



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



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The Yuan Wang-5 Affair

Author

Lalit Kapur

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Cover Photograph:

The Yuan Wang-5 entering Hambantota on August 16, 2022. Source: Twitter/Daily Mirror, Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka President Ranil Wickremesinghe with India's High Commissioner Gopal Baglay, Sri Lanka Air Force Chief Air Marshal Sudarshana Pathirana, Chief of Staff of the President's Office Mr Sagala Rathnayake, Chief of Defence Staff General Shavendra Silva, as well as Commanders of the Sri Lanka Army and Navy and the Defence Secretary at the Presentation Ceremony of the Dornier aircraft in Colombo, August 15, 2022.

Source: High Commission of India, Colombo

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by
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Contents

Introduction	1
The Objectives	1
About Hambantota	2
About Yuan Wang–5	4
Sequence of Events	5
The Strategic Play	7
The Bigger Picture	8
Conclusion	10



The Yuan Wang–5 Affair

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Introduction

The visit by China's research vessel Yuan Wang–5 (YW-5) to Hambantota in Sri Lanka from August 16-22, 2022 marks a new and revealing episode in the ongoing India – China great game in the Indian Ocean, one that is destined to continue into the foreseeable future. China has prevailed, in that the visit went ahead despite concerns expressed by India and the US. However, the game has not ended, nor has it been significantly impacted. There will be future successes and failures for both sides and the one that draws the appropriate lessons and reshapes its strategy will have an obvious advantage. This brief seeks to analyse the event and identify some lessons for India going ahead.

The Objectives

Much has been written of the Xi Jinping-led and CPC-ruled China's long term strategic objective of achieving "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" by 2049 and of building a global community with a shared (China-determined) destiny for mankind. China sees itself as the Middle Kingdom, superior to all others on earth and seeks undisputed primacy in Asia. This entails the subordination of India in Asia as well as validating the superiority of its own developmental model across the world. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) "is a unilaterally conceived national initiative designed to align the economic and strategic landscape from Eurasia to East Asia, Southeast Asia to South Asia, to China's singular advantage"¹. Bringing the economic prospects of Mackinder's world island under China's hegemony necessitates control over vast Eurasian region's resources, industrial highways and silk routes. Apart from security and military aspects, this also entails the revision of international laws and norms to suit the interests and views of Beijing's authoritarian regime. The Maritime Silk Road is the Indian Ocean part of this broader strategy².

¹ Hemant Krishan Singh and Arun Sahgal, "OBOR: China's Neo-Colonial Great Game", https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/uploads_dpg/publication_file/dpg-policy-note-vol-ii-issue-5-obor-chinas-neo-colonial-great-game-1047.pdf

² See Lalit Kapur, "Geopolitics of the Belt and Road Initiative: Maritime Imperatives for India", https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/uploads_dpg/publication_file/dpg-policy-note-vol-ii-issue-7-geopolitics-of-the-belt-and-road-initiative-maritime-imperatives-for-india-1053.pdf



India is cognisant of the need to counter China's challenge. This is evident from its principled objections to the BRI, its 'neighbourhood first' outlook and 'SAGAR' strategy, standing up to China's attempts to change the status quo along the LAC, membership of the Quad, engagement with Exercise Malabar and a series of military exercises with partner nations and the growing thrust for Aatmanirbhar Bharat. India seeks its own place in the emerging world order, based on the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity, equitable relations among nations, and compliance with the international rules-based order.

With this as the backdrop, we can proceed to examine the various elements of the ongoing debate over the YW-5.

About Hambantota

One of the numerous Indian Ocean ports financed by China under its BRI, Hambantota lies astride the SLOCs connecting both the Persian Gulf and the Suez Canal/Red Sea trade routes to the Malacca Strait, Southeast Asia and the Western Pacific. This corridor has often been described as the 21st century's industrial highway³. The port opened for business in November 2010 and is today the country's second largest after Colombo. Moreover, Colombo's ability to expand is limited due to urban constraints. Hambantota, on the other hand, has a surfeit of empty land available for further expansion and development.

When Sri Lanka set out to develop Hambantota Port, it's then President Mahinda Rajapaksa first approached India⁴. There were, however, concerns regarding the port's financial viability⁵. Sri Lanka thereafter tried to obtain financing from traditional sources in the West, including the World Bank, but failed as none could be convinced of the port's commercial prospects. So Mahinda Rajapaksa turned to China, which invested over \$ 1.06 billion in the project in two stages, but at commercial rates of interest. Developmental plans encompassed 10 berths with a quay length of 3,487 m specialised to handle containers, bulk cargo, general cargo, RO-RO cargo and liquid bulk, with a

³ Professor Tomohiko Taniguchi, Special Adviser to the Cabinet of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, <https://www.sundayguardianlive.com/news/without-india-modi-quad-not-fly-former-abe-adviser>

⁴ Sri Lanka to offer India port development to balance out China, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/sri-lanka-to-offer-india-port-development-to-balance-out-china/articleshow/58253212.cms>

⁵ India was not interested in building ports or highways in Sri Lanka, says former President Mahinda Rajapaksa, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/karnataka/india-was-not-interested-in-building-ports-or-highways-in-sri-lanka-says-former-president-mahinda-rajapaksa/article22883348.ece>

channel depth of 17m, sufficient for ships displacing over 100,000 tons. The stated intent of the project was to develop a regional maritime hub with its hinterland covering South Asia and East Africa. However, Sri Lanka's inability to repay the commercial loan resulted in then Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe visiting China in 2017 and negotiating a new concession agreement, under which China Merchant Port Holdings bought an 85% stake in the newly created Hambantota International Ports Group for \$ 1.2 billion, with exclusive rights to develop and operate the port and a 15,000 acre Special Economic Zone for 99 years⁶.

Whether China's investment in Hambantota was for economic or strategic purposes remains a matter of opinion. On the one hand is the perception that the economic rationale for Hambantota is weak⁷ and Sri Lanka has been a victim of debt-trap diplomacy⁸. On the other are reports that Hambantota has already begun turning a profit (China Merchants Port Holdings reportedly declared a dividend of Rs 1.05 billion, or about \$ 2.92 million to Sri Lanka in 2021)⁹, and that while the port's growth was adversely impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, the potential remains immense¹⁰. The potential will only grow as rail connectivity to the port comes on line in 2023. This success will strengthen China's position in Sri Lanka¹¹.

Irrespective of the economic aspects, the agreement inevitably raised security concerns in India. These do not relate to the YW-5 vessel snooping on India's installations or keeping tabs on them, as has been speculated about in the media¹². Shore based installations including at Kalpakkam, Kudankulam,

⁶Potential Discloseable Transaction Concession Agreement in Relation to Hambantota Port, Sri Lanka, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210304112527/https://www1.hkexnews.hk/listedco/listconews/sehk/2017/0725/ltn20170725444.pdf>

⁷Jonathan Hillman, "Game of Loans: How China Bought Hambantota", https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/180717_Hillman_GameofLoans.pdf

⁸How China Got Sri Lanka to Cough Up a Port, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/25/world/asia/china-sri-lanka-port.html>

⁹China-owned ports report Rs 1b dividend to Sri Lanka Ports Authority, <https://www.hellenicshippingnews.com/china-owned-ports-report-rs-1b-dividend-to-sri-lanka-ports-authority/>

¹⁰Chris Devonshire-Ellis, "The Real (Not Secret) History of Hambantota", [https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2021/09/06/the-real-not-secret-history-of-hambantota/#:~:text=1.05%20billion%20\(US%245.24%20million,Offloaded%20vehicles%20at%20Hambantota%20Port.](https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2021/09/06/the-real-not-secret-history-of-hambantota/#:~:text=1.05%20billion%20(US%245.24%20million,Offloaded%20vehicles%20at%20Hambantota%20Port.)

¹¹Saikiran Kannan, "Exclusive: Revival of Hambantota port in Sri Lanka may strengthen China's position in Indian Ocean", <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/revival-hambantota-port-sri-lanka-strengthen-china-position-indian-ocean-1781171-2021-03-19>

¹²See for example Chinese 'spy ship' Yuan Wang 5 docks in Sri Lanka despite Indian concern, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-62558767> and Why docking of Chinese spy vessel



Sriharikota and APJ Abdul Kalam Island lie well outside the vessel's radar and radio horizon and cannot be monitored effectively except from their close proximity. What can be monitored are the side lobes of radio uplink or downlink signals from shore stations to satellites and vice versa, as well as telemetry signals between test ranges and missiles. This, however, can as well be done from the high seas and has no bearing on Hambantota.

Concerns arise from an extension of China's civil-military fusion strategy, raising suspicions that the port is part of China's 'String of Pearls' and will eventually be used for military purposes. India's then Defence Minister hinted at this concern in 2018, when she said "Whether China will confine itself to only port activities in Hambantota port is a question and I don't want to say anything further"¹³. Sri Lanka has always reassured India that military use of the port will not be permitted. India's Ministry of External Affairs has consistently expressed confidence in the strength and enduring nature of deep-rooted and multi-dimensional ties with Sri Lanka^{14,15}. The reality is that Hambantota has not so far been used by China to resupply military vessels.

About Yuan Wang–5

Built by China's Jiangnan Shipyard and delivered in September 2007, YW-5 is a third generation ship of the Yuan Wang series (the name means 'long view') designed as mobile satellite tracking, telemetry and control stations capable of being deployed anywhere on the high seas. Operated by the PLA's Strategic Support Force, it displaces about 25,000 tons, has a length of over 222 metres, a beam of over 25 metres, and can accommodate 400 people. The ship is driven by diesel engines and can generate sufficient electricity to light up a small town of over 300,000 inhabitants. These figures indicate YW-5 can sustain herself independently in any particular area for months; it only needs the occasional supply of fresh provisions and, more rarely, fuel.

Yuan Wang 5 at Sri Lanka port is dangerous for India,
<https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/why-docking-of-chinese-spy-vessel-yuan-wang-5-at-sri-lanka-port-is-dangerous-for-india-1988738-2022-08-16>

¹³ Nirmala ware of China's Sri Lanka plans, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/nirmala-wary-of-chinas-sri-lanka-plans/article22614668.ece>

¹⁴ Transcript of Weekly Media Briefing by Spokesperson (December 14, 2017)
<https://mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/29178/transcript+of+weekly+media+briefing+by+official+spokesperson+december+14+2017>

¹⁵ Rajya Sabha Unstarred Question No. 651, answered February 08, 2018,
<https://mea.gov.in/rajya-sabha.htm?dtl/29453/question+no651+leasing+right+of+hambantota+port+in+sri+lanka>



The Yuan Wang-5 entering Hambantota on August 16, 2022.

Source: Twitter/Daily Mirror, Sri Lanka

Equipment fit on board includes C and S band monopulse tracking radars, cinetheodolite ranging and tracking systems, velocimetry systems, onboard computers to track and control spacecraft, inertial, satellite and stellar navigation and positioning systems, as well as HF, VHF, UHF and SATCOM communications via secure telephone, radio, fax and data link¹⁶. YW-5 is also equipped with meteorological instruments and can download weather satellite images. Its cyber and EW capabilities remain unknown. The missions for which it can be tasked include monitoring and tracking space vehicles such as rockets, spacecraft, launch vehicles, satellites and aircraft over water, and communication with mission centres in real time. Although details about its equipment fit are hard to come by, it could also be a platform for anti-satellite (ASAT) operations. Ships of the class are operated by the PLA Strategic Support Force to track satellite and ICBM launches¹⁷. The YW-5 is not, however, an oceanographic research vessel.

Sequence of Events

The timeline of recent events in Sri Lanka enables visualisation of the larger picture. Sri Lanka's economic crisis and its looming debt trap had long been

¹⁶ Andrew Erickson and Amy Chang, "China's Navigation in Space", http://www.andrewerickson.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/Erickson-Publication_Erickson-Chang_Yuanwang-Space-Tracking-Fleet_Proceedings_201204.pdf

¹⁷ US department of Defense Annual Report to Congress, Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2021, P 84, <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Nov/03/2002885874/-1/-1/0/2021-CMPR-FINAL.PDF>

evident¹⁸, but came to a political head in April 2022. By May, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa had resigned and the country was placed under curfew¹⁹. On June 22, the new Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe acknowledged that the Sri Lankan economy had collapsed²⁰. That political instability would be a fact of life in the country was evident to all international observers.



Sri Lanka President Ranil Wickremesinghe with India's High Commissioner Gopal Baglay, Sri Lankan Air Force Chief Air Marshal Sudarshana Pathirana, Chief of Staff of the President's Office Mr Sagala Rathnayake, Chief of Defence Staff General Shavendra Silva, as well as Commanders of the Sri Lanka Army and Navy and the Defence Secretary at the Presentation Ceremony of the Dornier aircraft in Colombo, August 15, 2022.

Source: High Commission of India, Colombo

This instability provided the opportunity for China to make its strategic play. Six days after the Prime Minister acknowledged economic collapse, China's Embassy in Sri Lanka "informed" the Sri Lankan Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) that the Scientific Research Vessel YW-5 would make a port call at

¹⁸ Sri Lanka's deep economic crisis: Wasted four years and a wasting election year, <https://www.ft.lk/columns/Sri-Lanka-s-deep-economic-crisis-Wasted-four-years-and-a-wasting-election-year/4-670265>

¹⁹ Mahinda Rajapaksa: Sri Lankan PM resigns amid economic crisis, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-61381536>

²⁰ Sri Lankan economy has 'completely collapsed', leader says, <https://news.sky.com/story/sri-lankas-pm-says-its-debt-laden-economy-has-collapsed-12638329>

Hambantota from August 11-17 for replenishment purposes²¹. That China thought it necessary to seek diplomatic clearance for the visit in the first place acknowledges the military background of the vessel – no such diplomatic clearance is required for routine civilian traffic. On receipt of security clearance from the Sri Lankan Navy and Ministry of Defence as well as from the Telecommunications Regulatory Commission of Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka's MFA conveyed diplomatic clearance to China's Embassy on July 12, requiring only that the ship's Automatic Identification System (AIS) be kept switched on within the Sri Lankan EEZ and no scientific research be conducted in Sri Lankan waters²². A day later, on July 13, YW-5 sailed from Jiangyin, near Shanghai²³.

The period between June 28, when clearance was sought and July 12, when it was first granted, would have been the right time to prevent the visit. Probably due to the absence of adequate intelligence, however, this was not attempted. India was forced to undertake a rearguard action without compromising Sri Lanka's sovereignty after the ship had sailed. Subsequently, "in light of certain concerns raised with the Ministry" Sri Lanka requested China on August 05 to defer the visit until further consultations were conducted²⁴. Sri Lanka's MFA is reticent about the source of these concerns, but the media has unequivocally identified India and the US as being responsible. China delayed the vessel's visit to Hambantota by five days, which was rescheduled from August 16 – 22. Sri Lanka re-accorded diplomatic clearance for the visit on August 13²⁵.

The Strategic Play

When asked about the impending visit, India's spokesperson said on July 28, "We are aware of reports of a proposed visit by this vessel at Hambantota port, in August. Let me just say that government carefully monitors any development having a bearing on India's security and economic interests and takes all necessary measures to safeguard them"²⁶. When Sri Lanka asked China to defer the visit, China's spokesperson stressed that scientific support vessels

²¹ Sri Lanka MFA Note "Chinese Vessel Yuan Wang 5", <https://mfa.gov.lk/chinese-vessel-yuan-wang-5/>

²² Ibid.

²³ Yuan Wang 5, <https://www.vesselfinder.com/vessels/YUAN-WANG-5-IMO-9413054-MMSI-413289000>

²⁴ Sri Lanka MFA Note, Op Cit

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Transcript of Weekly Media Briefing by the Official Spokesperson (July 28, 2022), https://mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/35563/Transcript_of_Weekly_Media_Briefing_by_the_Official_Spokespers_on_July_28_2022



from various countries including China had made port calls in Sri Lanka time and again. As a sovereign country, Sri Lanka had the right to develop relations with other countries based on its development interests. Interference by other countries on the grounds of so-called security concerns was morally irresponsible and against the basic norms governing international relations²⁷. He went on to urge relevant parties to see China's marine scientific research activities in a rational light and stop disrupting normal exchange and cooperation between China and Sri Lanka.

A day before Sri Lanka re-accorded diplomatic clearance for the visit, India's spokesman said on August 12, "Let me categorically state, we reject the insinuations in such statements about India. Sri Lanka is a sovereign country and makes its own independent decisions"²⁸. Four days later, China's spokesperson proclaimed, "At the noon of August 16 Beijing time, with active cooperation from the Sri Lankan side, the Chinese research vessel Yuanwang-5 successfully berthed at Sri Lanka's Hambantota port. The on-site welcoming ceremony was attended by Member of Parliament Mahinda Wiresekera as representative of the Sri Lankan President and more than ten heads of parties and heads of friendly communities"²⁹.

The dual status of YW-5 has enabled China to exploit a grey zone. Although operated by the PLA Strategic Support Force and used for military purposes, it is registered as a marine scientific research vessel. Better anticipation may have enabled closing of this loophole in discussion on India's security concerns between the Indian and Sri Lankan authorities.

The Bigger Picture

Successful conclusion of the visit has enabled China to demonstrate to the domestic and international audience the strength of its continued influence in Sri Lanka even after the fall of the Rajapaksa regime. It has also demonstrated that the over \$ 3.8 billion of assistance that India has provided is not sufficient to undermine China's hold – the amount is in any case far lower than the

²⁷ Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin's Regular Press Conference on August 8, 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202208/t20220808_10737507.html

²⁸ Transcript of Weekly Media Briefing by the Official Spokesperson (August 12, 2022), https://mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/35635/Transcript_of_Weekly_Media_Briefing_by_the_Official_Spokespers_on_August_12_2022

²⁹ Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin's Regular Press Conference on August 16, 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202208/t20220816_10744243.html

amount China has lent, and there are reports of current President Wickremesinghe planning another visit to China³⁰, hat in hand, soon. It has stretched the security envelope, establishing a new norm that support vessels, even if owned by the PLA, will not be classified as military and will have access to Hambantota. China will, at a suitable time, seek to expand this norm further, culminating in full access of its military vessels to Hambantota. It has not, however, been instrumental in enabling China to monitor sensitive Indian facilities, which can be done better from the high seas in the Bay of Bengal.



China's Space-tracking Ship Yuanwang-3 tracking orbital characteristics of Remote Sensing Satellite Yaogan-35 02, June 23, 2022.

Source: China Military Online

These, however, are tactical gains, of limited consequence in the long game ahead. The key question that remains unasked is the intended mission of YW-5 in the Indian Ocean. Ships of this type are few (China has only three operational ones) and are deployed for specific tasks. Nations with space or ballistic missile launch capability in the region include the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Iran in the Gulf Region, and India in South Asia. From India's perspective, the concern would be about YW-5's use to monitor missile tests, including of the K-5 SLBM which one report indicated could happen in 2022³¹, or of some

³⁰ Sri Lanka asks China for help with investment, trade and tourism, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/sri-lanka-asks-china-help-with-trade-investment-tourism-2022-07-25/>

³¹ K5SLBM: the ghost missile to be tested soon, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mIo4ot27LI8>



other missile from the APJ Abdul Kalam Island. This concern, however, cannot be addressed by attempting to deny YW-5 or similar ships access to regional ports, since the monitoring can and will happen from the free high seas. The only solution is to strengthen communications security. Meanwhile, wider security concerns about China's military presence in the Indian Ocean cannot be addressed by merely denying port facilities in India's vicinity. Sri Lanka is only one among the Indian Ocean countries in which China has established strategic stakes that could be converted to dual use facilities. Others include Pakistan, Iran, the UAE, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Djibouti, Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, South Africa, Madagascar, the Seychelles, Myanmar, Indonesia and Malaysia. India must focus on strengthening its own influence in these nations, including in the economic and military dimensions. This may not be possible in isolation, given China's asymmetric economic and military power. It can, however, be done in conjunction with other like-minded nations, including the US, Japan, Australia, France, the UK and the EU, necessitating intensification of India's engagement with these countries.

Conclusion

Segments of India's media have been unduly harsh, with one accusing the MEA of complacency³², another questioning the rationale for India's (unofficial) objections from the legal, military and diplomatic perspectives³³, and a third rhetorically asking whether a revisionist power should be allowed to free-ride unchecked on a body of international rules that privileges user-state rights over the security concerns of littoral nations³⁴. But while the media can afford to indulge in short-term sensationalism, India's foreign and security policies must be guided by long-term considerations. Any rational analysis will find it difficult to fault India's actions, including in making unofficial protests (if only to lay the ground for subsequent action), but then accepting a fait accompli and signalling to Sri Lanka, through the gift of a Dornier aircraft, that India would continue to pursue its neighbourhood first policy³⁵. The presence of the Sri Lankan President, Chief of Defence Staff and the entire Sri Lankan armed forces

³² Complacent MEA, <https://www.dailypioneer.com/2022/columnists/complacent-mea.html>

³³ "Step Back From the Water's Edge," <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/step-back-from-waters-edge-sri-lanka-china-india-8081108/>

³⁴ "Chinese ship at Hambantota calls for New Delhi to look closely at its maritime strategy," <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/chinese-ship-at-hambantota-calls-for-new-delhi-to-look-closely-at-maritime-strategy-8098230/>

³⁵ India gifts Dornier aircraft to strengthen maritime security of Sri Lanka, https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/35636/India_gifts_Dornier_aircraft_to_strengthen_maritime_security_of_Sri_Lanka



hierarchy on the occasion speaks far louder than the presence of a few MPs and a former minister at the function to welcome YW-5.

Going ahead, the YW5 affair marks just one episode in a long game that has neither been won or lost but still remains in play and will do so for times to come. Intensification of China's activity in the Indian Ocean is only to be expected. India must explore all avenues to strengthen its hand, including coordination of responses with other international partners. This will, however, necessitate better intelligence and strategic anticipation, not a strong point given India's long history of strategic intelligence failures³⁶.

³⁶ For more on this subject, see Lalit Kapur, "Taming the Revanchist Dragon", https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/uploads_dpg/publication_file/taming-the-revanchist-dragon-2057.pdf



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