the equilibrium and create a new balance.

According to Catherine Wang (2016), the challenge lies in the possible options of moves and placements each stone can take, which can seem “very abstract for outsiders to the game.” As its real-world practical strategic importance became more obvious in the West, for–er Secretary of State Henry Kissinger encouraged American military strategists to read David Lai’s book –a Strategic Studies teacher in the Institute of the U.S. Army War College– *Learning from the Stones: A Go Approach to Mastering China’s Strategic Concept* (Lai, 2004, p. 4). In this text, Lai compared the Western warfare strategy that focuses on using force with the Chinese war strategy that revolves around a “battle of wits” (Wang, 2016). Additionally, Wang (2016) adds how generals in ancient China played the GO game to strengthen their military tactics, and now, this form of learning still endures as strategists argue that GO can somewhat help understand Eastern military philosophy today.

1.1. Real-World Examples of China’s Wéiqí Tactics

However, the question remains: What is the current pertinence of this game when studying China’s global strategy and, more precisely, its strategy in the IOR? The relevance is obvious when we look at China’s wéiqí-like strategy behind the Maritime Silk Road Initiative, which is part of China’s larger Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI is a project to revive the ancient Silk Road that began in 2013 under the Chinese leader Xi Jinping. According to Chalfant (2020), the BRI project is expected “to cost around 18 trillion dollars upon completion in 2049 and connect over 100 nations into a mega-trade network.” Indeed, this initiative can push many third-world countries out of severe poverty and allow them to play a more relevant role in the international sphere. However, it will, most importantly, allow China greater leverage and bargaining power at the negotiating table. Thus, if the world were to become a wéiqí board, we would see China expanding across the middle of the board and intersecting with various world powers such as India and the United States (Chalfant, 2020).

These strategic efforts can be seen taking place in many regions of the world, such as Latin America, Africa and Europe. Regarding Latin America, China hopes to become its strongest economic ally in exchange for its political support on its “One China Policy” and BRI. Through this exchange, China is gradually encircling Latin America and leaving on the sidelines the United States’ influence on the region (Nugent & Campell, 2021). A final example that is poignant to the analysis of this paper is the strategic ‘encirclement’ of India by China’s String of Pearls which has the objective of dominating the Indian Ocean and warding off a chokehold of the Malacca Strait. Overall, the philosophy and tactics behind the GO game, explains Posner (2011), and the real-life examples seen in China’s projects and initiatives to spread worldwide could eventually come together to promote its grand strategy: the overthrow of the current hegemonic power. Hence, it will be increasingly important to study, analyze, and for future Western policy makers to begin understanding the rules of the wéiqí game to properly understand and respond to China’s advancements.

Figure 1: China's String of Pearls including Ports and Navy in the Indian Ocean Area



Source: Research Gate uploaded by Elai Rettig, "Book: Maritime Strategic Evaluation for Israeli, 2016"

Having examined the relevance of the GO game in China's strategy-building, it is also essential to study the current position of China on the 'board,' in other words, its geographical location -the entailing strengths and weaknesses- vis-à-vis India, its primary opponent, in the Indian Ocean Region. This understanding is crucial in determining China's future economic and political game plan.

1.1.1. Placements on the Wéiqí Board

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is becoming one of the most contested seas in the world. Alfred Mahan –a distinguished scholar in naval history and President of the United States Naval War College– famously proclaimed that dominion over the Indian Ocean equates to dominance over Asia and, in turn, the world (Patnaik, 2015). This statement was based on the geographical fact that the Indian Ocean expands itself towards five continents: Africa, Antarctica, Asia, Oceania, and crossing various commercial chokepoints, Europe. Moreover, this region encompasses a substantial portion of the globe's most transited sea lines of communication (SLOC). Notably, these sea lines have not only facilitated the movements of naval forces during "key historical events like the Japanese-Russian War of 1905 or World War II," but they also now enable the navigation of commercial vessels responsible for transporting essential commodities and vital energy resources that power our daily lives (Singh, 2022, p. 3).

India, a prominent adversary of China, occupies a strategically advantageous position within the Indian Ocean Region by virtue of its location between crucial bottlenecks. Towards the Western expanse, the Straits of Hormuz and Bab-El-Mandel play a vital role in facilitating the trade of oil products and merchandise, rendering them of significant importance (Singh, 2022, p. 5). The southern realm, positioned between the Lakshadweep and Maldives archipelagos, emerges as a critical chokepoint for sea lines of communication (SLOCs) linking Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia (Dutta, 2023). Furthermore, to the east, India's has control over the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago, which spreads over to the Western part of the Malacca Strait –a critical juncture connecting the Indian and Pacific oceans, which holds exceptional significance for China (Dutta, 2023). India's geographical placement within the IOR, coupled with its close control over the Malacca Strait, allows it to wield substantial influence over the region's geopolitical dynamics.

In the case of China, their biggest geopolitical and economic concern is the Malacca Strait –the strategic gate between the Pacific and the Indian Ocean, between the Malay peninsula in the north, and the Indonesian Island of Sumatra in the south. As later discussed, this chokepoint represents the most geographically concise route for sea-bound container and cargo vessels traveling between Europe and the Middle East on one side and East Asia on the other. Consequently, the Malacca Strait witnesses an annual flow of over 3.5 trillion dollars' worth of global trade, encompassing two-thirds of China's maritime trade volume and nearly one-third worldwide trade (Patel, 2023). China, the second-largest economy worldwide, heavily relies on the Strait of Malacca for approximately 80 percent of its oil imports –a critical aspect to consider, given that imported oil accounts for 75 percent of China's total oil

consumption, meaning that roughly 60 percent of its oil supply navigates through this significant Strait (OEC, 2021). Therefore, any substantial obstruction or blockage of the Strait of Malacca would pose a significant risk to China's economy, as viable alternatives to the Strait of Malacca for energy imports and manufactured exports are limited.

For instance, a maritime trade route getting to and from the Chinese east coast would have to re-route around Sumatra and either pass through other easily blockable chokepoints through the islands of the Indonesian archipelago or pass along the long open ocean route around the southern side of Australia. These alternative routes would not only substantially increase traveling time but also traveling costs. For these reasons, Chinese President Hu Jintao warned China of its weak point in the Strait of Malacca in 2003, calling it the "Malacca Dilemma." Hu Jintao highlighted how the lack of alternatives and vulnerability to a naval blockade this region posed a big threat to China's economic stability. The President suggested that "certain powers have all along encroached on and tried to control navigation through the [Malacca] Strait" (Paszak, 2021). Because of this, establishing China's position in the South China Sea and pushing this influence directly to the Strait of Malacca has become of imperative importance to Beijing's national security. According to Chalfant (2020), this action is a popular *wéiqí* geopolitical strategy China uses, called 'salami slicing.' The term originates from the approach of gradually slicing off small portions, usually referring to land or territory, but it also encompasses slicing in terms of "technology, culture, economy, sovereignty, and even demography" (Chalfant, 2020; Ashraf, 2017). This reveals China's inclination towards a cautious, incremental gain over time rather than immediate and quick gain.

Having briefly examined the players' placements of the stones on the GO board -in this case, India and China being the stones and the Indian Ocean the board- the following subsections focus on how precisely China is 'salami slicing' its way across the IOR with a specific focus on Sri Lanka. This paper focuses on Sri Lanka because, unlike other South Asian countries, its geographical location presents itself as a more appealing target for geoeconomic interests in the IOR region. Kamburawala and Abeyrathne (2022) explain how Sri Lanka's location is critical in the BRI project -particularly the Maritime Silk Road- since it serves as a hub that provides facilities for the easy transportation of Chinese exports and imports (p. 60). Roy- Chaudhury (2019) clarifies that although Sri Lanka is undoubtedly just another of the many countries participating in the Maritime Silk Road (MSR), its strategic position between the Indian Ocean's east-west shipping routes makes it an essential part of the initiative (p. 155). Lastly, as elaborated in the case study section in the second chapter of this analysis, Sri Lanka and China have held diplomatic relations since the 1950s. Thus, analyzing how China has developed its strategy throughout the years and how Sri Lanka has responded can be indicative of how China's ambitious goals in the IOR are developing and what precautionary measures can or should be taken in the long run (Asirwatham, 2018; Kumar, 2017, p. 1113).

Before analyzing the development and current situation of the Sino-Sri Lanka relationship, it is important to understand the three main courses of action China has decided to take in the IOR vis-à-vis India -one of the most obvious challenges China will have to face- and Sri Lanka. To do so, the following subsections will focus on China's go-to sharp power regional approach and displacement strategy at a global level, its main weakness in the Indian Ocean region, namely the Strait of Malacca, and finally, China's plan to overcome this issue: The String of Pearls.

1.2. China's Sharp Power Strategy

According to John Adams, there are two ways to conquer or enslave a country, "one is by the sword, and the other is by debt" (Nikkei Asia, 2018). Following Joseph Nye's definition, these two tactics would fall under 'hard power' control. Nye was an American political scientist well-known for having co-founded the international relations theory of neoliberalism with Robert Keohane in their book *Power and Independence* in the 1970s. Later, in the 1990s, he popularized the terms 'hard power' and 'soft power' in his book *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*. For Nye, hard power is based on "military intervention, coercive diplomacy, and economic sanctions" (Wilson, 2009, p. 114). Soft power, in contrast, is defined by Nye (2009) as being "associated with intangible power resources such as culture, ideology, institutions, and foreign policy" (Gallarotti, 2011, p. 63). Having understood this, 'sharp power' may be defined as a mix of both, however, with a stronger inclination towards being a hard type of power.

The term 'sharp power' was popularized by The National Endowment for Democracy (NED) in 2017, and was used to describe how authoritarian regimes wield this power to manipulate and divert culture, education systems, and the media. Simon Shen explains that "a country using this approach takes advantage of the asymmetries between

free and unfree political systems, allowing regimes to limit free expression and distort political environments in democracies while simultaneously shielding their country from outside influence” (Snow, 2021, p.5). Thus, when an authoritative power attempts to influence a region or country, it is referred to as sharp power influence in the sense that they “pierce and perforate the political and information environments in the targeted country” (Faust, 2021). Joseph Nye explains that sharp power is not an unknown phenomenon. Instead, it is another term for information warfare (Skoneczny & Cacko, 2021).

However, it is important to mention that information manipulation is not the only tool used to display sharp power. Other tactics include backing certain political groups and social organizations that fit into the intervening powers agenda, modifying history -such as intentional falsification and denial of facts that are commonly accepted in historiography-, “manipulation of elections in a given country, strategic scientific cooperation, international economic undertakings” -such as China’s Belt and Maritime Road Initiative-, and hybrid conflict (Skoneczny & Cacko, 2021). Overall, hard power use can be defined as a hostile action carried out by the State using “methods imitating soft power characteristics to manipulate the image of the targeted country or destabilize its socio-political system, or force certain actions by its authorities” (Tiffert & McPherson-Smith, 2021, p. 2).

When it comes to China, the CCP has consistently prioritized strengthening its legitimacy both domestically and internationally. Thus, the concept of sharp power emerged alongside the rise of Communist parties (Mankikar, 2022). With the creation of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the united front strategy was utilized to address both internal and external adversaries of the CCP while ensuring that the international perception of China aligned with the party’s agenda (Mankikar, 2022). As a result, China has been using sharp power to increase its national and global influence and image. Examples of China’s use of sharp power can be seen through the BRI, which is considered a tool of the country’s statecraft to create a new China-centric era of globalization that differs from traditional economic initiatives (Amaresh, 2021). Another example can be seen through the building of Confucius Institutes around the world, whose aim is to promote the Chinese language and culture in a biased way. At a national level, China’s sharp power can be seen in the silencing of the Hong Kong protests and the Uyghur camps -which have sparked weak international backlash, most likely due to China’s economic might.

Overall, sharp power at an international level involves norms and practices that penetrate nations in a cunning and concealed manner, aiming to undermine and influence them through coercive or corrupt means (Walker, 2019). As Tiffert and McPherson-Smith (2021) mention, “sharp power can take many forms, from interference in local media and elections to the cultivation of surrogates who, from foreign patrons, import censorship, unsustainable debt, and surveillance technologies without public accountability” (p. 3). Thus, the primary concern of the use of sharp power is its intrusion of a country’s state of affairs, which undermines and weakens democratic institutions, economies, and information channels, making it easier for illiberal actors to take advantage of the situation. As a result, this can debilitate democracies and regions worldwide, decreasing international security and increasing geopolitical and geostrategic tensions. Thus, analyzing the strategy behind the use of sharp power is vital to understand how it can be reversed and subdued.

1.2.1. Overview of Sri Lanka’s Civil War and China’s Sharp Power Contribution

China’s relations with Sri Lanka go back over 20 centuries ago and have historically been strengthened by shared religious and cultural values. Moreover, for centuries, the small island has served as a key nexus in maritime trade for China. Nevertheless, although the relationship between both countries stretches back, China’s focus on this partnership became more significant after 2007, when the 50-year milestone of diplomatic relations was achieved (Embassy of PRC in Sri Lanka, 2022). It was during this period up to the present day when China’s use of sharp power was more noticeable -the Civil War serving as a pivotal moment for Chinese intervention.

(i) Historical Contextualization of Sri Lanka’s Civil War

The origins of Sri Lanka’s civil war go back to the period of British colonization. Since the formerly known Ceylon island became independent from British rule in 1948, ethnic tension grew. Bajoria (2009) explains how after Sri Lanka’s independence, the Sinhalese, who disliked “British favoritism towards the Tamils” during the colonial period, responded by depriving the Tamil plantation workers of India and establishing Sinhalese as the official language. In 1972, the Sinhalese, who were Buddhists, made Buddhism the nation’s primary religion. This was

followed by the Tamil minority, comprised of Hindus and Christians, being accused of having close relations with the colonizers, which made them even more marginalized and ousted from the country (Denis & Kumari, 2022). Ethnic tensions only worsened in 1976 when the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) –a group calling for an independent state for the Tamil minority– was created. Campaigns for a Tamil homeland were most recurrent in northern and eastern Sri Lanka (Bajoria, 2009).

Tensions reached a tipping point in 1987 when the LTTE killed thirteen soldiers, triggering the assassination of 2 500 Tamils (Bajoria, 2009). During this time, India, which had deployed peacekeeping forces, retreated as violence quickly escalated in the region. In 2006, the Sri Lankan government launched a military campaign to once and for all put down the LTTE. This war prolonged until 2009, accounting for 100 000 people, including Tamil civilians, being killed, the Sri Lankan economy left devastated, and the island nation international reputation left to tatters (Denis & Kumari, 2022). As it is later examined, India largely remained on the sidelines during and after the conflict. On the other hand, China was offering military support during the conflict. Following the LTTE's defeat, China made extensive efforts to protect the Rajapaksa regime from international scrutiny regarding the atrocities committed against the Tamil minority. China argued that Sri Lanka alone had the authority to address these matters, thus attempting to avoid Sri Lanka from taking accountability at the United Nations (Hein, 2017, p. 87). China would take advantage of this show of diplomatic soft power to gradually stir anti-Western sentiments and lay the seeds for more pro-China nation-building in Sri Lanka.

Having contextualized Sri Lanka's Civil War, the next section, for clarity purposes, looks at China's 'softer' sharp power use and then the hard sharp power influence.

(ii) On Soft Sharp Power: Politics, Culture, and Diplomacy

During the culmination of its Civil War in 2009, when Sri Lanka's government needed India's support the most, it found itself sidelined by its neighbour. This allowed Beijing to form tighter links with Sri Lanka. Hein (2017) analyzes how, while the Western countries criticized the human rights abuses that occurred towards the end of the civil war, China consistently provided political backing to Sri Lanka –in fact, “China even voted against the UN resolution sponsored by the United States on Sri Lanka in 2009, 2012, 2013, and 2014.” In accordance with the soft power strategy and the aforementioned second universal rule of *wéiqí* (non-interference in the internal affairs of states, i.e., allow coexistence), China stated that Sri Lankan military actions did not affect the international peace and security (Herath, 2019, p. 10). In appreciation of China's support –which involved both economic and military support, especially during the Eelam War IV– political and diplomatic ties between the former Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa deepened (Jayasundara, 2023, p. 10). By deepening political support and trust, it became easier for China to get what it wanted at the negotiating table. This is seen in Sri Lanka's unshaken support of the 'One-China' policy on Taiwan and Tibet issues (Jayarathne, 2017, p. 7). This is also evident in the number of Chinese infrastructure projects and investments that Sri Lanka has opened its borders to. These include the Hambantota port, Mattala International Airport, highways, railway lines, and Colombo port city.

Apart from 'political soft power' support, China has also invested in building Chinese Cultural Centers (CCC). As per the CCC website, many centers that are being built actively promote Chinese culture through art exhibitions, food fairs, martial arts training, and Buddhist religious gatherings in South Asia. This cultural form of soft power should not be taken lightly (Wagner, 2014, p. 2). For instance, Jayasundara (2023) states how “China, an officially atheist country, took steps to hold international Buddhist forums where more than 1000 prominent Buddhist monks, experts, and scholars from over 50 countries attended” (p. 19). Some may be wondering why this is done. According to Ranade (2017), Buddhism is often seen as a peaceful and harmonious religion. As a result, China finds it advantageous to emphasize Buddhism in its narrative of achieving power through peaceful means. Accordingly, China promotes these narratives in Sri Lanka by employing an extensive Buddhist diplomatic approach. This involves high-level visits, collaborative religious events, donations, and gifts. These activities aim to highlight the historical Buddhist links between China and Sri Lanka, presenting them as having a shared destiny and shared values rooted in Buddhism. (Ranade, 2017). Rosendal (2022) adds how terms such as “millennium Buddhist fate” are used to highlight the religious foundation that unite China with the other South Asian countries. Moreover, regarding Sri Lanka, Chinese officials underscore the importance of promoting trade relations between China

and the island nation through Buddhist exchanges, asserting that Buddhism holds a pivotal position in cultivating collaboration within the framework of the BRI (Raymond, 2020).

Lastly, China has also invested in the establishment of Confucius Institutes (CI) around South Asia. Indeed, there are Confucius institutes in practically all of the countries in South Asia. In Sri Lanka, in order to improve Chinese cultural and educational links, China Radio International (CRI) is also launching on-air Confucius Institutes (Jayasundara, 2023, p.20). However, this rapid expansion of the CI has been criticized internationally, claiming it to be a dangerous form of Chinese soft power. Willy Lam, a professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, stated: “The Confucius Institutes serve as a base where Beijing’s experts in propaganda and united front work can ‘infiltrate’ their host universities and shape the opinion [about China] of scholars and students” (Torres, 2017). In the long term, this could suppose a shift in the perceptions in favor of China. Inevitably, having a favorable impression of a country and seeing them in a good light and as a trustworthy partner makes political and economic alliances easier and more durable.

(iii) On Hard Sharp Power: Economy

Given China’s export-oriented economy, which entails a significant need for energy expansion, adopting an economic-focused strategy in Sri Lanka becomes notably more crucial. This approach aims to guarantee secure access to the sea lines of communication (SLOCs) that are vital for China’s trade operations. Considering this, Shivamurthy (2022) gives an insightful case of how China took advantage of the poor economic situation in Sri Lanka during the “rise of Rajapaksas”, which depicts a perfect example of the strategic use of sharp power in an economically weak and politically corrupt country. In brief, the term “rise of the Rajapaksas” refers to the political ascendancy and grip on power of the Rajapaksa family in Sri Lankan politics. The Rajapaksas are a prominent political family in Sri Lanka, with their rise to power beginning with the election of Mahinda Rajapaksa as the President of Sri Lanka in 2005. Their presence in politics prolonged itself to 2020 when, following a landslide victory in the August elections, Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa swore in a cabinet that included “two of his brothers and two nephews, sharing multiple portfolios among the family” (Jacinto, 2022). Back in 2005, after having won the presidential elections, Mahinda was the one to launch the war against the LTTE (Banerjee, 2022). During this period, Gotabaya held the position of Defense Secretary, the brother who previously was part of the Sri Lankan Army. As president, Mahinda became the spearhead for the political fortune of the Rajapaksas, a transition from a rules-based order turned into one of family networks (Jacinto, 2022). In sum, this period between 2005-2015 is known as the “rise of the Rajapaksas,” which also encompasses the beginning of risky investments in infrastructure projects tainted by political corruption and China’s capitalization of the increasing economic instability of the island (Arudpragasam, 2022).

Much debate has taken place discussing how Rajapaksas economic mismanagement and populist policies had caused the downfall of the small island. However, less discussed is how China has also played a role in this downfall. A pivotal moment in Sri Lanka’s downfall’ was, ironically, the successful end to the more than two-and-a-half decades-long civil war. As according to Jacob (2015), the achievement could mainly be attributed to China’s provision of weapons to the regime, as well as the West’s greater focus on the human rights violations against the Tamils rather than recognizing China’s deliberate actions (p. 1). After the war, economic recovery called for much-needed support in the Sri Lankan government. Once again, China took the initiative and provided the island nation economic aid through multiple investments and infrastructure development plans. As a result, from 2005-2015, China emerged as Sri Lanka’s main source of development assistance and foreign direct investor (Shivamurthy, 2022). As Sri Lanka tried to recover economically, it proposed several massive infrastructure projects that China enthusiastically seized. At this moment, China’s gradual sharp power tactics and, in turn, economic grip over Sri Lanka began.

China’s assistance did result in a short-lived economic boom, but the investments from China did not have the potential to generate returns. Instead, it “created a façade of development which strengthened Mahinda’s position” (Shivamurthy, 2022). Due to this, China also indirectly played a role in the political sphere by shaping the growing populism on the island. In sum, China’s involvement in Sri Lanka’s path toward economic recovery has been pivotal. While Beijing recognized the investment opportunities as a strategic avenue to bolster its economic interests, the Rajapaksas exploited this situation to attain more political and economic power. Shivamurthy (2022) concludes

that upon the ascension of Rajapaksa's successors in 2015, Chinese investments and loans had become intricately intertwined with the Sri Lankan economy to such an extent that breaking ties with China seemed unthinkable. In sum, it is from this gradual infiltration by China into Sri Lanka's economic and political stability that China now holds a 99-year lease of the key Hambantota Port, holds a debt stock in Sri Lanka of around US\$7.3 billion –which renders the small island absolutely dependent of China–, and is currently planning to set up a radar base there to track Indian and U.S. military movement (Sharma, 2023).

Overall, through cultural and diplomatic relations that portrayed China as a trustworthy, helpful partner and through economic and, indirectly, political aid, China has managed to trap Sri Lanka in a challenging state of affairs. It is understandable that due to the international backlash, China has shifted the blame onto others for the crisis. However, the fact that China only provided an insignificant amount of economic support to the island state has given rise to suspicions regarding China's trustworthiness, motives, and the potential consequences of its initiatives, loans, and influence over other countries. In short, debt is indeed an effective way of 'conquering' a country.

1.3. Rush Doshi's Long Game: China's Displacement Strategy

In this section, this paper examines China's grand strategy and goal behind the use of its sharp power. While not the focus of this paper, it is nevertheless important to understand that many researchers agree how most of China's policies are linked to its larger long-term strategy to displace the U.S. as a power hegemon (Brands & Sullivan, 2020; Donnet, 2020; Doshi, 2021; Easton, 2022; Larson, 2015; Mattis, 2021; Wong & Swanson, 2022; Schuman, 2022). However, as aforementioned, China is not going to achieve this immediately. On the contrary, it is a gradual incremental gain that Rush Doshi, author of the book *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order*, has divided into three stages called the 'stages of strategic displacement.'

According to Doshi's analysis, a hegemon's position in a regional and global order rises from three 'forms of control' used to control other states' behavior: coercive capacity, consensual inducements, and legitimacy (Doshi, 2021). For emerging states, to displace the hegemon, it must take two strategies. The first strategy consists of weakening the hegemon's exercise of control; particularly those focused on the rising State. In this case, this can be depicted as China weakening India's control of the IOR or weakening the U.S. dominant standing in the South China Sea and, in turn, reducing its sphere of influence in the world. The second is to build forms of control over others. This is important as no hegemon state can establish itself as such if it does not secure its control over other states through "coercive threats, consensual inducements, or rightful legitimacy" (Doshi, 2021). This strategy should first be applied at a regional level, which China has been doing gradually through the expansion of its claim in the South China Sea and the creation of the String of Pearls in the IOR.

Doshi (2021) further analyzes China's process of strategic displacement throughout the years. China's first displacement strategy (1989-2008) was to weaken American control over China and Asia as a whole. To do so, China had to build the foundation for regional hegemony in Asia (second strategy of displacement 2008-2016), which would happen post-2008 financial crisis when the U.S. had weakened, and China could take advantage of this. Indeed, at a regional level, China already accounts for more than half of all Asian military spending, pushing the region toward a Chinese sphere of influence (Donnet, 2020, p. 138). This shift can eventually lead to the withdrawal of U.S. forces from certain areas of the map and, overall, the end of American regional alliances (Doshi, 2021). In turn, this can lead to China 'filling in the blank spots' and creating its own regional alliances with neighboring countries. In turn, considering the hypothetical displacement of the U.S. as a super power, China could also achieve the reunification with Taiwan, and effectively resolve territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas (Doshi, 2021). Not only that but by resolving disputes in the South China Sea and expanding itself in that territory, China would also be able to tackle its Malacca Dilemma and thus ensure its economic stability regionally and, thus, globally.

Recently, as will be further discussed in the next two subchapters, China has taken the third step of displacement. This step expands into weakening and developing policies and strategies worldwide to, ultimately, displace the U.S. as a global leader and instead establish itself as the new hegemon. This strategy can be seen taking place gradually in many regions of the world, including the IOR. Bukhari (2021) explains that China's first 'Blue Book' on this region was released in 2013 with the initial aim of maintaining the *status quo* (p. 6). However, as China entered its third step of displacement, China saw the need to play a more proactive role in the affairs of the IOR and to

weaken India's position there. It is important to mention that China's actions bear strongly on the strategic calculus of India. Indeed, China is worried about India's maritime intentions beyond the Indian Ocean because of India's own strategic policies in the region (Subrahmanyam & Monterio, 2005). As a response, apart from establishing its Maritime Silk Road, China has also deepened diplomatic ties with littoral states such as Nepal, Bangladesh, the Maldives, and Sri Lanka. These efforts to accumulate influence far from its territory have come to fruition, as seen by the economic and military partnerships forged with Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Djibouti (Bukhari, 2021, p. 6). All in all, slowly but surely, China is 'salami slicing' its way to displace the current hegemonic power and create a new balance.

As examined, the first step in the strategy of displacement focused on blunting American presence regionally, the second on building a Chinese order regionally, and the third, a strategy of expansion, now seeks to do both globally. Following Mao's famous revolutionary guidance, China is on track to reach its grand strategy using sharp power tactics to "surround the cities from the countryside," becoming the overpowering force (Rolland, 2020). Having understood the how and why of China's use of sharp power at a country and global level, the following section examines one of the main reasons its focus has centered on the IOR: the Strait of Malacca Dilemma.

1.4. The Malacca Dilemma

Countries tend to build their economic foundations upon a solid infrastructural system which may be in the form of transport and connectivity, such as railways and high-speed internet cables, or energy production, such as pipelines and wind farms. Indeed, infrastructure is fundamental for economic growth and, in turn, also ensures the security of a country. Huge repercussions would ripple throughout the economy if a road or water channel were obscured. A recent example of this can be seen in the stranded container ship in the Suez Canal a couple of years ago. It took only a single ship to block the passage for almost two weeks, causing billions of dollars in damage (Chellel et al., 2021).

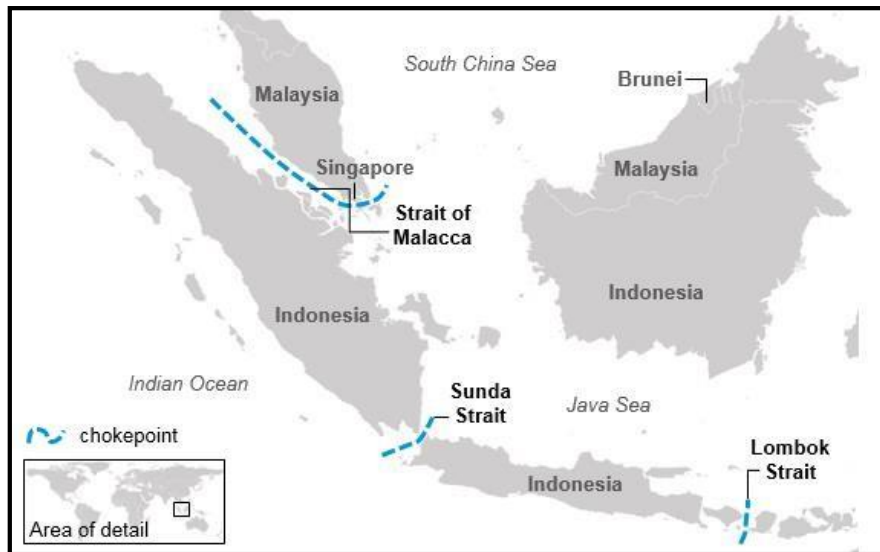
Today, six main chokepoints connect international sea routes. These are the artificial channels of Panama and Suez and the Straits of Gibraltar, Hormuz, Bab el-Mandeb, and Malacca. Through these passageways sails the majority of the world trade and crude oil production, making these areas vital points to the global economy (Energy Information Administration, 2017). The Malacca Strait, in particular, has surged as a hot spot for most eastern Asia bounded fossil fuel traffic, accounting for around 60 percent of the annual global petroleum moved at sea. The Strait is indeed the fastest way across from the Pacific to the Indian Ocean and vice versa. Thus, simultaneously connecting and potentially dividing these regions. The Strait of Malacca divides the Malaysian Peninsula and Singapore from the Indonesian Island of Sumatra, measuring at its minimum width 2.7 kilometers across, creating a bottleneck for the 200 ships that move daily, an average of 15 million oil barrels (Paszak, 2021).

China relies on this chokepoint for most of its trade with Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. These last two regions are essential in providing the lion's share of Chinese energetic sources. As a matter of fact, more than 70 percent of the total Chinese oil imports pass through the Malacca Strait to reach the big cities on its eastern coast (Basi, 2022). The blockade of this Strait alone could spell disasters for Asian economies, especially for the Chinese. In the past three decades, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has experienced rapid growth in its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) due to international trade. As a result, it became increasingly reliant on sea lanes of communication to export its goods. Because more than 80 percent of trade is seaborne, this is even more important for China, which in less than ten years, has seen its container throughput capacity more than double from 108 million containers in 2009 to 242 million in 2019 (Topcu, 2023). Having understood the vital importance this Strait plays for China's economic and commercial necessities, the following subsection looks into the roadblock it finds itself in due to its high dependence on an area of land that is out of its sovereign control.

1.5. China's Response to the Malacca Dilemma

From a geographical standpoint, the Malacca Strait lacks long-term alternatives in case of a blockade, as the second and third fastest sea routes from Asia to Europe are through the Sunda and Lombok Straits, which are easily lockable chokepoints. Whereas the only open sea passage connecting the Indian with the Pacific Ocean is through Southern Australia.

Figure 2: Indian Ocean to Pacific Ocean Maritime Chokepoints



Source: ILLS International Institute for Law of the Sea Studies, “Navigational²³ Regimes of Particular Straits, Sunda and Lombok case study”

As aforementioned, taking these routes would not only drastically increase sailing time but also shipping costs, making any cargo economy unfeasible. Consequently, China has decided to take a two-pronged strategy to address these security issues. On the one hand, China plans to create a land-based oil and gas supply network, while on the other hand, it is implementing the build-up of the Chinese Navy power projection capabilities (Choudhary, 2023). Land pipelines could effectively reduce the necessity of seaborne oil imports and could create a redundancy mechanism bypassing the Malacca Strait altogether (Topcu, 2023). Chinese planners have considered two main projects as pivotal to this strategy. These are the gas and oil networks built along the China-Myanmar economic corridor, while the other is an oil line proposed to be built along the China-Pakistan corridor (Caesar-Gordon, 2016, p. 5).

Nevertheless, many challenges face the construction of these pipelines, and there are still doubts about their effectiveness compared to seaborne transports. For instance, given that, on average, it costs around two dollars to transport one barrel of oil from the Persian Gulf to the eastern ports of China, passing through Myanmar could take anywhere from five to six dollars -whereas moving it through Pakistan would make prices increase to 15 dollars (Jaybhay, 2020). This inevitable reliance on maritime transports has sparked a significant shift in Chinese strategic and military posture.

The Chinese Navy has placed as its top priority the acquisition of more advanced and capable power projection capabilities, as demonstrated by the construction of more technologically advanced and capable units (Congressional Research Service, 2023, p. 2). The new military assets will provide Beijing with a useful coercive tool that can be used to protect Chinese interests overseas. For instance, the People’s Republic of China is pushing to create an equivalent of the United States Navy amphibious expeditionary group, which is comprised of vessels capable of supporting amphibious operations with the least logistical land footprint possible (Congressional Research Service, 2023, p. 26). According to the U.S. and Japanese military estimates, the Chinese marine corps has risen from a 10 000 men strong force in 2017 to approximately 25 000 to 35 000 in 2020 (Lague, 2020). Furthermore, from satellite imageries, it has emerged that China is constructing its third ‘type 075’ –a 40 000-ton helicopter carrier– and has finished building the sixth exemplar of the ‘type 071’ –a ship equipped with a good dock for the deployment of hovercrafts and other amphibious landing vehicles (Tadjeh, 2021). Moreover, during a Congressional Audition, a senior analyst at Janes stated that by 2035, China would double its force projection fleet as Xi Jinping promised to create a ‘world-class force’ (McDevitt, 2020).

In view of expanding its reach and political influence, Chinese military experts have proposed an increased military footprint outside of China by creating logistical bases in foreign countries (Russel & Berger, 2020, p. 23). These, also referred to as strategic points, in tandem with the build-up of naval projection capabilities, are considered the backbone of Beijing’s maritime security strategy. Chosen for their proximity to global sea trade routes and the

political affinity with the Chinese leadership, Gwadar in Pakistan, Koh Kong in Cambodia, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, and Kyaukpyu in Myanmar are considered the most likely candidates to become oversea bases according to the Asia Society Policy Institute report *Weaponizing the Belt and Road Initiative* (Russel & Berger, 2020, p. 26). These strategic points could fall within a broad spectrum of military uses. On the low, they provide refueling and resupply facilities, while on the high, they function as an ajar backdoor to establishing fully-fledged military bases (Sutton, 2020). An example of this can be found in the first People's Republic of China (PRC) overseas military base in Djibouti. Another recent example is when the "Chinese surveillance vessel Yuan Wang 5 docked at the Hambantota Port last year after the Sri Lankan government conceded to the Chinese request despite India's warning" (Sharma, 2023).

Progressively, the People's Republic of China has placed the Indian Ocean after the southern and eastern Chinese Sea as its next strategic operational theatre, especially given the rising role of India as its most significant regional competitor. Chinese pivot towards this area is also marked by the fact that three out of four strategic points stretch out at the edges of the Indian Ocean surrounding India-Gwadar near the Hormuz Strait, Hambantota Port near the Malacca Strait, and Kyaukpyu- creating an imaginary string encircling India (Bukhari, 2021, p. 8). Since 2008, the Chinese presence has been increasingly present in the region involved in an alleged international effort against piracy in the Gulf of Aden. This expansion in the Indian Ocean has prompted worried comments by its main regional competitors: India, Japan, and Australia, sparking concerns about Beijing's plans to disrupt the sea lines and its ultimate intentions.

1.6.China's String of Pearls Strategy

Having analyzed China's Malacca dilemma, this section examines its strategy to tackle this weak point, namely, the String of Pearls. The String of Pearls is a geopolitical initiative outlining China's strategy in the IOR. It encompasses the existing network of Chinese commercial infrastructure as well as potential military installations, extending from the mainland China to locations such as Port Sudan and the Horn of Africa. The maritime trade route originates from the East China Sea, enters the Indian Ocean Region, and provides further maritime trade feasibility to the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea (Kharl et al., 2020, p. 76). Within the concept, the so-called "pearls" are allegedly military or commercial infrastructure projects or hubs, while the "strings" are the sea lines of communication between them. Khan (2021) argues that "China is backing port projects in countries like Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Myanmar to enclose India through its naval bases" (p. 14). This network would not only help China surround the Indian peninsula but also maintain its military presence in the Indian Ocean.

Despite China's denial of obscure intentions, the rebrand from "The String of Pearls" to "The Maritime Silk Road" was intentional. Kharl, Butt and Abbas (2020) call the new Maritime Silk Route Initiative "nothing but old wine in a new bottle to surround India" (p. 75). Indeed, this rebrand has allowed China to discuss its strategy of investing in maritime infrastructure in ASEAN and further west. China maintains that economic considerations drive its investment in regional maritime infrastructure and posits the ways in which this undertaking will yield economic benefits for the host countries (Tiezzi, 2020). Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying added that the Silk Road aimed to "create opportunities for cooperation and connection with neighboring and regional countries and allowing everyone to share development opportunities" (Tiezzi, 2014). Nevertheless, China's commercial and economic narrative has not deterred other countries from the idea that China is also combining this economic approach with a military one.

The sea routes on which the "pearls" are being built or constructed run through many of the world's most critical geostrategic points, including the Strait of Malacca, the Strait of Hormuz, and the Bab-El-Mandeb Strait (Choudhury & Nayak, 2020). All of which grow into strategic importance as China rises in power. The first pearl on the long string stretching from China to the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf is generally considered the Yulin Naval Base on the Chinese island of Hainan (Paal, 2011). The next pearl on the string is the Chinese presence on a small set of islands in the South China Sea, including Woody Island, which holds a Chinese airstrip and has been militarized along with the other small islands, allowing China to hold a tight grip on the area. As the string extends from the South China Sea through the Strait of Malacca, it enters the centerpiece of the concept: the Indian Ocean. Chinese pearls on the Indian Ocean are primarily commercial in nature -though China has been building a complex military infrastructure since 2017.

One such commercial pearl is the Port of Hambantota in Sri Lanka. The Port is situated far south of the island and overlooks the major shipping route connecting the Strait of Malacca with the Bab-El-Mandeb Strait and the Suez Canal. Due to a series of political and economic mishaps, China secured a 99-year lease over Hambantota in December 2015, increasing its influence in the region. Additionally, in August 2017, the Cabinet of Ministers signed a concession agreement with China Merchant Port to operate the Hambantota Port as a private- public partnership project (Moramudali, 2020). Moramudali (2020) explains that under this, a 70 percent stake of the Port is leased to China Merchant Port. Another central pearl is the Chinese-controlled deep-water Port at Gwadar, Pakistan. This Port is a commercial infrastructure critical to the China-Pakistan economic corridor. Gwadar represents a significant geostrategic foothold for China due to its proximity to the Strait of Hormuz -an important chokepoint for Chinese oil imports (Conrad, 2017, p. 57).

Moreover, this Port can provide China with a notable strategic advantage over the Western side during any war-like situation. China also provides Pakistan with fighter jets, submarines, and nuclear assistance (Kundu, 2018). Other commercial pearls include the Chittagong Port in Bangladesh, where the State has financed a container shipping facility, and the Port of Mombasa in Kenya, where there are some speculative fears that China could similarly seize the port facility as done with the Hambantota Port due to the states deepening Chinese-owned debts (Nyabiage, 2022).

Another notable unbuilt pearl is the Bagamoyo Port in Tanzania, which will be built by China's state-owned China's Merchant's Port if a final agreement is reached. The final central pearl in the string is the Chinese military base in Djibouti city. This space represents the first major Chinese foray into an overseas military presence built-in 2017. So far, China claims that it uses the Djibouti base to support anti-piracy efforts, United Nations (UN) peacekeeping efforts, and humanitarian relief missions (Cabestan, 2018). However, it is said to have also been used for intelligence collection, non-combat evacuation operations, and counter- terrorism.

1.6.1. Growing Concerns with China's String of Pearls

Numerous discussions and debates have occurred regarding what pushes China to construct this so-called String of Pearls. China argues that its expanding presence in the Indian Ocean is commercial and, most importantly, peaceful in nature, with many of the pearls being part of the road component of China's Belt and Road Initiative. Samaranayake (2011) supports this view by claiming that going by much of the available evidence, nearly all the pearls would be "indefensible" in wartime (p. 121). Moreover, Vines (2013) adds that China's decision to create ports and bases in the Indian Ocean is driven by the need to make official agreements for supplying and supporting their naval forces involved in combating piracy near the Horn of Africa. Thus, China's strategy should be considered as not clashing and consistent with the interest of India and its Western allies. India, however, views the situation differently. Instead, it sees the Chinese efforts to develop commercial and, so far, a small amount of military infrastructure, combined with the China-Pakistan economic corridor, as an attempt 'encircle' it Agrawal (2023). This view is not without merit.

As China continues to increase ties with Indian Ocean states, particularly in the realm of economic development, it also increases its influence in what India considers to be its own backyard. On top of this, China has also been accused of using "debt trap diplomacy" to make less developed countries wholly reliant on China. This strategy implies that China has allegedly been baiting lesser-developed states with unsustainable loans they cannot feasibly repay to increase its geostrategic leverage over them (Himmer, 2023, p. 2). However, this remains a topic of contention, with experts and analysts debating the extent to which debt trap diplomacy actually occurs. Fundamentally, the more ties grow between states surrounding India grow with China, the more leverage the latter has against the former. Regardless of commercial developments, what is more worrisome for India is the potential development of military infrastructure (Khan, 2022, p. 93). If China were to establish military bases across the Indian Ocean in India's vicinity, the consequences for Indian geostrategy would be enormous. With military infrastructure based in and around the Indian Ocean, China could contain India and neutralize its ability to project geopolitical power.

Overall, according to John Mearsheimer (2021), the "simultaneous rise of China and India, along with the rising 'unhinged multipolarity,' has created a power shift in Asia" (p. 464). Indeed, India faces an immediate threat from China due to their geographical proximity, border disputes, and expansionist agenda. Moreover, despite being geographically distant from the U.S. mainland, China is also a significant concern for the United States due to

Beijing's strategic ambitions. In any case, the exact nature and purpose of China's strategic String of Pearls are yet to be determined in the coming years.

1.7. Closing Remarks

According to Cao, "Oceans are the source of life, the home of storms, the treasure chest of resources, the arteries of economies, and the outpost of national defense" (Bukhari, 2021, p. 4). It is generally agreed that China's rise to power was largely due to its trade-driven economics. Accordingly, the Indian Ocean serves as China's vital trade route and plays a crucial role in its journey towards achieving economic success and, inevitably, gaining regional and global power. However, as mentioned previously, China has been vocal about its biggest vulnerability in the IOR, namely the Malacca Strait, and has used it as the reason to assert its domination in this region. Many sources of information coincide with the fact that, ultimately, China is concerned that its own national interests are being met and covered in the long term. Disagreements arise when dwelling over the certitude of China's strategy in the IOR is purely to safeguard its commercial vulnerabilities or if there are also concealed interests.

As analyzed in the previous sections, there have been arguments against the narrative of China's encirclement strategy and that, if anything, encirclement would not entail anything beyond the building of ports and infrastructure for its commercial needs. Indeed, if China plans to sustain its economic growth, it only seems logical that it will have to rely more on port building in the littoral countries in the IOR for ship-borne fossil fuel imports from the Middle East and Africa (Choudhary, 2023, p. 99). Even more so when it is considered how energy security has become an inextricable link to the survival of the Chinese Communist Party and hence a national security imperative (Choudhary, 2023, p. 100).

Nonetheless, as compiled by the Squadron Leader, Mohit Choudhary of the Indian Air Force, Beijing's pressing concerns over its commercial security in the Malacca Strait have been exaggerated for three main reasons. Firstly, the countries that surround the Malacca Strait –Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia– are neutral. This means that one country's needs or demands do not sway them. In fact, they have resisted international attempts, even from the U.S., to administer these straits, fearing that this would compromise local coordination in the region between them (Choudhary, 2023, p. 101). Second, there are local disagreements regarding the main threats to the straits. These counterbalancing perspectives prevents a single country's targeted blockade of the Strait. Additionally, China's fear of terrorism and piracy is a threat that affects all countries equally, meaning that this concern is not China-specific (You, 2007, p. 468). Meaning that, if anything, a coordinated maritime patrol activity should be organized, and not solely a Chinese one. Third, if, for some reason, there was going to be a blockade against the Chinese, it would most likely be organized by the U.S., and it would likely prefer to block the Hormuz over the Malacca Strait. This is because the U.S. Navy enjoys unchallenged superiority in the former (Choudhary, 2023, p. 102).

On top of that, dismissing the suspicion that China's extensive interest in acquiring and operating ports worldwide is anything but benign is naïve, especially when considering China's military modernization plan and the expansion of its Navy with global reach. Particular suspicion has been directed towards seemingly "overbuilt" and "underutilized ports" located along crucial trade routes in the Indian Ocean. These ports raise concerns as they appear to be more fitting for potential naval bases rather than functioning as commercial operations (Russel & Berger, 2020, p. 5). In summary, it can be concluded that China has three key motivations for increasing its involvement in the IOR region: to foster trade relations with neighboring countries, to impede India's growing influence in the region, and to ensure the security of its energy requirements by establishing naval bases at critical maritime chokepoints. Bukhari (2021) concludes that this will undoubtedly carry an unpleasant message for Delhi, implying that "China is more successful by surpassing India's strategy towards its neighboring countries" (p. 8).

In this regard, it can be stated that China's encirclement strategy goes beyond the Malacca Dilemma and beyond the necessity to cover commercial vulnerabilities. In closing, this chapter has analyzed China and India's –and, to a lesser extent, the U.S.– position and strategies in the IOR wéiqí board. The next chapter focuses on the real-life results of China's tactics on the small island of Sri Lanka and, through the perspective of the small State, how its policy framing has developed throughout its unique relationship with the Red Dragon.

Chapter 2: China's 'Salami Slicing' Strategy: Understanding Sri Lanka's Policy Framing of China's Advancements

An interesting angle to analyze China's encirclement tactic of Sri Lanka is not only by how it frames its own geoeconomic and geopolitical advancements to appear as an attractive international partner but also by how Sri Lanka reacts and responds to these advancements. Hence, the following sections explain the methodology used: the Policy Frame Analysis, its operationalization, case study selection, data collection methods, and the three chosen time frames of investigation. This chapter also examines the ongoing debate on framing China's involvement in Sri Lanka. It is important to consider that Sri Lanka is a small state and a developing one, for that matter. Thus, further research would be interesting to understand how framing China's strategies play out with larger economically and politically more developed states than Sri Lanka.

2.1. Debate on Framing China's Involvement in Sri Lanka

This section looks into the current debate regarding the framing of China's involvement in Sri Lanka. In this field of study, most scholars have undermined the role of ideology, politics, and values when analyzing relations with China. Instead, they have applied an economic-centered perspective as a way to frame countries' policies vis-à-vis China (Maher, 2017; Veselý, 2021). Scholars have argued that this is a mistake as it can lead to a short-term focus on economic gains (Babić & Dixon, 2022, p.19). There are indeed some exceptions where some scholars have studied China as also a political superpower and investigated how its political beliefs and actions influence a State's policy framing; however, this field of discussion is scarce (Rosenthal & Wong, 2011; Maher, 2017).

All things considered, in the case of Sri Lanka's policy framing, a few years ago when the pandemic began, China had beat records in providing crucial and timely support to the nation island –through millions of dollars of loans, a currency swap, Sinovac vaccines, and medical assistance. Nevertheless, Sri Lanka has begun to increasingly scrutinize China's assistance. This is a significant shift in its usual policy framing. Indeed, Sri Lanka's Sinhala nationalist political landscape has commonly framed its policies as resisting the “imperialist” West and “interventionist” India since its Independence in 1948, throughout its civil war, and a decade after (Srinivasan, 2021 July). In turn, for a significant length of time, Sri Lanka has been framing China's involvement positively for several reasons: First, due to the perception that the West is not a reliable partner. This was especially evident during and after Sri Lanka's civil war 2009. As mentioned earlier, when the Western nations vehemently condemned the Sri Lankan government's management of the conflict, specifically during the war's final phases, and the United States halted its military assistance due to human rights concerns, Beijing emerged as a solid supporter (Deutsche Welle, 2010, October 05). Inevitably, Sri Lanka's perception of China improved while its perception of the West worsened. Moreover, its original closest ally, India, also neglected Sri Lanka during its weakest periods (Bajoria, 2009, May 18). On the contrary, for better or for worst, China was there. Second, unlike other countries' requirements and setbacks for infrastructure building and foreign investments, China's ‘no strings attached’ *modus operandi* –for example, not asking Sri Lanka to recognize and resolve its humanitarian crisis– made Sri Lanka frame its policies towards its investments positively. Thus, according to Sri Lanka's positive policy framing, it had found a new partner to balance out the West and India that could guarantee them diplomatic and economic support.

On the flip side, it is interesting to see how the West and India clash in perceptions with Sri Lanka's policy framing of China. During this analysis, it was remarkable to see how most journal articles and academic papers viewed Sri Lanka as a small state that had either been deceived, fooled or controlled by China's assertive strategies –hence the emphasis on ‘debt trap diplomacy.’ This perception can be due to a couple of reasons: first, China is the *de facto* ‘opponent’ of the West, and thus any advancement or economic, political, and military achievement is inevitably perceived as a threat to the Western (and in this case IOR) balance of power structure (Global Times, 2023; Lo, 2022). Second, China's development model has broken with the common idea that economic success is only possible if you follow in the same footsteps as the West. Indeed, China has proven this idea wrong by becoming an economic world power by its own means but also through innovative initiatives and policies such as the BRI (Islam,

2022). Consequently, this has provoked an increasing weariness and mistrust from the West and India; particularly focusing on how China has managed to create these web-like connections across different regions of the world so seamlessly.

In an attempt to explain this ongoing debate on policy framing, political scientist Jude Howell introduced a new way of framing China's rise to power, which arguably, helped group and clarify the international reaction. She first explained that most of the international world placed China within the categories of either predatory or developmental State (Howell, 2006, p. 274). Considering this categorization, some scholars argue that China cannot be framed as a developmental state but classified as a strategic rival. They argue that China's calculated strategy can be seen through the development of numerous projects, such as the Belt and Road

Initiative, which has been perceived as a divide-and-conquer approach (Bian & Emons, 2017; Hooijmaaijers, 2019). Moreover, they argue that recent attempts to invest in and acquire essential infrastructure –such as the Hambantota Port– through private Chinese investors or Chinese companies closely linked to the State is proof of how China needs to be seen as a strategic and predatory state whose ambition goes beyond the economic sphere (Hooijmaaijers, 2019, p. 452). Overall, there is a consensus among contemporary scholars that China cannot be considered a developmental state but, instead, a potential threat that must be addressed through tougher policies and stricter foreign investment rules.

Some scholars argue that China should not be framed as a predatory state, but it does not entirely fall under a developmental state either. Instead, China's rise to power should be understood as a re-scripting of globalization and world power dynamics that give rise to a new vision of modernity (Brennan & Vecchi, 2021, p. 1070). Pal (2013) explains that China diverges from the International Relations discourse based on Western ideas, especially with the Anglo- American discourse, as China is said to stand apart from the existing world powers and values. Howell (2006) thus places China between a developmental and predatory state, calling it polymorphous. She explains that a polymorphous state displays contradictory features such as autonomy and clientelism, developmentalism, and predation (Howell, 2006, p. 292). Consequently, scholars argue that these contradictory and unstable features have caused deep concern about the purpose of China's involvement in states like Sri Lanka and regions like the IOR.

Considering Howell's framing of China's polymorphous nature, this paper contributes to the literature by updating Howell's 2006 analysis of how China's rise to power at an economic and geopolitical level is perceived and framed by, in this case, Sri Lanka.

2.2. Methodology

An appropriate method to investigate how Sri Lanka's position towards China changed –as it tackled different economic and political situations– is through Policy Frame Analysis. Radulova (2009) defines a frame as a selected depiction of a social circumstance (p. 3). In this case, the social phenomenon would be the increase of Chinese involvement in Sri Lanka's key infrastructure development and the rising debt crisis. Through frames, policymakers can direct attention toward what they consider salient issues and diverge attention from other problems they wish not to focus on. This way, consensus can be reached for a particular objective to be considered and addressed. For this divergence of attention from one issue to another to occur, in other words, to elevate the salience of an issue, the salience itself needs to be defined. Entman (1993) defines salience as “making a piece of information more noticeable and memorable to the audience” (p. 53). This can be done through repetition and association with cultural and familiar symbols. For instance, the disregard of risky investments from foreign countries that could affect national security, through the focalization of how investments are generating wealth and jobs that are needed due to economic crises –the latter point would thus be what is repeated and highlighted to make Chinese investments seem safe, beneficial and needed.

Radulova (2009) adds that policy frames do not just entail different policy visions or courses of action but also different values and meanings (p. 3). She elaborates that policy frames can be defined as performing three different functions: pointing out a social condition as problematic, offering an explanation about a problem, and proposing a policy action or non- action (Radulova, 2009, p. 3). Hence, Radulova comprises policy frames into four dimensions. First is the normative dimension, which frames a social reality based on the meanings attached to it. For example,

it judges how concerning an economic/political crisis or foreign investment is to Sri Lanka's national security and stability. The second is the constitutive frame, where the issue is depicted as creating a public concern or problem, such as a security or economic issue. The third is the cognitive dimension which shows how policy framing depicts the causes to the mentioned problem. Lastly, the policy dimension pertains to the function of the frame to outline solutions to the perceived problem. Applying this framework is helpful to illustrate how Sri Lanka has been developing its position on its alliance with China and particularly on Chinese investments, on how Sri Lanka framed the outcome of the different challenges, and how it came up with a solution to the perceived problem.

This paper applies this analytical framework by compiling statements by Sri Lankan –and to some extent, Chinese– political figures and business owners and compiling data from newspaper articles and academic sources into these four dimensions. This way, positions can be distilled and organized to identify different motivations and interests Sri Lanka has vis-à-vis Chinese investments. This can then explain the shift in position Sri Lanka has gone through during its different presidencies and its response to China's growing presence in its state of affairs. According to Herath's (2019) analysis, small states like Sri Lanka can take two kinds of responses: either bandwagoning with the rising power or forming an alliance to balance against it (p. 2), this will be further analyzed when answering the second hypothesis.

To perform this research, we need to extract the appropriate frames from the available literature. In this case, however, while literature covers Sri Lankan and the Chinese economic and political relationship, there is a gap in academic research regarding policy framing. In other words, there needs to be more analysis done to extract the relevant frames to understand how the Sino-Sri Lankan relationship has developed in China's favor. Thus, this paper uses an inductive coding approach, where codes from academic sources, statements from political figures, and newspaper articles are derived. A code is defined as “a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019, p. 6). Thus, through an inductive approach, keywords are collected and grouped, and Sri Lanka's position –and to some extent China's position– throughout the chosen timeframes can be assessed through Radulova's framework.

Accordingly, the codes in the **normative dimension** would then look at how Sri Lanka judges Chinese investments and economic aid based on the kind of Chinese economic involvement, how Sri Lanka's national security and economic well-being are affected, and the general relationship it has with China. The **constitutive dimension** is determined by how Chinese investments and growing assertiveness in infrastructure building were perceived by the different heads of State in Sri Lanka. The possibility that this could lead to a possible risk to security and public order at a national level, thus frames a security and public concern. In the **cognitive dimension**, the thing that triggered the problem is seen as the lack of transparency in Chinese economic and geostrategic involvement as well as, to some extent, Sri Lanka's own national corruption. The **policy dimension** pertained to how distancing from China and increasing international ties with other countries, such as India or the U.S., or applying stricter economic regulations could remedy the problem. These dimensions and procedures are applied to all the sources analyzed; however, this paper will mainly assess the principal changes in Sri Lanka's position. Thus, three precise time frames are chosen to allow a realistically feasible analysis of the relevant information during those periods.

The chosen time frames are the following: during the end of Sri Lanka's civil war and Mahinda Rajapaksa's regime where economic and diplomatic relations with China solidified and seemed to be at their best (2009-2010). Followed by the tumultuous relations during Maithreepala Sirisena's presidency, where a more anti-China stance was taken, and more scrutiny was held on its investments as the term 'debt trap' was sinking into a reality in the island nation (2015-2016), and finalizing with the current relationship (2022-2023) between both countries, where Ranil Wickremesinghe –unlike Maithreepala Sirisena despite his stronger anti-China rhetoric– has taken the necessary initial steps to disengage itself from China and not depend on them entirely, and in turn, open themselves up to collaborations with other world powers.

The data for this analysis was collected from academic sources written within the selected timeframe that analyzed Sri Lanka's position, newspaper articles, and statements made by Sri Lankan political figures mentioned in academic literature. Most newspaper articles used were written in English. News articles used in the analysis were ones that mentioned the relationship between China and Sri Lanka at an economic, political, and diplomatic level and Sri

Lanka's reactions throughout time, thus contributing to Radulova's framework. Moreover, some official statements made by political figures were taken from previous academic work, providing more reliability regarding their origin. Although limited language competencies narrowed the study of certain sources, analyzing the four policy dimensions during the selected time frame was possible.

Sri Lanka has been chosen as the case study for several reasons: first, due to its important role in China's Maritime Silk Road –being the first country to support the proposal. Second, the importance Sri Lanka has in the stability of the IOR as the island nation remains important for both India and China strategically. Indeed, China has been supporting anti-India political movements and even supplying arms to dilute India's growth and influence in Sri Lanka, which, in turn, has raised tensions in the IOR. Third, Sri Lanka is undergoing an unprecedented economic crisis that has now worsened to become a humanitarian crisis due to years of political corruption, mismanagement and faulty economic policies. Nonetheless, as previously mentioned, China has also played a part in this crisis; thus, it is an interesting case study to analyze how this situation and the framing of this situation has changed and evolved.

Additionally, the case of Sri Lanka is appropriate for this form of analysis to understand how a small state like itself responds to an ascending power like China. Moreover, the study of Sri Lanka allows for a closer examination of why some smaller states are likely to pursue seemingly contradictory and ambivalent policies, which “can be interpreted as both power acceptance and power rejection simultaneously” (Herath, 2019, p. 1). This ambivalence will be referred to as “bandwagoning with the rising power” or “balancing against the rising power.” Moreover, it also answers the question as to whether its current economic situation is a result of a power disparity between both countries, national political corruption, or if the accusations of China's “debt trap diplomacy” are to blame for Sri Lanka's current state of affairs. Having understood this, the following section applies the Policy Frame Analysis to the case at hand.

2.3. Sri Lanka's Policy Framing: Bandwagon With China or Counter China?

This section brings forth the analysis of the identified policy frames. The manner in which Sri Lanka frames its position on Chinese economic and political aid is assessed through the four dimensions: normative, constitutive, cognitive, and policy.

Frame 1: Sri Lanka after the Civil War (2009-2010) Opening Up To China

The first policy frame is Sri Lanka encouraging and opening up to the development of a Sino- Sri Lankan partnership. When analyzing the situation in Sri Lanka in the **normative dimension**, China's interest in Sri Lanka was not framed negatively as it was not perceived as a threat to its national security nor stability. On the contrary, it helped stabilize many domestic problems. It is important to highlight that this period under Rajapaksa was marked by “major initiatives to strengthen the relationship with China” (Hein, 2017; Jayasundara, 2023). This need grew after 2009 when China became one of the only countries that “helped the Sri Lankan state immensely” with the war of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (Deutsche Welle, 2010, October 05). China's diplomatic support was also valued, “unlike the Western countries that imposed conditions.” Indeed, “China prevented” multiple times for the genocide and Tamil killings from being “taken up by international organizations” (Deutsche Welle, 2010, October 05; Singh, 2018).

Moreover, for Sri Lanka, China's ‘no-strings attached’ aid was a helpful tactic for internal stabilization during this time, as the West and India were not bound to assist the island. However, for Sri Lanka, China was seen as a savior: “They want to make sure the same magnitude of money flows in, in times of insecurity” (Hull, 2011, August 09). In sum, Sri Lanka framed China in a positive light; Former Sri Lankan ambassador to the European Union, Kalyananda Godage, commented “We are interested in a good mutually beneficial relationship which also looks after our security, economic and political interests. So we are very happy with our relationship with China.” (Deutsche Welle, 2010, October 05).

Moreover, in the economic dimension, Sri Lanka welcomed Chinese loans and infrastructure development for the improvement of its weak economic state. Former minister Mahinda Yapa commented on why the country gave preference to Chinese loans, claiming that “While HSBC [bank], for example, was offering loans with 9% interest rates, China has been offering loans for very low rates, such as 1% or even 0.5%,” (Pathirana, 2010, November 21). Thus, considering Sri Lanka’s situation, the demand for capital injections and diplomatic support was much needed (Jayarathne, 2017; Shivamurthy, 2022; The Economist, 2010, July 08).

In this case, in the **constitutive dimension**, Sri Lanka frames the need for external support –in this case, attract Chinese economic and diplomatic support– based on risks to the nations stability, namely economic and political collapse. In the case of Sri Lanka, “Chinese demands were crucial to salvage Sri Lanka’s economy in the transition from a low-income economy to middle-income status” (Radhakrishnan, 2012, December 14). This framing is seen in Gotabaya’s clarification that China’s interest in the Hambantota Port was “purely economic” and that Sri Lanka was China’s “crown jewel” (Mendis, 2022, July 11; Radhakrishnan, 2012, December 14; Kamburawala & Abeyrathne, 2022, p. 61). It was emphasized that Sri Lanka would face “more difficulty in recovering” from the crisis if they “lost this valuable partner” –so much so that Sri Lanka, a predominantly Buddhist country, even “stopped two of its cricket players from meeting the Dalai Lama in India” in order to cause the least controversy possible with China (Deutsch Welle, 2010, October 05).

When analyzing what triggered economic problem through the **cognitive dimension**, the lack of transparency in Chinese investments and infrastructure building is not mentioned as it is not the cause of the situation in which Sri Lanka finds itself in –for now. Indeed, Sri Lanka suffered economic and political turmoil, but China was not framed for the blame. What is interesting is that during this time, when China’s investments –including state-led investments such as China Merchants Port Holdings– grew in the small island, the Sri Lankan government was not completely oblivious to the possible consequences this could have on the future of national stability (Pathirana, 2020; Wijayasiri & Senaratne, 2018; Kamburawala & Abeyrathne, 2022; Singh, 2018). Indeed, there were some concerns that Sri Lanka would “lose some autonomy” in how it managed its assets and were troubled by a “possible loss of sovereignty” of important infrastructures (Hundlani & Kannangara, 2020; Kamburawala & Abeyrathne, 2022). Nonetheless, due to the bleak situation post-civil war, it had chosen not to frame it as a problem or the cause of future problems as, at the moment, such investments were needed (Uluwaduge, 2022, p. 81).

In the **policy dimension**, Sri Lanka ushered Chinese investments to increase in the market and post-war economic recovery as there was also a “much-needed confidence in the leadership and the government” (Shivamurthy, 2022, May 30). Sri Lanka did so by encouraging more closeness in their economic partnership. This is seen by Sri Lanka’s government taking on “massive debt” and allowing China to use “debt diplomacy” as a way to turn “bad loans into investments that would convert them into geopolitical gains” (Chaudhury, 2019, p. 162; Reddy, 2010, February 04). This framing of China as a reliable partner was highlighted multiple times. China is called a “consistent ally” where there are “strong bonds” between both countries and will remain a “reliable friend” (Macan-Markar, 2020, October 28). Overall, keywords and ideas do not push for any sort of closing off from Chinese economic and diplomatic aid. Instead, it calls for the maintenance of open markets and the attraction of Chinese investments. To demonstrate this urgency, Sri Lanka presents the crisis as an economic and public issue that would have taken years to resolve where it not for the support of China.

Frame 2: Sri Lanka (2015-2016) Under Maithreepala Sirisena’s ‘On The Fence’ anti-China Posture

Contrary to the previous frame, around early 2015, Sri Lanka shifted towards a more anti-China narrative and pushed for stricter foreign investment laws and in general more economic scrutiny. Looking at the situation in Sri Lanka through the **normative dimension**, the galloping growth of Chinese influence in key infrastructure and in the economy of Sri Lanka as a whole began to be judged with deeper scrutiny. During this period, the new government of President Maithripala Sirisena came to power. During his campaign and after winning the elections, Sirisena had a vocal “anti-China approach” to the “largely opaque financial and commercial deals” that had entered the country during the previous regime (Singh, 2018, p. 3). Consequently, Sirisena “froze all Chinese investment plans” and

ordered a “full review of those decisions,” citing allegations of “corruption and overpricing” (Singh, 2018; Aneez, 2017, February 16; Foizee, 2020, February 14).

Nevertheless, despite this turn towards a more protectionist position, Chinese investments, and cooperation projects quickly resumed as they were still judged as “beneficial for the economy as a whole” (Babi & Dixon, 2022). However, another reason for the change was that Sirisena realized that China had already grown a “way deeper influence” in the country, and it would be “unwise” to cut ties considering the “employment of thousands of local workers” (Foizee, 2020, February 14; Foizee, 2020, February 11). Nevertheless, there were demands for changes in some terms of projects. Sirisena was vocal against the dependency Sri Lanka had fallen into with China. He believed that strengthening ties with other powers would “ensure the country’s sovereignty was not eroded” by “dependence on a single global power” (Deutsche Welles, 2015, March 03). This explains Sirisena’s attempt to get closer to India during this period. However, while Sri Lanka had initially changed positions compared to 2009-2010 by framing the increasing Chinese involvement as a matter of concern, short-term economic goals still prevailed. This is seen with the handover of the seaport in Hambantota to Chinese control for 99 years due to Sri Lanka’s inability to pay off the Chinese debts and the continuance of the development of the new port of Colombo. Furthermore, in this frame, Sri Lanka is aware of China’s inclination toward a more strategic partnership with the island due to the BRI, particularly the ‘String of Pearls’ plan. This plan made Sri Lanka realize that by opening their markets to China, they had allowed Sri Lanka “to be obtained by foreigners by paying ransom to a handful of persons” and, as a result, were stuck with a “dangerous ratio to loan payment and state revenue” (Pattanaik, 2015, June 05; Meyer, 2015, February 22). Overall, Sri Lanka generally frames the Chinese rise of power in the small island as a matter of concern, particularly in the assertiveness of Chinese investments, infrastructure project-building and the consequential increasing national debt.

To frame this situation as a public concern, through the **constitutive dimension**, Chinese presence on the island is framed as a considerable security concern, calling it “an opportunity” for Chinese companies to “take advantage of a corrupt regime” and make China hold the “upper hand” in the “strategically important island” (Gowen, 2015, August 16). Ravi Karunanayake, finance minister during the government’s first year in office stated the tricky situation the island-nation found itself stuck in and how they had to “keep taking loans” because a new government “can’t just stop loans. It’s a relay; you need to take them until economic discipline is introduced” (Abi-Habib, 2018, June 25). The port of Hambantota case prompted Sri Lanka’s government to “scale back bilateral ties” with China and demand a “Yahapalayanaya” [better governance] in Sri Lanka’s foreign policy decisions and a much clearer stance on “China’s financial might” (Singh, 2018, July 30; Kapoor, 2017, November 07). Moreover, Sri Lanka expresses concern about the ability for China’s money and clout to “buy favors and concessions” (Kapoor, 2017, November 07). This concern sprouts from the fear of China’s “reclamation of land” [for infrastructure building] that is changing “the whole landscape of the region” “threatening the country’s “sovereignty” and, at a local level, “hindering the “fishing community primarily” (Kuronuma, 2017, December 19; Kapoor, 2017, November 07). Moreover, Sri Lanka frames its concerns that such strategic projects are leading the nation island to a point of no return with China, “enclosing them” in a partnership where there is “very little local employment” in a country that needs local workers, where “corrupt politicians” are “bribed” with what China calls “gifts”, making the country fall into a deeper crisis which critics have described as “turning the island into a Chinese colony” (Kapoor, 2017, November 07; Foizee, 2020, February 11; Singh, 2018, July 30).

When investigating what caused the policy shift in the **cognitive dimension**, Sri Lanka addresses the increasing debt crisis and Chinese investment and infrastructure building that target strategically important sectors such as ports and power plants. Sri Lanka also argues that maintaining the idea that China has Sri Lanka’s best interests at hand and not considering that “Beijing is putting a lot of money” into “economically non-viable though strategic projects” is an enormous risk to Sri Lanka’s economy, security, and stability (Sigh, 2018, July 30, Reuters, 2017, August 23). This is because this mindset does not address the “corruption within the government” that grants such contracts and, consequently, the allowance of “Chinese state-owned acquisitions” that “take advantage” of this situation to “secure these projects without an open bidden process”(Pattanaik, 2015, June 05; Buchanan, 2015, January 01; Shepard, 2016, September 30; The Economic Times, 2017, May 17). The state of the national government was framed as “run-down”; this was especially obvious when the state minister of national policies and economic affairs answered in an interview “We are asked to do it; so we did” when questioned for the justification of the

Hambantota Port project (Abi-Habib, 2028, June 25). In sum, Sri Lanka shows concern for the “inadequacies” of “its excessive state debt and loan payments” that China has to an extent caused and taken advantage of through the continuation of investments and infrastructure building (Domínguez, 2015, March 25), thus framing China’s increasingly strategic investments and Sri Lanka’s poor internal management as a cause for the crisis.

In the **policy dimension**, the government, particularly at the beginning of Sirisena’s presidency, voices its support for adopting a more balanced –meaning not closing Sri Lanka out of other potential alliances with neighboring countries– and transparent relationship with China. However, as seen throughout the presidency of Sirisena, it did not want to antagonize Beijing due to the economic dependence Sri Lanka has, which “does not allow it to spurn Chinese investment” (Pattanaik, 2015, June 05). Thus, while Sri Lanka resumed China’s infrastructure building and investments in the country, it also called for “better positive bilateral relations” and an “equity swap” that would allow Beijing “equity in Sri Lanka’s infrastructure projects” in return for “debt relief” (The Diplomat, 2016, November 18; Domínguez, 2015, March 25). Comparing this frame to the previous one, Sri Lanka’s position in maintaining an open market and welcoming most Chinese investments, infrastructure building, and loan ‘gifts’ clearly shows a shift towards a more protectionist and distrustful approach to China. However, overall action by Sri Lanka against China has been limited to rhetoric upon the realization what Sri Lanka needed –stability– could “only be made possible” by China’s “burgeoning economic muscle” (Foizee, 2020, February 14; Chowdhury, 2015, March 26). This is initially seen in Sirisena’s policy framing as being more “pro-Indian, pro-Western, and less China-friendly” than his predecessor, yet in practice not much changed as seen by the inability to pacify Chinese assertive and strategic economic involvement in the country (Roy-Chaudhury, 2019, p. 157).

Frame 3: Sri Lanka (2022-2023) A Push Towards India and Debt Relief

In the months before the suicide bombings took place on Easter Sunday 2019, Sirisena had engaged in an open row with then Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe for a grapple for power, leading to the latter being sacked by Sirisena. Although initially having formed an alliance with him, which depicted a potentially new kind of political culture, it was not long until Sirisena followed the footsteps of the previous Rajapaksa party against his partners’ wishes. Amid political tensions and instability, the bombings of 2019 contributed a series of failures in national security. The political situation in Sri Lanka only worsened when Sirisena installed former strongman Mahinda Rajapaksa as Prime Minister and when later, his brother Gotabaya won over the national elections. Nevertheless, the presence of the Rajapaksas in power did not last long. Sri Lanka’s economy came to a standstill when the government halted payments to international creditors which pushed the economy to the brink. As a result, thousands of people stormed Gotabaya’s official residence causing him to flee to the Maldives. This paved the path for the rise of Wickremesinghe. Similarly, Mahinda Rajapaksa resigned as Prime Minister due to protests about the government’s poor handling of the deepening economic crisis. As a result, in 2022, Dinesh Gunawardena became PM after Ranil Wickremesinghe was sworn in as President.

With President Ranil Wickremesinghe in office, a few things have changed. A clear plan had been signaled to move away from China and attempt to develop the country’s economy away from China’s grasp. Moreover, there has also been an attempt to resume and improve relations with neighboring countries. For instance, although Wickremesinghe asserted that the Chinese-built and operated Hambantota port is used for purely commercial reasons and that India and the West should not be worried about it being used for military purposes, Wickremesinghe did assure India that their security concerns will not go unnoticed (Kapoor, 2017, November 07). Nonetheless, doubts have risen about how committed this new presidency is to setting boundaries with China.

In the **normative dimension**, Sri Lanka’s President Wickremesinghe has pushed to move the island nation closer to India and away from China. Indeed, at the beginning of his Presidency, the dominating discourse in Sri Lanka’s policy-making converged on the necessity to “protect national security” and promote “economic, investment, and national security ties with its immediate neighbor [India]” (Balachandran, 2022; India Today, 2021, May 30). Regarding Sri Lanka’s debt issues, Sri Lankan Central Bank Governor Nandalal Weerasinghe called for an early resolution of the debt restructuring talks saying, “It is in the best interest for China and Sri Lanka both to complete this process soon so we can get back to repaying our distressed obligation” (Bloomberg, 2023, April 13). President Ranil Wickremesinghe, in *France 24*, also discussed his concerns on the country’s strategic location and rumors about China wanting to put military bases in the country, claiming “we are a neutral country” and “we emphasize

on the fact that we cannot allow” Sri Lanka to be “used as a base for any threats against India” (Perelman, 2023, June 26). As a consequence of Sri Lanka’s increasing economic dependence on China, the possibility of China using the Hambantota Port as a military base, and in turn the potential isolation this could bring to Sri Lanka from other powers, has led Sri Lanka to seek a “restructuring” in the relationship with China in order to “find a common framework that will benefit both countries” (Bala, 2022, July 20; Macan-Markar & Hanada, 2022, August 24).

Puzzlingly, in the **constitutive dimension**, Sri Lanka framed China as being “a very friendly country to Sri Lanka” and claimed that “history with China goes back thousands of years” (NDTV News, 2022, June 05; Srinivasan, 2022). However, while less blunt, Wickremesinghe still hinted at framing China’ as a potential security threat in the IOR yet not specifically at a national level. Moreover, regarding the potential militarization of the Hambantota port, Wickremesinghe explained that both India and themselves “share common interests” and believe that the “Indian Ocean should be free of big power rivalry,” which would be a “detriment for the region” (NDTV News, 2022, August 06). The President also framed China as a somewhat opaque economic partner stating that “the issue and concern with China is whether Chinese loans were used on truly economically viable projects” (NDTV News, 2022, June 05; Balachandran, 2022, September 21). Additionally, Wickremesinghe stated that the debt crisis was a lesson for the Sri Lankan government to be more careful when accepting Chinese money and learn to avoid “improper debt structure arrangements” (Macan-Markar & Hanada, 2022, August 24; Singh, 2022, February 01). The government stresses that this economic situation needs to stabilize, which means that “China making no mention of debt restructuring talks must be addressed” and a solution found because Sri Lanka is increasingly having problems in “paying for essential imports including food, fuel and medicines” (ANI, News, 2023, June 16; NDTV News, 2022, August 13). Moreover, Sri Lanka has expressed concern over China’s stance not changing regarding Sri Lanka’s need for a debt relief, referring to this as “China playing a game of ‘Hide and Seek’ on Sri Lanka’s debt restructuring” (ANI News, 2023, June 16). Thus, another problem that Sri Lanka finds in its partnership with China is not only its risky investment projects and questionable infrastructure acquisitions –that will cause further economic deterioration– nor the future strategic and potentially military plans– that could hinder Sri Lanka’s relationship with India but also isolate it from the West– but also the fear that China is not ready to commit and help improve the deteriorating economic situation, making it fully dependent on China and China’s conditions.

When analyzing the causes of the problem in the **cognitive dimension**, similar reasons arise that were analyzed in the previous timeframe. Namely, Sri Lanka addresses the lack of a transparent economic partnership with China, the lack of internal national management of these operations, and the lack of finding common ground with China for these problems. Indeed, “Beijing not only did not agree to debt restructuring requests” it instead “intends to sign agreements to develop further the Hambantota port” (ANI News, 2023, June 16; Satoh, 2023, May 25). However, unlike the previous timeframes, some solutions are being put into practice in the **policy dimension**. On the one hand, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has approved a 3\$ billion bailout for Sri Lanka (Macan-Markar & Hanada, 2022, August, 24; Nikkei Asia, 2023, March 21). This will be able to spur financial support from other partners as it will “improve the country’s standing in international capital markets” and potentially help Sri Lanka rise from its financial crisis (Satoh, 2023, May 25). With this bail, Wickremesinghe expects the Chinese to “come along with a debt deal” (Parkin & Reed, 2023, March 22). And indeed, four months ago, the Export-Import Bank of China sent Sri Lanka a resolution giving “assurances for a debt restructuring” (Jayasinghe & Shalal, 2023, March 08). This agreement proves how slowly but surely Sri Lanka is taking decisive policy actions and obtaining financial assurances from its major creditors – among them being China. The IMF commented that Sri Lanka’s economy will be expected to “resume growing in 2024 after contracting 3% this year”; however, “this growth depends greatly” on the “economic reforms Sri Lanka has agreed to undertake” (Mallawarachi, 2023, June 02). Wickremesinghe is expected to present the domestic debt restructuring framework to parliament this weekend; meanwhile, to contain potential market volatility Sri Lanka has declared a five-day holiday from June 29 to July 3 (Jayasinghe, 2023, June 26). In sum, while the “necessary policy action” has taken place and a middle ground has been found with China, whether this framework works long-term remains to be seen (Mallawarachi, 2023, June 02).

Overall, by 2022-2023, Sri Lanka has somewhat shifted its relationship with China, taking control of the reins and establishing a debt restructuring framework that prevents the island nation from falling into a deeper debt crisis and, in turn, from becoming entirely reliant on China at an economic but also geopolitical level. As a result, these findings illustrate how the position and framing of Sri Lanka on its alliance with China has somewhat changed

to consider more its own geopolitical interest and long-term economic well-being while still maintaining a solid alliance with China.

2.4. Closing Remarks

It is often cited that the number of debt Sri Lanka has to China is approximately “10 to 15 percent of its total public external debt”. However, according to a briefing paper published by China-Africa Research Initiative (SAIS-CARI), Sri Lanka’s debt to China “amounts to approximately \$7.3 billion, or 19.6 percent of the country’s total foreign debt as of the end of 2021” (Moramundali & Panduwawala, 2022). However, Sri Lanka’s biggest share of debt consisted of Eurobonds –international sovereign bonds– which amounted to 36 percent of the country’s foreign debt by the end of May 2022 (Moramundali & Panduwawala, 2022, December 20). When looking at these numbers, what does this truly suggest about the role of China in Sri Lanka’s current debt problems?

Considering the Policy Framing Analysis, China’s increasing involvement in Sri Lanka’s state of affairs has indeed played some part in the island’s economic deterioration. As the Sino-Sri Lankan partnership developed, Sri Lanka found itself economically trapped by China, as any reversal to the economic ties with the Red Giant seemed impossible given its high dependency, which in turn made the mounting debt worse. Hence, some arguments claim that the BRI, China’s global infrastructure chain initiative, has been the main contributor to Sri Lanka’s debt crisis. Sri Lanka’s debt to Chinese lenders amounted to a significant \$7.4 billion, establishing it as a major beneficiary among countries participating in the Belt and Road Initiative. The considerable rise in Sri Lanka’s debt to China, coupled with the leasing of key infrastructures –such as the Hambantota port– to a consortium led by China, has triggered intense discussions regarding the impact of Chinese financial engagement in Silk Road nations. Critics view this financial involvement as part of China’s strategy to enhance its political and military influence in the region, commonly called ‘debt-trap diplomacy.’

Moreover, the idea of the Chinese’ debt trap’ diplomacy originated precisely from the events that took place at the end of 2017, where the Sri Lankan government transferred 70 percent of the Hambantota Port to state-owned China Merchant Group and allowed China a lease of 99 years on the port and surrounding land (Qinglian, 2022, July 18). According to multiple articles, it is alleged that the Chinese government was aware that the Hambantota port would never be financially viable. Instead, the purpose of providing funding was to secure ownership of the port in the future when Sri Lanka would be unable to repay the debt (Abi-Habib, 2018, June 25; Himmer & Rod, 2023, p.10). In sum, China’s lending of money to Sri Lanka for infrastructure projects that were ‘white elephants’ greatly contributed to its debt crisis.

On the other hand, as also seen in the analysis, Sri Lanka’s economic situation cannot be solely attributed to China, as, in fact, its debt crisis extends beyond its commitments to China. Marion Esteban, Senior Analyst at the Elcano Royal Institute and Senior Lecturer at the Centre for East Asian Studies of the Autonomous University of Madrid, claims that the economic crisis in Sri Lanka is the result of a convergence of various economic and political factors that have been brewing for several decades. One reason being that Sri Lanka had been unsuccessful in attracting foreign direct investment after opening its market in 1977. This is due to the unstable business environment, a lack of policy consistency by the different heads of state, and the civil war (Esteban, 2018). These factors culminate in an import-dependent economy burdened with substantial debt, leading to challenges in balancing payments and a deficit in foreign reserves. Moreover, the interplay of economic policies driven by populism from consecutive administrations, intertwined with electoral strategies aimed at gaining popular support, and a preference for symbiotic connections between government bureaucracies and the wealthy, has resulted in an unfavorable balance between government revenue generation and the overall gross domestic product (GDP).

Due to its transition to a middle-income country, Sri Lanka faced limitations in accessing concessional loans from bilateral and multilateral partners (Jayasinghe, 2022). As a result, Colombo resorted to seeking commercial borrowings from international capital markets to meet its infrastructure-related needs. This led to a steady increase in the debt-to-GDP ratio, reversing the declining trend observed since 2009. Furthermore, the economy faced a series of persistent shocks, both domestic and external, starting in 2018. These shocks included: the political turmoil of 2018 when President Maithripala Sirisena removed Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe from office, followed by the Easter Sunday attack in 2019, and shortly afterwards, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

These events, directly and indirectly, impacted the economy, further exacerbating its debt crisis. According to Attanayake (2023, March 30), the “final nail in the coffin” had been Gotabaya Rajapaksa’s policy-making mistakes and poor economic management.

To finalize, there have also been multiple studies that have discredited the ‘Chinese debt trap’ as the main source for Sri Lanka’s debt crisis (Attanayake, 2023, March 09; Weerakoon & Jayasuriya, 2019, February 28; Wignaraja et al., 2020). These state that Sri Lanka’s debt problem was mainly caused by the international capital market in the West, specifically the increase in Eurobonds borrowed from the international capital market. In sum, in the Policy Frame Analysis, China’s role in Sri Lanka’s debt crisis was framed as one of the root causes of all its debt issues. However, the commonly accepted explanation for this origin emphasizes the country’s insufficient macroeconomic policies and excessive dependence on commercial borrowings and export credits as means to tackle its twin deficit challenge (Attanaye, 2023)– a fiscal deficit is caused when a country spends more money than it earns, and a current account deficit caused country’s total imports of goods, services, and investments exceed its total exports.

In closing, Herath (2019) explains Sri Lanka’s questionable economic choices through the classification of ‘bandwagoning’ with the rising power. Abeyagoonasekera (2022) explains how the “deteriorating economic circumstances with multiple miscalculated strategic choices weakened the state capacity of Sri Lanka, making it bandwagon with China” (Sachini, 2022, p.20; Abeyagoonasekera, 2023, March 03). This is done with the hope that Sri Lanka will gain profits and opportunities while cooperating with China’s interests. This is what Cheng-Chwee Kuik calls “strategic hedging.” Kuik (2021) explains how this strategy argues that states are likely to follow somewhat contradictory and vague policies. “This is seen when a small state gets closer to an emerging power in order to maximize returns, while at the same time, trying to counteract the risks stemming from such associations by maintaining a certain distance through selective defiance and some resistive measures” (Kuik, 2021, p.302). As seen in Sri Lanka, this strategy came with higher political and economic costs –and even, at some point, isolation or entrapment risk– rather than economic improvement and stability. In reference to the GO game, according to the Ten Golden Rules made by Wang Jixin, Sri Lanka had broken the 9th rule: “Against strong positions, play safely” [*Shi Gu Qu He* - 彼强自保], which allowed China to ‘cut’ the island nations stone and encircle it (Sensei’s Library, 2015).

Overall, this section concludes that while China has indeed played an important role, Sri Lanka’s economic downfall has not resulted wholly from China, and thus its involvement in the island nation cannot be classified as the leading cause of the debt crisis. After examining this case study, the final chapter takes a step back from the Sino-Sri Lanka relationship and looks into the wider implications of China’s strategic involvement in the IOR. Indeed, the creation of the String of Pearls is symptomatic of China’s increasing geopolitical and geoeconomic influence. For India, raising concerns have caused New Delhi to adopt a series of comprehensive strategies to counter China’s challenge. For the U.S., the implications of China’s strategy have put to question its economic and military means, as well as willingness to maintain peace in the area and ensure the well-being of those countries.

Chapter 3: The Wider Implications of China's 'Encirclement' of the Indian Ocean Region

In 1972, President Nixon said to Chairman Mao that “the Chairman has changed the world,” Mao replied, “No, I have just changed a few things on the outskirts of Beijing” (Bader, 2016, p.1). Fast forward a few years later and it is evident that Mao and now Xi Jinping have undeniably influenced the trajectory of China and, consequently, the world. Xi Jinping’s tenure has witnessed transformative shifts in China’s economic, political, and military capabilities, resulting in substantial changes in its international perception and, consequently, its overall placement in the international *wéiqí* board. Certainly, China’s *tao guang yang hui* [develop capabilities while keeping a low profile] foreign policy has changed. The question now stands if it expects the international system to mold and accommodate itself to the newly transformed China.

China’s growing presence in the Indian Ocean cannot be denied. Indeed, the Indian Ocean is a crucial trade pathway encompassing strategically significant chokepoints, especially for energy shipping, as a result, China heavily depends on a secure Indian Ocean for its trade operations. This explains China’s obvious interest in developing a solid foothold in region. As Baruah (2023) points out, “History will tell us, the flag follows the trade.” Undoubtedly, a way of showing interest in a region is by displaying a presence there, mainly a physical presence (Baruah, 2023). In recent years, China has successfully accomplished this objective. For example, in 2017, China established its first-ever overseas military base in Djibouti, located in the Horn of Africa. Later in 2022, the Chinese foreign minister visited the strategic island of Comoros –which is largely neglected by the international community (Baruah, 2022). Lastly, China, while still being considered a ‘novice player’ in the region, China is the “only nation with embassies in the six islands of the Indian Ocean, namely Sri Lanka, Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, Madagascar, and Comoros” (Razdan, 2023, May 14). In sum, China has consistently engaged with countries across the Indian Ocean, from littoral nations to islands, in order to gradually cement its presence throughout the IOR.

However, two of the most important countries in China’s freedom of navigation in the IOR are India and the U.S. (Bo, 2014). Taking into account the aforementioned circumstances, the shared goals of Washington and New Delhi to ensure the security and stability of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) form a solid foundation for cooperation. However, according to Baruah (2022), the U.S. and India differ in interests regarding the Indian Ocean. On one side, the IOR is a “priority theatre for India,” while on the other, the region features in the “margin of U.S. strategic priorities” (Baruah, 2023). Nonetheless, while not being a top priority for the U.S., this region still plays a significant part in its engagements in Africa, the Middle East, and Afghanistan. Thus, the security implications of China’s push into the IOR have recently made the U.S. widen its limiting tunnel vision of strategic priorities. Additionally, it has pushed the U.S. and India to begin establishing a mutual understanding of the Indian Ocean in each other’s strategic priorities in order to respond to China more effectively and, in turn, strengthen U.S.-India cooperation in the IOR.

All things considered, the next subsections consist of a literature analysis of the strategic planning that both India and the U.S. are developing to respond to China’s ever-growing presence in the Indian Ocean Region.

3.1. Tensions between China and India: Counter-Encirclement Strategy

As aforementioned, John Mearsheimer (2006), an American political scientist and international relations scholar, stated that the simultaneous rise of China and India, along with the nascent “unhinged multipolarity,” has transformed the power dynamics in Asia (p. 162). Multipolarity refers to the distribution of power, which in this case, signifies that two states have nearly equal amounts of military, political, and economic influence. However, due to the term “unhinged,” it can be argued that in this context, power is balanced when the targeted state creates defensive alliances or acquires military capabilities in response to the rising power (Mearsheimer, 2006, p. 163). Khan (2023) explains three main ways to balance power in a particular region: first, by building alliances with other countries. Second, through internal balancing through military expansion. Third, through limited hard balancing, which combines both. In India’s case, it is using the so-called limited hard power balancing (p. 93).

Limited hard balancing, explains TV Paul (2018), entails the development of a modest military buildup and informal alliances (p. 26). This allows for strategic partnerships but not coordinated military operations or preemptive warfare. In India's case, its response to China's Belt and Road Initiative, and specifically the String of Pearls, has been limited due to resource constraints and the growing alliance between Pakistan and China (Naqvi, 2017, p. 120). In response to the power imbalance, India has been actively participating in alternative diplomatic initiatives as a countermeasure to China's encroachment in South Asia. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in particular, has pursued a regional diplomatic approach aimed at fostering engagement with neighboring countries and establishing political connections. Das (2016) explains that Modi recognized that "foreign policy begins at a country's borders," and his first step in implementing this was to "invite all the heads of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) to his inauguration ceremony" (p. 19). Through this diplomatic effort, Modi has tried to forge lasting relationships with its neighboring countries.

3.1.1. India's Diplomatic Tour

While crucial, India nonetheless faces significant strains in establishing enduring and reliable partnerships with neighboring nations as a result of its geographical position. Indeed, the distinctive landscape of India, which encompasses shared borders with countries of varying capacities, resources and cultures makes the process somewhat of a challenge (Malhotra, 2014). Nonetheless, especially during these times of "unhinged multipolarity," forging strong links has become increasingly necessary. Especially if India wants to remain a strong power within Asia, it must learn to maintain a good relationship in "its backyard" (Hemal, 2019; Khan, 2023, p. 94). As a result, Narendra Modi has taken a more pragmatic outlook in regional diplomacy, where dialogue and political links remain key to forging alliances.

During these diplomatic endeavors, Modi traveled to multiple regional countries but also beyond the IOR, Modi visited other international powers like France, Australia, Japan, and the U.S. This inevitably helps strengthen India's presence in the IOR and abroad. Aryal and Bharti (2023) highlight that, at a regional level, India's principal strategy is based on promoting South Asian peace and cooperation; this is due to much of its own socioeconomic and political progress depending on there being a stable and peaceful environment in the neighboring countries (p. 224). The success of this foreign policy strategy can be seen through numerous examples.

For instance, during his trip to Nepal and Bhutan, Modi advocated for the concept of "trans-Himalayan regionalism" and underscored its significance as a "fundamental pillar in Asian politics, cultural exchange, and regional security" (Das, 2016, p.24). Modi's visits to Nepal and Bhutan were highly successful, as he adeptly tackled the challenges by addressing any concerns and effectively explaining India's strategic approach. Through his skillful actions, Modi effectively bridged the communication and confidence divide that had arisen with these countries in previous years (Das, 2016, p.25). Another example is seen in Modi's relations with Bangladesh, which also proved to be a success, managing to neutralize the mistrust and divide that had long defined the relationship (Khan, 2023, p.96). As a result of these diplomatic endeavors between India and Bangladesh, Dhaka took the initiative to commence the authorization procedure for allowing access to the Chittagong port. Additionally, they presented a proposal for the execution of the suggested railway linkage between Agartala, India, and Akhaura, Bangladesh. (The Economic Times, 2022, April 29).

Regarding Sri Lanka, after years of hardly any contact, Prime Minister Modi visited the island nation. During this visit, Modi emphasized both countries' important historical and cultural ties. Moreover, India also claimed to be committed to boosting investments in its debt-ridden neighbor. India's Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar commented how these investments would focus on "core areas such as tourism and infrastructure" (Al Jazeera, 2023, January 20). India's recent accomplishment in Sri Lanka, where they signed an agreement to establish power plants in the northern region of the country, demonstrates the effectiveness of these recent visits. Also, this particular achievement is significant as it comes after China had to suspend a similar project in the region (Francis, 2022, March 29).

A final example, in 2016, India and the Maldives forged an action plan aimed at establishing a defensive collaboration. To achieve this, Prime Minister Modi highlighted the significance of this agreement, emphasizing its "close connection to India's national interests," as well as the "stability and security of Maldives" (Vaugh, 2018, p. 38).

Modi also made a commitment to provide the required support for the establishment of democratic institutions on the island –this in turn led to further agreements being signed on defense cooperation (Vaugh, 2018, p.38). Overall, Modi's engagement with India's neighboring countries through diplomatic alliances is a key component of India's foreign policy which aims at curbing Beijing's String of Pearls strategy. Hence, by prioritizing the strengthening of ties with neighboring nations, Modi seeks to counteract China's strategic intentions.

3.1.2. India's Act East Policy

India's 'Act East' policy is a strategic and diplomatic initiative aimed at strengthening India's engagement with the countries in the Asia-Pacific region. According to Kesavan (2020), the 'Act East' policy, previously known as 'Look East,' is "not an entirely separate entity but rather represents different phases in the continuous evolution of India's approach" towards the Asia-Pacific region. Indeed, in response to the evolving global order, India's foreign policy had to undergo various adjustments, one of which was the transformation of the Look East Policy (LEP) into the Act East Policy (AEP), as rebranded by the present administration. The policy surfaced following the "conclusion of the Cold War" as part of New Delhi's endeavors "to revive Southeast Asia's significance" –and subsequently East Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific– within India's foreign policy agenda (Bajpaee, 2022, p. 631). This policy promotes "economic, strategic, and cultural relations with the vast Asia-Pacific region" (Kesavan, 2020). Indeed, since the launch of LEP, many geopolitical changes have occurred in the IOR. Thus, the AEP aims to help India adapt to the new reality and effectively respond to China's increasing regional influence.

One of the main objectives of AEP is to establish trade corridors between the countries that belong to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (Barua, 2020, p.105). For India, its support for the ASEAN regional groups is rooted in efforts to avoid an alternative regional group being created and dominated by major powers –such as China (Bajpaee, 2022, p. 642). This can be done through infrastructure initiatives, such as the Agartala-Akhaura Rail Project, which established the inaugural railway link between North Eastern India and Bangladesh (Banerjee, 2023, April 05). Additionally, India has initiated several connectivity projects, such as the Trilateral Highway Project and the construction of a port in Myanmar (Ganapathi, 2015, p. 65). Moreover, enhanced strategic alliances with countries like the Philippines and Vietnam which aimed at counterbalancing Chinese supremacy in both the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, also resulted from various alterations to the AEP (Khan, 2023).

Notwithstanding, India has found itself in a roadblock in its pursuit of eastward engagement, due to three distinct reasons: domestically, the country's reform agenda falls short of its global ambitions; regionally, the mounting pressure on the principle of 'ASEAN centrality'; and globally, the uncertain state of the international order (Khan, 2023, p. 97). A significant portion of these issues can be attributed to the increasing divisions within ASEAN, particularly between member states favoring closer ties with Beijing and those pursuing a more balanced foreign policy; thus maintaining an equidistant stance towards major regional and global powers in order to avoid being dragged into an unnecessary conflict (Wang, 2022, January 07). Against this backdrop, India's regional involvement has expanded beyond ASEAN, encompassing bilateral, trilateral, and plurilateral initiatives that operate outside of the ASEAN framework. Palit (2016) explains that while there is no neglect of Southern Asia, India's strategic engagements are expected to increase with other countries and regions such as Central Asia, Japan, and Africa (p. 83). One of those plurilateral initiatives is known as the 'Necklace of Diamonds' –considered to be a direct response against China's String of Pearls strategy.

3.1.3. India's Necklace of Diamonds

Recently, India has hit a milestone, surpassing China in population and exceeding 1.4 billion people, and with such size comes geopolitical, economic, and cultural power that India can use to its advantage (Allison, 2023, June 24). China is not doing good in this aspect. With a shrinking and aging population, sustaining economic growth and achieving its geopolitical ambitions will be harder. Nevertheless, India is still far from reaching China's economic power. This is apparent in the "lessons Mr. Modi takes from China" in his inclination for infrastructure development, investing projects that improve the supply chains and connectivity (Mashal & Travelli, 2023, April 19).

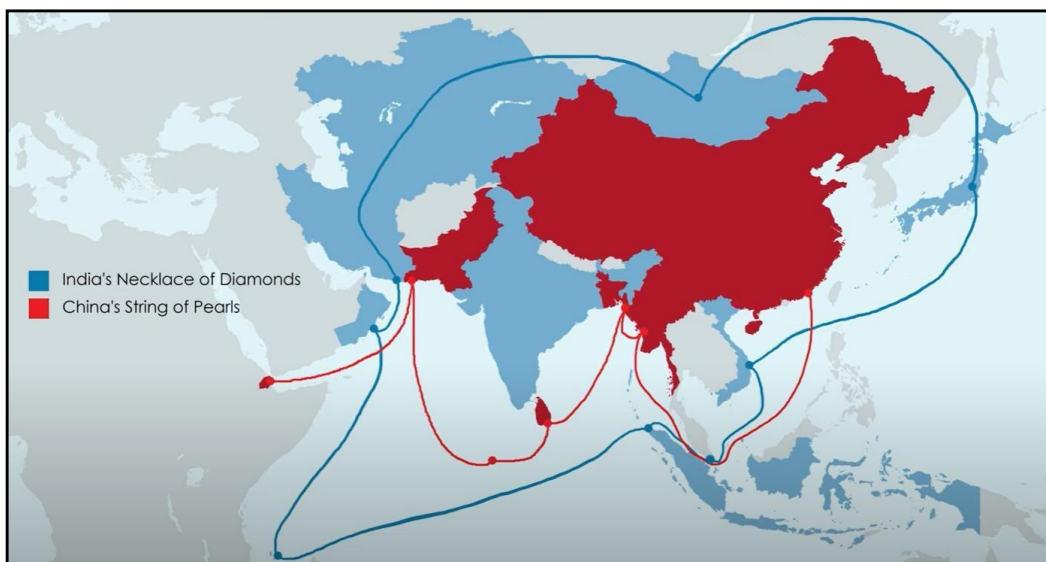
Nonetheless, while domestic issues that weaken India's global position still need to be dealt with –for instance, internal violence between Hindus and Muslims, low education rate, and increasing poverty rate– the appeal to be

an alternative to China is still in India's interest (The Economic Times, 2022, December 09). Its endeavors to leverage its expanding technological and economic prowess to benefit from the Western world's strained relationship with China, as well as its diplomatic initiatives aimed at forging solidarity with neighboring nations to counter China's escalating presence in the Indian Ocean area, exemplify this (Mashal & Travelli, 2023, April 19). Regarding the latter, as previously examined, India has already begun evolving its 'Act East Policy' to go beyond its regional scope and has also started to counteract China's growing presence through its own String of Pearls.

The term Necklace of Diamonds was first used by India's former Foreign Secretary, Lalit Mansingh, in 2011. In simple terms, this strategy mirrors China's String of Pearls –encircling the 'encircler' or counter-encirclement policy (Brewster, 2018; Bhattacharya, 2022, p. 105). India intends to mirror China's strategic tactics by enlarging its naval bases and forging alliances with strategically located nations in the IOR thus, surrounding China. While much of this is said to sprout from economic interests, perceptions of both countries have undertaken a more security-focused perspective (Saalman, 2012). This is seen by how India has framed China's String of Pearls as being an “encirclement tactic” to “contain India's influence over its neighbors” (Abbhi, 2015, p. 1; Abdollahi, 2021). For this reason, India's relations with its neighboring countries have been reawakened. Diplomatic visits, courtesy calls, exchange of gifts, and promises have flourished between Prime Minister Modi and the leaders of the surrounding nations (Abbhi, 2015, p. 3). This renewed engagement aims not only to counter Chinese influence but also to bolster India's presence in the region.

The Necklace of Diamonds stretches across Central Asia, Mongolia, Japan, Vietnam, Indonesia, Singapore, Seychelles, Oman, and Iran, intending to create a containment barrier surrounding China. In New Delhi, Joint Defense drills and combined arms exercises are taking place alongside efforts to enhance economic partnerships and establish industrial corridors (Mohan, 2022). In truth, the concept of “strangling” each other lies at the heart of India's and China's geopolitical strategies. Whether through a String of Pearls or a Necklace of Diamonds, both countries aim to assert dominance over the Indian Ocean.

Figure 3: Visual Representation of China and India's 'encirclement' strategy in the IOR



Source: Drishtikone Newsletter, “Of Pearls and Diamonds-Maritime Battlegrounds”

3.1.4. When in doubt, Tenuki

Before analyzing how India is responding to China's String of Pearls, it is first interesting to visualize the strategic movements taking place through the lens of GO. According to the webpage Sensei's Library (2019), “Tenuki,” a Japanese GO term, denotes “playing somewhere else.” In the GO game, this, for instance, means that the black stones play *tenuki* by not ‘answering’ the white stones last move locally but instead adding a move in another part of the board. This move is connected to the idea of being in control (*sente* 先手) or letting the opponent lead (*gote* 後手). When a player *tenuki*, it means they decide to ignore the opponent's recent move because they do not see it as a pressing danger. Instead, they believe it is safe to move somewhere else on the game board (Sensei's Library, 2019).

In most games, the player who can stay in control of the game's pace has a big advantage. They are usually the ones with *sente*. On the other hand, a player might willingly choose *gote* to protect a vulnerable position or gain a local advantage like securing territory. Sensei's Library (2019) states: "In the endgame (*yose*) players typically try to play all available *sente* moves and then play the largest *gote* move on the board. A *reverse sente* play is a *gote* play that prevents the opponent from making a *sente* move." Finally, sometimes, a player might decide to *tenuki* even when the opponent's last move is somewhat harmful. They do this because they believe their own move will inflict even more damage on the opponent. They are willing to accept the anticipated loss from not responding directly, as they expect a greater advantage from the move they make elsewhere on the board instead (Sensei's Library, 2019). Considering this, when examining the strategic response of India to China's String of Pearls, it could be argued that India is pulling a *reverse sente* play by gradually blocking China's possibilities of fully controlling the IOR and, in turn, encircling China. The next subsection examines how this GO strategy plays out in real life.

3.1.5. Reverse Sente at Play

Taking a look at the opponents movements on 'the board,' China has been engaged in negotiations to secure dual-use privileges at Oman's Duqm port, undertaking the construction of a deepwater port on Kenya's Mamu Island, and actively advocating for a submarine base at Marao Island in the Maldives (Nikkei Asia, 2018, July 26; Mishra, 2021; Bansal, 2018, February 06). However, as seen with the case of Sri Lanka, with each 'pearl added to its string,' China's foreign policies have left many of the countries involved in a more precarious situation than before -with nations indebted, unable to repay loans, being coerced into accepting geostrategic concessions. In light of these circumstances, India is keen on leveraging these developments by strengthening its naval presence beyond its borders with the Necklace of Diamonds strategy. This involves establishing additional overseas naval bases, forging new military alliances, and extending its influence throughout the region. Simultaneously, India aims to impede China's String of Pearls strategy (Lea, 2014, p. 28). To do so, India has used its soft power (diplomacy, geopolitical strategies) and hard power tactics (increasing geoeconomic and naval presence).

Considering this, let us now observe how India has been 'placing its stones' on the 'board.' In 2015, Seychelles consented to construct a naval base on Assumption Island, which would be exclusively leased to the Indian Navy (George & Suri, 2018, February 18). By establishing a presence in Seychelles, India secured a strategic operational base on the African continent. With a well-planned approach, the Indian Navy now could effectively counter the Chinese influence in Djibouti and Kenya. Additionally, Assumption Island is strategically located north of the Mozambique Channel, a crucial route for maritime trade. Further, in 2016 Iran and India agreed to construct Chabahar, Iran's inaugural deepwater port (BBC, 2016, May 23). This development enabled India to access the North-South Transport Corridor, which establishes a connection from Mumbai to Moscow through Iran and Azerbaijan. By securing a stake in Chabahar, India effectively counters China's influence in Karachi and the Gwadar Port.

Furthermore, in 2018, India successfully obtained an agreement with Duqm, providing it with a firm foothold in the Arabian Peninsula. This strategic move significantly counterbalanced China's presence in Djibouti and Karachi (Panda, 2018, February 14). Notably, Duqm's location in the Strait of Hormuz, a pivotal chokepoint, further strengthens India's position and deters China's strategic endeavors in that area.

Concerning the Strait of Malacca, New Delhi signed a significant agreement with Singapore in 2018. This accord grants the Indian Navy access to logistical support, including rearming and refueling, at Singapore's Changi Naval Base (The Statesman, 2018, June 01). Additionally, India forged a deal with Indonesia during that same year, obtaining military access to Sabang Port; situated at the northern gateway of the Strait of Malacca, this Port has the potential to, in the future, serve as a submarine base (Panda, 2018, May 21). These agreements represent a distinct aspect of India's diplomatic endeavors as they enable India to extend its influence into the South China Sea. Moreover, by establishing these agreements surrounding the Malacca Strait, India seizes a strategic advantage vis-à-vis China. On top of that, starting in 2020, India had been involved at a military level in the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago's, which lies north of the Malacca Strait -another geographical placement in favor of India's interests (Global Order, 2023, March 17). In summary, as India strengthens its presence in the surrounding areas, New Delhi gains increased leverage over Beijing, thus enhancing its bargaining power if conflict were to arise.

Besides military expansion, as previously highlighted, India has invested in diplomatic relations with the nations surrounding China. In 2018, India and Mongolia reached an agreement to establish a bilateral air corridor to enhance trade and foster closer interactions between their respective populations. (Business Standard, 2018, June 24). That same year, Narendra Modi embarked on a diplomatic tour of Central Asia, a strategically crucial region due to the abundance in natural resources (Zafar, 2022). India's approach towards Central Asia revolved around safeguarding its national interests regarding resource security, fostering economic exchanges, and enhancing connectivity to engage with the broader Eurasian region (Zafar, 2022). Regarding countries outside India's regional sphere, in 2017, India and Japan jointly launched an initiative known as the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor. This initiative was designed to promote economic infrastructure, stimulate economic growth, and challenge China's grip on Africa (Singh, 2019, January 27).

Nevertheless, the strength and longevity of India's Necklace of Diamonds remains to be seen. As previously mentioned, most of this doubt stems from the ASEAN region, as some countries hold close ties with China economically and politically. Moreover, China is wealthier than India, which allows it to invest in its String of Pearls more effectively than India. Nonetheless, as a whole, India and China's end goal is to encircle the other by controlling the terms of commerce.

In essence, New Delhi's approach to counter Chinese activities is twofold. Firstly, it involves fostering closer relationships and engagement with neighboring countries in order to bring them into New Delhi's sphere of influence. Secondly, it involves establishing its own economic, naval, and diplomatic networks and strengthening existing ties to effectively 'steer the ship' and maintain a prominent position in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Going back to the *tenuki* strategy, India, through its *gote* moves, has been able to somewhat modify the evolution of the 'game' to its advantage and avoid getting "getting locked" into the "local fight" and continuing to play where there are larger plays elsewhere (Sensei's Library, 2019). In other words, a *reverse sente* situation is at play, meaning India is preventing the opponent China from making a *sente* move and controlling the game's progression. Having examined India's position vis-à-vis China, the next section analyzes the U.S.'s role in the grand scheme of things.

3.2. The Growing Need for the U.S. to Prioritize the Indian Ocean Region

The term "world order" refers to the prevailing values, rules, and norms that establish the framework for global governance and shape the international community during a specific period (Zhao, 2016, p. 13). Throughout history, the stronger powers have played a pivotal role in determining the rules of the world order, aligning them with their own values and interests. On the other hand, weaker states have generally accepted these rules, while emerging powers that are discontented with the existing order have sought to challenge and replace it by advocating alternative principles that reflect their unique preferences. This is precisely what China has been doing following the aforementioned 'Long Game strategy.'

The idea that China aims for regional and, in turn, global supremacy does not seem far-fetched when listening to Xi Jinping's address at the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures, where he stated: "It is for the people of Asia to run the affairs of Asia, solve the problems of Asia and uphold the security of Asia" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of PRC, 2014, May 21). According to Bader (2016), this language has been interpreted as a statement of Xi's desire to "throw the United States out of Asia" and "destroy" U.S. regional alliances (p. 13). Regardless of the hidden meaning of that statement, what is clear is how, according to the Congressional Research Service Report (CSR), the intensifying rivalry between China and India in the IOR has created pressing implications for the U.S.

During the Trump administration in 2017, the U.S. stated how the "geopolitical competition" between "free and repressive visions" of world order in the Indo-Pacific region called for increased attention from the West (Vaughn, 2018, p. 2). Certainly, according to Chinese liberal scholars, endorsing the so-called China model would only "reinforce despotism and nationalism," obstructing China's integration into the wider global community (Li, 2015, p. 134). Moreover, it is argued that promoting a uniquely Chinese approach that intentionally isolates the country from the "mainstream of human civilization" would perpetuate existing political autocracy (Li, 2015, p. 135). Thus, without the presence of a power in the IOR like the U.S. –that promotes and functions as a democracy and attains to the rule of law– concepts like individual freedom, liberation, and the unhindered growth of a market economy would be mere hollow rhetoric that China could capitalize on to solidify its sphere of influence. Additionally, China

has been described by the U.S. as being a “revisionist power” and a competitor “challenging American power” while attempting to “erode American security and prosperity” in the Indo-Pacific region (Zhao, 2016, p. 13). As suggested by the U.S.’s framing of Chinese intentions in the Indo-Pacific region, a response to the increasing tensions between India and China is expected –especially as this region has inevitably become among the top geopolitical concerns in the U.S., together with Europe and the Middle East.

Furthermore, China also poses a “threat” to the economic foundations of the U.S. As Tobin (2018) explains, while China’s economic success continues to soar, diverging from the principles of the Washington Consensus, Beijing has taken on the task of challenging the established “trinity” of Washington institutions, namely “the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the U.S. Department of the Treasury” (p. 156). This is achieved by providing concessional financial aid and commercial loans to other nations while on the side building a strategic network of economic interests in the Indian Ocean (Mendis, 2012, p. 56). Moreover, China has also been using its economic leverage for wider geopolitical means. For instance, pressuring nations to oppose recognizing Taiwan, boycotting and limiting Chinese tourism as a means to compel or penalize countries entangled in political disagreements with China, and has utilized military threats to intimidate and coerce countries entangled in territorial disputes concerning maritime claims (White, 2020, p. 10). In sum, the U.S. and India should understand how China could completely change the *status quo* if its strategies proved successful long-term –Beijing’s “community of common destiny” would signify a future in which the “U.S. and its alliances are absent” (Tobin, 2018, p. 159).

Considering this, according to Dr. Satoru Nagao, there are three main fields of interest for the U.S. in the IOR. First, to maintain a secure sea passage for international trade. Second, to ensure a stable situation on the main chokepoints in the region –the Strait of Hormuz, Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, and the Strait of Malacca. Third, to be a balancing power in this region as it is bound to remain the main arena of Sino-Indian competition (Nagao, 2012, p. 17). Furthermore, the CSR report has determined that the U.S. should respond by: “regulating the resource levels of the Navy and Army to align with national security objectives in the IOR, foster and enhance strategic and diplomatic alliances with regional partners to advance American interests, and assume the role of a mediator power to actively promote regional stability.” (Vaughn, 2018, p. 4; Baruah, 2021).

3.2.1. Why the U.S. Has Been Sidelining the Indian Ocean Region

While the Indo-Pacific discourse was present during the Obama years –as seen with the continuation of the U.S. “Pivot to Asia” strategy; aimed at establishing a more balanced economic, diplomatic, and security approach (Lieberthal, 2011)– it was under President Trump that the U.S. approach to the region picked up steam. Under the “Indo-Pacific strategy,” U.S. approach to the IOR underwent a rebranding process, wherein New Delhi assumed a more important role and a series of initiatives were launched to strengthen the defense capabilities between India and the U.S. in the region (Purayil, 2021, p. 64). These initiatives include the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, the 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue, and the India-U.S. Nuclear Deal (Khan, 2023, p. 101).

Nevertheless, many of these initiatives leave out much of the Indian Ocean Region itself. For instance, in 2017, the U.S. National Security Strategy defined the Indo-Pacific region as spanning from the “west coast of India to the western shores of the United States” (Saha, 2023). However, this definition overlooked the Western Indian Ocean and the Indian Ocean extending towards the African continent. It was not until the Biden administration that the entirety of the Indian Ocean was recognized as a somewhat relevant element of the Indo-Pacific strategy Report (Anand, 2022, September 10). Nevertheless, the Report from the Biden administration has not shown a much different stance than the previous administration. This is because the Report neglected to recognize “Africa, the Persian Gulf, the Arabian Sea, or the Bay of Bengal, and only makes a single mention of the Indian Ocean” (Saha, 2023). The question remains why, despite the concerns mentioned above, is the U.S. stalling when it comes to paying attention to the Indian Ocean Region?

One possible reason is that there is a low probability that military conflict will start in the Indian Ocean, contrary to the high chances of the heavily militarized Western Pacific (Saha, 2023; Kim, 2013). However, although the growing military footprint of China in the Indian Ocean may not present immediate threats for U.S., it possesses the capability to significantly disrupt American strategic and operational planning in the wider region (Rehman, 2012, p. 18). Therefore, as China continues to enhance its nuclear submarine capabilities in the Indian Ocean, it becomes

imperative for the United States to uphold a solid sea-based nuclear capacity in order to deter any attempts to coerce U.S. allies and guarantee unrestricted mobility for U.S. military forces throughout the Indian Ocean.

Another reason is that Washington is tied to other bilateral and plurilateral defense arrangements in the Pacific region, which makes it the Pentagon's primary area of focus unlike the IOR. Moreover, Saha (2023) adds that the "weakening of the United States' position within the First and Second island chains in the Pacific," which comprise the Kuril Islands to Taiwan in the First Island Chain (serving as a natural defensive barrier for the U.S. and its allies) and the Mariana Islands in the Second Island Chain (providing an additional defensive line for the U.S.), inevitably, in the event of an emergency in the Pacific, the Indian Ocean would take second place in importance. Nevertheless, Professor Friedberg (2021) argues that although China's military objectives in the area remain somewhat uncertain, it possesses compelling motives to launch a pre-emptive strike in the Indian Ocean that could pressure a transfer of U.S. forces from the Pacific to that region –for the sake of the U.S. not losing that region to China. This potential threat calls for the necessary diversification of U.S. military presence in the Indian Ocean and a "military presence that makes use of access agreements rather than permanent basing" (Campbell & Sullivan, 2019). In other words, the U.S. should expand its military presence and sea access agreements in order to enhance its ability to respond quickly to any regional instability –potentially caused by China– and maintain a flexible approach in the Indo-Pacific region and IOR as a whole.

Finally, the reason as to why the U.S. has recently begun to pay attention to the IOR is due to the increasing pressure one of its most important allies there, India, is suffering as a result of China's geoeconomic and geopolitical expansion (Amin, 2020). With the development of the String of Pearls, India fears the encirclement strategy from China –as seen in Figure 1. As China's naval modernization progresses and potential military bases emerge along India's coastlines, India is urging the United States to curb Chinese aspirations (Humbert, 2017, December 20). Thus, due to the Indian Ocean's growing strategic significance and the competition among influential regional players tensing, the United States recognizes the necessity of supporting its ally India to counteract Chinese dominance in the region. All in all, it has become vital for Washington to observe the actions taken by China and respond assertively, considering the growing importance of the Indian Ocean for the balance of power in the international order. As the U.S. strives to uphold a free and open Indo-Pacific, it is essential for Washington to develop effective policy tools tailored to tackle challenges withing the IOR.

Relating it back to the Game GO, it is often said that the great strategy game in the U.S. is chess, while in China it is GO (Bhoothalingam, 2018). This contrast in preference is also evident in the strategic decisions by leaders, where the world witnesses these two games being played out on a global stage: the U.S. tends to favor a method of "changing foreign rulers," while China concentrates on "expanding its territory by encircling it" (South China Morning Post, 2021, January 31). However, as China appears to be gaining leverage in the IOR, the U.S. might just have to considering playing by the same rule book, and beat China at its own game. In closing, referencing the book *Madame Secretary* by Madeline Albright: "For any administration, China is in its own category –too big to ignore, too repressive to embrace, difficult to influence, and very, very proud" (Shambaugh, 2020, p. 141).

3.3. Closing Remarks

Apart from considering the aforementioned analysis on China and India's interest in the IOR, it is also important to understand the theory of realism in international relations, which has arguably been said to be the foundation to understanding the world the way it is rather than how we wish it to be. Dunne and Schmidt (2019) explain that the "realist tradition is based on recognizing that international politics is a continuous struggle for power" (p. 132). Most realist proponents argue that the state of international politics resembles a war-like scenario, where political actors are compelled to prioritize their own security due to limited alternatives (Wivel, 2019, p. 3). As historian Friedrich Meinecke explained, the State, which is defined as a key actor in international politics, must pursue power, as it is the best way to survive in the threatening anarchic environment (Dunne & Schmidt, 2019, p. 132). Overall, the three core elements that are identified with realism are statism, survival, and self-help. Statism refers to the idea that the State represents the will of the collective people; survival refers to the condition of anarchy that exists outside the State that must be confronted by power; and self-help makes reference to the quest States go through to augment its own power (Dunne & Schmidt, 2019, p. 135).

Having understood this, it is also important to highlight that, according to realist Hans J. Morgenthau, there are three basic patterns of the struggle for power among states: “to keep the status quo, to increase power, and to demonstrate power” (Guzzini, 2018, p. 5). Considering this, Morgenthau urged foreign policy officials to maintain a general balance of power in order to avoid a catastrophic clash of interests. Certainly, throughout history, realists have consistently recognized the importance of maintaining a balance of power as crucial for safeguarding the independence of nations, and to do so, –ensure their security– states must rely on themselves (Dunne & Schmidt, 2019, p.139). When a State focuses on securing its own safety, it inadvertently contributes to the insecurity of other states, giving rise to what is commonly referred to as the “security dilemma.” According to Booth and Wheeler (2008), security dilemmas arise when a state’s actions generate an unresolvable uncertainty in another state’s perception of these preparations or actions (Dunne & Schmidt, 2019, p. 140). This uncertainty revolves around whether those preparations “have ‘defensive’ purposes only –to enhance its security in an anarchic world– or whether they are for ‘offensive’ purposes –to change the *status quo* to its advantage” (Booth & Wheeler, 2008).

Understanding these theoretical concepts makes it easier to examine the ulterior motives and actions of India and China in the Indian Ocean region. Indeed, while India and China are emerging as superpowers in the 21st century, there has been a growing antagonistic relationship between the two states. Using the terms mentioned above, if we take Morgenthau’s classification of the patterns for the struggle for power, China can arguably be classified as a state that seeks power to gain even more power and, in turn, demonstrate its capabilities and potential to the international world. Thus, China’s preparations and actions can be classified as “offensive realism” because it aims to change the status quo in the IOR to achieve its own interests. The expansion of its maritime forces in the Indian Ocean, along with the establishment of military and strategic alliances with neighboring nations including Sri Lanka and Djibouti reveal China’s “offensive” intentions with the String of Pearls strategy (Megal & Mirza, 2022, p. 22).

These actions have created a ‘security dilemma’ where India perceives the assertive Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean as a challenge to its own position/importance in the region. Once again, taking Morgenthau’s classification, India could arguably be placed in the first category: a country struggling for power in order to maintain the status quo or, in other words, to maintain India’s ‘backyard’ secure. Thus, as a result of China’s encirclement of India, it saw the need to develop the Necklace of Diamonds strategy to enhance its relations and partnerships –with littoral neighbours as well as Central Asia, the Middle East and Africa– in order to countermeasure to China’s power moves in the IOR. In other words, India has responded to the security dilemma caused by China’s policies and initiatives for mainly protective defensive purposes. This is what is referred to as “defensive realism.” Hence, India has been following China’s security and regional ambitions in order to protect its interests, maintain its influence –the *status quo*– in the region, and not get displaced (Kaplan, 2009, p. 20).

It could be argued that China is also reacting under defensive realism –and thus that India and China have similar intentions in the IOR. Brewster (2014) contends that China is acting mainly to mitigate its strategic vulnerabilities in the IOR –thus explaining the bolstering of its naval presence, securing strategically favorable port accesses, and diplomatic involvement with the Indian Ocean states (p. 136). Nevertheless, the String of Pearls strategy of encirclement of India, the military build-up in some of its ‘pearls,’ and the economic vulnerabilities that some of the ‘pearls’ are going through –debt trap diplomacy– that China is taking advantage of to push its geopolitical and geoeconomic agenda differs from Brewster’s narrative. Moreover, India, which is apprehensive of China’s intentions, has responded by taking defensive decisions: Act East Policy, the Neighbouring First Policy, and the Necklace of Diamonds (Megal & Mirza, 2022, p. 35). Importantly, these policies were not adopted by India to further increase its power, but as a response to the concerning security dilemma that had arisen due to China’s increasing presence. In sum, China’s active assertiveness towards the states of the Indian Ocean reveals its ambition to exert control and establish dominance in the region, thus projecting an “offensive show of force” on the global stage.

Indeed, both India and China have strategic motives to maintain their presence in the Indian Ocean region. Nonetheless, India has different foundational intentions than China-India is to defend itself while China is to expand itself. However, this outlook and analysis could change in the coming years as India’s Necklace of Diamonds is still a fairly recent initiative. Thus, more time has to go by, for the sake of objectivity, to fairly compare India’s strategic advancements in the IOR to China’s String of Pearls and its long-term repercussions. In closing, the final section of this paper concludes by answering the research question, the three hypotheses that were posed, and suggests possible further research needed.

Conclusion

In GO, there is an anecdote that goes the following way: There was once an amateur showing his playing tactics to a renowned player called Lin Haifeng (Lin Kaiho). At a slip of a mistake in his moves, the amateur, as an excuse, said: “Well, I only got the order of play wrong.” To this, Lin Haifeng replied: “Go is the order of play.”

Ever since Xi Jinping arrived in power in 2013, the Chinese Communist Party has arguably been focused on precisely this, “the order of play.” Deliberately with well-planned foreign policies and calculated economic strategies, China has managed to infiltrate itself in practically all aspects of society –politics, economics, culture, and education– and, like an expert wéiqí player, China has slowly but surely encircled almost every region of the world, the Indian Ocean region (IOR) being no exception to this. China has been taking into account the ‘priority plays’ of this area, meaning it has taken into account the various positions one can take to see how it can successfully reach the endgame: become a power hegemon in the IOR. Thus, it can be argued that we find ourselves in the opening (stub) of a GO game between India, China, and to a lesser extent, the U.S. In the opening game, the opponent (China) has first to claim the open corners of the board –the pearls in the string–, then it will have to approach and enclose the corners –‘The String of Pearls’–, this will lead to China having to connect the sides of the boards –diplomatic ties with littoral countries in the IOR– and finally, begin making center moves –or begin taking over the center of the Indian Ocean, in other words, ‘salami slicing’ its influence throughout the whole area.

Considering the first step –claiming the open corners of the board– China has successfully done so through tactical geopolitical and geoeconomic moves. Usually, claiming open corners is an easy way to gradually and vaguely open a game without causing too much concern from the other player –because there is no clear idea of the opponent’s strategy. However, the opponent’s initial moves are usually driven by what could be potentially ‘urgent points’ that must be controlled to avoid its encirclement. Importantly, the opening phase (*joban*) is not aimed at finding the largest territory but rather at having a good basis (influence) from which you can develop your own territory.

A real-life example is China’s claim that the Strait of Malacca poses too much of a vulnerability for its economic and commercial stability. This can be considered an ‘urgent point’ which calls for the opponent’s need to place their ‘stones’ there immediately. Go is a game also ruled by minimal play, meaning you move around the board because it is required. China framed its geopolitical and economic encirclement of the Strait of Malacca as being precisely that, a commercial issue that required a solution. So, China placed itself around the Malacca Strait in such a way that only caused international alarm when China had already built a solid String of Pearls not only around the Malacca Strait but around India as well. In other words, China had been strategically probing its order of play, which allowed an otherwise challenging *fuseki* (opening of the game) to become vague enough that no other power saw the threat or needed to oppose it.

Considering this, the first hypothesis posed –China’s claim over the ‘corners of the board,’ meaning the encirclement of the IOR is due to commercial vulnerabilities caused by the Strait of Malacca– is not entirely true. While it does hold some truth, as indeed the Malacca Dilemma was a ‘vital point’ China needed to cover, other reasons pulled the Red Dragon to encircle the IOR. For instance, some scholars have sustained that China’s encirclement strategy is limited to building ports and infrastructure to support its commercial needs. China’s reliance on port building in littoral countries in the IOR for energy imports from the Middle East and Africa aligns with its economic growth objectives. Energy security is also seen as vital for the survival of the stability of the Chinese Communist Party and a national security priority.

However, arguments against the narrative of China’s encirclement strategy suggest that concerns over commercial security in the Malacca Strait have been exaggerated. As aforementioned, the three countries surrounding the strait –Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia– are neutral and resistant to international attempts to control the straits. In fact, they have even opposed the U.S. attempt to gain some leverage in that area as this would only cause more complications between the three countries; thus, China’s worry seems exaggerated. Moreover, disagreements over the main threats to the straits and the shared concerns of terrorism and piracy prevent a single country from blocking the strait. Moreover, if a blockade were to occur, only the U.S. would be capable of taking on such a task (considering its economic and military capabilities); however, it would not focus on the Strait of Malacca but instead on the Strait of Hormuz as it is there where they hold naval superiority.

Concerns about China's extensive acquisition and operation of ports worldwide have also been raised. Some suspect these ports, located along critical trade routes, could serve as naval bases rather than purely commercial operations. China's military modernization plan and the expansion of its Navy with global reach contribute to these suspicions. In summary, it can be argued that China's increasing involvement in the IOR involves reasons that go beyond commercial vulnerabilities: such as fostering strategic political relations, countering U.S. and Indian influence in the region, and securing its position in the region by establishing naval bases at crucial maritime chokepoints. Thus, the first hypothesis is proven as false.

Once China had successfully claimed these corners, it began by enclosing them through the creation of web-like connections. China called this the String of Pearls. As analyzed through Sri Lanka's policy framing of China, to some extent, China took advantage of this 'weak group.' From the beginning of its relations, Sri Lanka could be considered, following *wéiqí* terminology, a 'weak, floating group without a base.' Meaning that after its civil war in 2009, Sri Lanka was left in a vulnerable, isolated and weak position. This was due to its political and humanitarian situation after the civil war that, due to a lack of accountability, put Sri Lanka on the sidelines by the West, including India. If this were to be visually observed in a *wéiqí* board, Sri Lanka would be a baseless group of stones in the center of the board –and China could be seen surrounding such territory, creating what is termed an 'eye,' hence 'killing' the other player's stones and effectively capturing them. Some argue that, in Sri Lanka's case, its current debt crisis was entirely caused by China's involvement in the country's economic development. However, they fail to recognize that Sri Lanka, since the closing of its civil war, was 'a weak group,' and for its survival, it called for a connection to another power to ensure its safety and stability. As India was unwilling to forge such a connection due to humanitarian reasons, China took the initiative to create such a connection, albeit a tactical one that would make a separation almost unviable for Sri Lanka.

Nonetheless, regarding the second hypothesis posed, namely that Sri Lanka's debt crisis occurred due to China's increasing involvement in the country's economic development, is not true either. As mentioned throughout the Policy Frame analysis, it is noted that while Sri Lanka's debt to China is significant, its debt crisis extends beyond its commitments to China. Various economic and political factors, including an unstable business environment, policy inconsistencies, civil war, and inadequate macroeconomic policies, have contributed to Sri Lanka's economic deterioration and mounting debt. It is acknowledged the role of China in providing funding for infrastructure projects, such as the Hambantota port, which has been criticized as contributing to the debt crisis and viewed as part of China's 'debt-trap diplomacy.' However, multiple studies have discredited the notion of the 'Chinese debt trap' as the main source of Sri Lanka's debt crisis, attributing it instead to Sri Lanka's higher percentage of borrowing from international capital markets, specifically Eurobonds. Sri Lanka's economic challenges are also exacerbated by persistent shocks –such as the 2019 Easter bombings– and poor economic management by the corrupt Rajapaksas. Thus, while China's involvement is significant, it cannot be solely blamed for Sri Lanka's debt crisis, hence, the second hypothesis is proven false.

Lastly, China's final opening tactics in the IOR involve forging its pre-established connections and extending its territory along the sides of the board. During this third step, China has encountered a response from its opponent, India. Indeed, India has pulled a *reverse tenuki* that has caught China unprepared. In other words, India has begun to create a larger circle around China by also establishing diplomatic, economic, and military relations with the surrounding countries. While it has been argued that India has now adopted the same rule book as China and is emulating it for its own strategic interests in the IOR, this is not entirely true. Considering the realist school of thought, China's assertive presence in the IOR, demonstrated through its String of Pearls strategy, reveals its ambition to change the existing *status quo* and establish dominance in the region. This offensive realism approach aims to expand China's power and showcase its capabilities on the global stage. On the other hand, India has responded to the security dilemma caused by China's actions with a defensive realism stance. India's Necklace of Diamonds strategy, aimed at safeguarding its interests and maintaining the existing order, reflects its need to counterbalance China's influence.

Thus, considering the third hypothesis posed –despite India's concerns, it has similar objectives to China in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR)– this paper concludes that it is, for the time being, not true. While China seeks to increase its power and demonstrate dominance, India focuses on self-defense and maintaining its regional position. However, it is important to note that India's initiatives, such as the Necklace of Diamonds, are relatively recent, and

their long-term repercussions are yet to be fully assessed. Nevertheless, while there are certain overlapping strategic objectives, India and China have differing foundational intentions in the IOR. Indeed, both countries aim to secure their interests and maintain a presence in the region. However, China's approach leans more towards expansion and asserting dominance, while India focuses on defense and curbing China's encirclement tactics, hence this makes the third hypothesis false.

Overall, answering the research question posed, certainly, GO is the order of play. This is seen in how Sri Lanka's position vis-à-vis China has shifted over time. In other words, it is seen by how national economic and political instability makes a country latch on to the most appealing, easy, yet paradoxically most damaging connections. Around 2009-2010, after coming out of a civil war, Sri Lanka was in a state of internal collapse. The West was not ready to help the island nation, and India was siding with them. Thus, considering China had already supported the Sri Lanka government during the civil war with military aid, when they also offered economic support after the civil war, Sri Lanka willingly accepted. This was framed as the only solution to escape their current state of affairs.

In 2015-2016, almost ten years after the civil war, Sri Lanka's economic situation did not improve as much as expected. Instead, it had become intertwined with China and its 'white elephants' of infrastructure projects. Additionally, Sri Lanka noticed how their dependence on China had inevitably made them self-isolate from the other world powers. Nonetheless, due to economic dependence and political turmoil, Sri Lanka continued to frame China as a necessary partner to escape their current situation. It was not until 2022-2023, under Ranil Wickremesinghe, that Sri Lanka began to frame China as not an unconditional partner and hence began to open up to make connections with other world powers, including its neighbour India. Unfortunately, Sri Lanka is far from fully escaping China's encirclement. Indeed, Sri Lanka still has a long way ahead of economic and political restructuring; nevertheless, the shift in policy framing regarding China marks a pivotal moment in the island-nation path toward stability and detachment from the Red Dragon. If we were to, one last time, visualize a GO board, we would be able to observe China's black stones almost surrounding a group of white stones and Sri Lanka placing one white stone right between China's pieces, hence preventing and presenting the breakage of China's attempt at full encirclement.

Overall, the role of China as a global power and creditor cannot be taken lightly. What has happened and is happening to Sri Lanka could repeat itself in other countries where China's influence has penetrated at a geopolitical and geoeconomic level. Indeed, Sri Lanka's unique circumstances provide valuable insights for ongoing debt restructuring initiatives and offer valuable lessons for other nations grappling with similar situations at the hands of an expert GO player like China. In closing, *"the GO board is a mirror of the mind of the players as the moments pass. When a master studies the record of a game, he can tell at what point greed overtook the pupil, when he became tired, when he fell into stupidity, and when the maid came by with tea"* (Sensei's Library, 2022).

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Resumen: El juego del “GO” es un juego estratégico complejo inventado hace unos 40 siglos. Su principal objetivo es rodear más territorio en el tablero que tu oponente. Se pueden encontrar referencias a este juego en textos chinos de hace 2.500 años. De hecho, dejó una huella notable en la cultura china, hasta el punto de que el juego se consideraba una de las cuatro artes esenciales de un erudito chino, junto con la música, la caligrafía y la pintura. Sin embargo, el juego GO va más allá del mundo de las artes y se expande al mundo internacional debido a su importancia geoestratégica. Esto se hace evidente al observar las similitudes en las estrategias del juego GO a las estrategias geopolíticas y geoeconómicas de China detrás de la Iniciativa de la Ruta Marítima de la Seda, que forma parte de la más amplia Iniciativa de la Franja y la Ruta (BRI, por sus siglas en inglés), cuyo objetivo es conectar a más de 100 naciones en una mega red comercial. Actualmente, la principal zona de interés para la Iniciativa de China es el Océano Índico, ya que alberga su mayor punto débil económico y geopolítico: el Estrecho de Malaca. Teniendo esto en cuenta, este documento analiza la posición actual de China en el “tablero wéiqí”, es decir, su situación geográfica, y los puntos fuertes y débiles que conlleva frente a India, su principal oponente en la región del Océano Índico. Esta comprensión es crucial para determinar el futuro plan económico y político de China a escala regional, pero también internacional.

Abstract: The game of “GO” is a complex and strategic game invented around 40 centuries ago in which its main goal is to surround more territory on the board than your opponent. References to this game can be found in Chinese texts as early as 2,500 years ago. Indeed, it left a notable footprint in Chinese culture, so much so that the game was considered one of the four essential arts of a cultured Chinese scholar, along with music, calligraphy, and painting. However, the GO game goes beyond the world of the arts and expands itself to real-world practical strategic importance. This becomes evident when observing China’s wéiqí-like strategy behind the Maritime Silk Road Initiative, which is part of China’s larger Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which aims at connecting over 100 nations into a mega-trade network. Currently, the main area of concern for China’s Initiative is the Indian Ocean, as it holds its biggest economic and geopolitical weak point, namely the Strait of Malacca. Taking this into consideration, this paper examines the current position of China on the ‘wéiqí board,’ in other words, its geographical location, and its entailing strengths and weaknesses vis-à-vis India, its primary opponent in the Indian Ocean Region. This understanding is crucial in determining China’s future economic and political game plan at a regional but also international level.

Palabras clave: Iniciativa de la Franja y la Ruta, Collar de Perlas, China, Wéiqí, Sri Lanka, India, estrategia del cercamiento, poder duro, geoestrategia, Collar de Diamantes.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative, String of Pearls, China, Wéiqí, Sri Lanka, India, encirclement, hard power, geostrategy, Necklace of Diamonds.