

China's Engagement with Maritime Nations: A Case Study¹

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Abstract

In the recorded history of Sri Lanka and Malaysia, trade with Chinese merchants, transshipment of Chinese goods, embarking of Chinese ships and people were an ordinary occurrence. Malaysia and Sri Lanka were initial subscribers of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), when China launched BRI in 2013. Hence, the problem identified for this research is: why are China's relations with Sri Lanka and Malaysia through the 21st century Maritime Silk Road being scrutinised by Western powers? Towards this end, objectives of this research are two-fold, i.e. to examine Ancient China's engagement with maritime nations in the Indian Ocean; and secondly, to compare the ancient relations with that of the relations it maintains with these two states in the 21st Century. As a descriptive study, it utilises the case study methodology, with Malaysia and Sri Lanka selected as the cases. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data. Trade and commercial ties remain the backbone of the interactions between China and the two maritime states. In conclusion, it can be ascertained that China's modern interactions with maritime nations continue to be underpinned by economic interactions, and secondly, that China's contemporary interactions with Malaysia and Sri Lanka are underscored by geopolitical considerations.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative, Maritime Silk Road, China, Malaysia, Sri Lanka

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Introduction

The People's Republic of China (PRC herein referred to as China) is partial to its ancient civilisation; a history, it takes pride in, and often demonstrates in contemporary international relations. Due to this, to date, China maintains robust relations with some of the countries it maintained relations with, during its imperial era. Historical insight indicates that China engaged with many maritime nations through the Ancient Maritime Silk Road (Abeywardhana, 1994, p. 2; Cole, 2013). Many of these maritime engagements occurred during the voyages of Admiral Zheng He, which were patronised by the empire. Accordingly, Edward Dreyer notes:

Zheng He's first six voyages took place because Emperor Yongle wanted to force the countries of the Western Ocean into tributary relations with China. Zheng He's seventh voyage took place because Emperor Xuande was concerned that tribute missions from these countries had ceased to arrive. (Dreyer, 1974, p. 186 as cited in Cole, 2013, p. 2)

Even though the Ming emperors showed a keen interest towards the Indian Ocean and its countries, emperors after Xuande did not pay attention to the affairs of the region. Therefore, this research examines the relations Ancient China maintained with two countries, namely Sri Lanka and Malaysia.

The recognition given to Sri Lanka stems from the geographical position of being an island-state, equidistance in the East-West maritime trade posts in the Indian Ocean, astride the famed sea lines of communication (SLOCs). In the recorded history of Sri Lanka, trade with Chinese merchants, transshipment of Chinese goods and embarking of Chinese ships and people was an ordinary occurrence. According to Jayasingha and Wang (2005, para. 3; see also Gunasingha, 1961, p. 183; Nicholas, 1959, pp. 17-18), there is documented evidence to indicate Sino-Lanka relations existed from the first century C.E. Accordingly, Sri Lanka was known by the Chinese as 'Sinhalam', 'Ssu-Cheng-pu', 'Se cheng buguo' or 'Shi zi guo' meaning Sinhadipa or Lion Country (*China Daily*, 2005a; para. 1; Siriweera as cited in Jayasingha and Wang, 2005, para. 3; Pieris, 2016, para. 4).

This is indicative of the ties between the two countries and how the Chinese were documenting relations with the Indian Ocean island-state commencing from many centuries previously.

Relations with Malaysia stem from its location in Southeast Asia, between the Pacific and Indian Oceans, and in being a seafaring nation. China's relations with the Malay peninsula span over 2,000 years. According to *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia* (Tarling, 1999, p. 186), "Malay (*Kunlun*) sailors were known in China by the third century BC". Moreover, the Tanah Merah Kingdom and the Kedah Kingdom are known to have maintained contacts with China (Nagara, 2018, para. 4). Malaya flourished under Imperial China's tributary system by seeking protection from it. Don J. Wyatt (2012, pp. 32-33) notes that there were interactions between the *Kunlun* even during the Tang (937-976) and Song (960-1279) dynasties. However, ancient bilateral relations prospered the most when the Malacca Sultanate was established in 1400, as they maintained close relations with the Ming Dynasty (Nagara, 2018, para. 7). This illustrates the relations between the Malay Peninsula and China, maintaining a reciprocal relationship. These relations with Sri Lanka and Malaysia showcases the nature of the relations China maintained with maritime nations through the Ancient Silk Route.

In 2013, the PRC launched the 'One Belt One Road' initiative, the precursor to the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI), to which, Malaysia and Sri Lanka were initial subscribers. However, since their subscription, and increased engagement in developing infrastructure, both these two maritime states of the Indian Ocean have received criticism. Hence, the problem identified for this research is: *why are China's relations with Sri Lanka and Malaysia through the 21st century Maritime Silk Road being scrutinised by Western powers?* Towards this end, objectives of this research are two-fold, i.e. to examine Ancient China's engagement with maritime nations in the Indian Ocean; and secondly, to compare the ancient relations with that of the relations it maintains with Sri Lanka and Malaysia in the 21st Century.

This research is relevant in the contemporary international politics, as China's development initiatives are causing concern among countries in the region and the world at large. Therefore, this research investigates with the aim of providing

new interpretations to China's engagement with Sri Lanka and Malaysia. Secondly, the research is relevant from a policy perspective, as China's engagement with maritime nations such as Sri Lanka and Malaysia have a recorded history, spanning centuries. Hence, the research juxtaposes the ancient relationship with that of the current and provides insight into the relationship Malaysia and Sri Lanka can design as maritime nations in the Indo-Pacific region. Therefore, the insights obtained through the empirical findings from this research are paramount for policymakers from Sri Lanka and China, to strengthen and implement their foreign policy with China in the future.

In achieving the aforementioned objectives, this paper is further divided into four sections. The first section describes the methodology employed in this paper, which, as a qualitative study, is explanatory in nature. Ancient China's engagement with maritime nations in the Indian Ocean is the second section of this paper. This section deliberates on the relations China had with Sri Lanka and Malaysia in the past, and the nature of those relations. The penultimate section is a comparison of the Ancient Silk Route and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. The final section provides the empirical findings and the conclusion.

Research Methodology

Qualitative in nature, the research followed the case study research design to conduct the research. The case study design as per Alexander George and Andrew Bennet (2005, p. 18) is a "well-defined aspect of a historical happening that the investigator selects for analysis". According to Schramm (1971 as cited in Yin, 2003, p. 12), a case study can be defined as something "that... tries to illuminate a *decision* or a set of decisions: why they were taken, how they were implemented, and with what result". Case studies can be broadly categorised as single-case study, multiple or comparative case study analysis. Therefore, this research follows George and Bennet's (2005, p. 18; see also Yin, 2003) definition of a case study method: "to include both within-case analysis of single cases and comparisons of a small number of cases", as the literature indicates that this is the most convincing method to follow when conducting case study-related qualitative research. It, therefore, utilised the case study methodology, with

Malaysia and Sri Lanka as the two primary cases. Applying the within-case analysis and comparative case study method enabled this research to better assess the research problem and achieve the research objectives.

The cases of Sri Lanka and Malaysia were selected due to their suitability in achieving the research objectives, as both these countries had engaged with imperial China and had a long history of interaction. The second reason to select these cases were because Sri Lanka and Malaysia are closely interlinked with the BRI and have several projects each commissioned via the BRI in their respective countries. The third reason to select these two case studies over others in the Indian Ocean region was because the relations both these countries maintained with China improved and strengthened over the successive governments. The attention given to the relations Sri Lanka and Malaysia maintained with China in the literature and media was the fourth reason to select these two particular case studies. Lastly, the two cases were selected as they both have a sizeable Chinese population (or Chinese descendants) in their countries, with 25 percent of the Malaysian population consisting of a Chinese minority.

Hence, Sri Lanka was selected as it is a central node in the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) initiative in the South Asian region, drawing further attention towards it as a country centrally located in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Furthermore, Malaysia represents the Southeast Asian region which “is one of the most critical areas making up the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road” (Liu and Lim, 2018, p.2). Malaysia is also located adjacent to the Strait of Malacca, an area that has caused apprehensions in Beijing vis-à-vis the safety of its energy shipments as well as the South China Sea, certain areas of which, China is in dispute with Malaysia. The research utilised both primary and secondary data. Secondary data was obtained to trace the historical developments between China and the two cases, as well as to determine the contemporary debates on China's relations with Sri Lanka and Malaysia. Primary data by way of government statistics, policy documents, historical records, statements and speeches were also utilised for this research. These were important to triangulate the data derived from secondary sources and to improve the validity and the reliability of the information.

Triangulation of data is one of the methods Norman Denzin identified in 1978 to “improve the analysis and interpretation of findings from various types of studies” (UNAIDS, 2010, p. 13). Norman K. Denzin defines triangulation as “the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon” (1978, p. 291 as cited in Jick, 1979, p. 602). Therefore, Denzin indicates obtaining information from multiple sources improves the accuracy, the validity and the reliability of the material researched. Uwe Flick (2004, p. 178) interprets this as “the observation of the research issue from (at least) two different points.” Taking this into consideration, the research triangulated the data obtained for the research via multiple sources.

As an explanatory research, it utilised the thematic analysis technique to analyse the data gathered from both the abovementioned cases. As the researchers did not opt for pre-figured themes, they permitted for the themes to emerge from the data gathered. Thus, several emergent themes were identified through the research. Detailed descriptions of case studies were required to illustrate the causality of the cases under consideration. These descriptions enabled the researchers to build an argument for the research problem, i.e.: why are China’s relations with Sri Lanka and Malaysia through the 21st century Maritime Silk Road being scrutinised by Western powers?

Ancient China’s relations with Maritime Nations in the Indian Ocean

This section is divided into two sub-sections, to trace the relations China maintained with Sri Lanka and Malaysia. The sub-sections provide detailed descriptions of the cases and draws on the recurring themes from this period for the subsequent analysis.

Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka’s central and strategic geographic location in the Indian Ocean Region, equidistance from the East and West has been the topic of immense conversation and debate since ancient times to post-independence and even in contemporary discussions, thereby projecting Sri Lanka as a maritime nation. Furthermore, the country’s location has afforded access to seafarers from everywhere due to its

close-proximity to the sea lines of communication (SLOCs). This proximity is applicable both then and now.

In addition to the geographical location, Sri Lanka is also blessed with natural harbours such as Trincomalee and Galle. The Trincomalee harbour is the fifth largest natural harbour in the world spanning over 2,000 hectares, where aircraft carriers could be easily brought in because of the “natural depth of 25-metres and does not have to be dredged” (Colombage as cited in Balachandran, 2018, para. 7).

Historical records indicate that trade was the most influential component between the two countries in the ancient days similar to the contemporary relations (see Deawraja, 2006). Paranavitana (1960) Bastiampillai (1990) and Abeywardhana (1994) indicate that the initiation of Sri Lanka-China relations could be traced to China's enthusiasm to extend its trade relations, resulting in the Ancient Silk Route. Jayarathna further points to details from ancient inscriptions which discuss “...trade patterns and exchanges taking place especially at Chinese posts when vessels from ‘Sihaladeepa’ called on” (2015, p. 118). Abeywardhana (1994, p. 3; see also Bastiampillai, 1990, p. 2) draws attention to how ancient Sri Lanka was an entrepot for goods coming in from India, Persia, the Far East and the West. These indicate the “significance of the island nation in maritime affairs of yesteryear” (Jayarathna, 2015, p. 118), as well as the fact that there were robust maritime links between Sri Lanka and China. Additionally, Navaratne (1976, p. 2) indicates that Sri Lanka was the port at which China interacted with merchant ships from the West.

P.A.T. Gunasingha (1961, p. 179) indicates that Sri Lanka conducted relations with China from the first century C.E. According to historical records (Abeywardhana, 1994, p. 2; Nicholas, 1959, pp. 18-19; Gunasingha, 1961, p. 179), Sri Lanka held a key position in the Chinese trade route, similarly to that afforded to the Arab merchants. Accordingly, Sri Lankan delegations were frequently dispatched to the Chinese courts in first century and later on in the fifth and sixth centuries (Gunasingha, 1961, pp. 183-184). Ancient chronicles indicate that since the eighth century there were many ships, varying in their sizes, arriving at ports around Sri Lanka, and how Sri Lankan emissaries too

were posted to numerous Courts around the world, amongst them, the Courts of China (see Jayarathna 2015; Navaratne, 1976, pp. 2-3). According to Siriweera and Werake (as cited in Godahewa, 2012) “13 missions had been sent to China by the Kings of Anuradhapura between 131 AD and 989 AD.” Furthermore, “in 428 AD King Mahanama is recorded as having sent a model of the Sacred Tooth Relic Shrine to the Chinese Emperor” (Godahewa, 2012). These illustrate both the political and trade ties between the two countries.

Trade between Chinese merchants, transshipment of Chinese goods and embarking of Chinese ships and people was an ordinary occurrence. Trade between Sri Lanka and China were robust that towns like Beruwala from the West coast of Sri Lanka “was also known to the 15th century Chinese traveller Ma Huan as ‘Pich-lo-li’ as it appeared on the Mao Kun map, a set of navigation charts from the Ming dynasty (1368-1644)” (UNESCO, n.d.; see also Dewaraja, 1960). Gunasingha (1961, p. 183) further notes that despite there being robust trade relations between China and Sri Lanka, there appeared to be a reluctance in reporting on the same in comparison to the attention given to cultural connections. He indicates that “this may have happened as reporters considered reporting on trade relations were of lesser importance” (Gunasingha, 1961, p. 183). Gunasingha further notes that Sri Lanka’s relations with China continued strongly and the last recorded visit from this time-period was in 762 C.E., as there was an influx of Arab traders.

Dewaraja (2006, p. 62) indicates that “a variety of products from China including gold and silver, candlesticks, lacquer ware, silk embroideries, blue and white porcelain, textiles and Buddhist sutras and incense burners” were traded at the Galle harbor during Zheng He’s second visit to Sri Lanka in 1409. Dewaraja considers this to be the most important of Zheng’s visits to Sri Lanka. Wimalasena (2015, p. 816) draws attention to imported textiles to Sri Lanka, especially the silks, which were in “great demand”. Bastiampillai (1990, p. 6) notes that “Silks, aloes, clove wood and sandalwood” etc. from China were traded in Sri Lanka, and the Chinese imported goods such as “pearls, precious stones, filigreed gold and valances” from Sri Lanka. Besides transporting their own goods, the Chinese were known to trade produce such as wines they

purchased from the Middle East (Bastiampillai, 1990, pp. 7-8).

Subsequent to dominance of the seas by the Arab merchants, Chinese seafarers were once again visible in the Indian Ocean. Among the ancient relations, the numerous stops Admiral Zheng He made during his voyages “between 1405 and 1433, reaching as far as Mombasa, Mogadishu, and Mecca” are noteworthy (Cole, 2013, p. 1). The island has likewise been a favourite stop-over during voyages of Chinese naval fleets, such as Zheng He's. According to Lorna Dewaraja, during the Ming Dynasty, Admiral Zheng travelled to over 30 countries in Asia and Africa between the years 1405 and 1433 (China Daily, 2005b, 2005). Lorna Dewaraja (2006, p. 61) notes “On 6 of these voyages he [Admiral Zheng] showed special interest in establishing commercial contacts with Sri Lanka and organized stopovers in Sri Lanka in at least six of his voyages.” It was during his second voyage between 1409 and 1411 that Zheng He erected an inscription in three languages; Chinese, Tamil and Persian in Sri Lanka's Galle city (Dewaraja, 2006, pp. 62-63; Navaratne, 1976, p. 6; China Daily, 2005b). In addition to the relations maintained with Admiral He, Sri Lanka had connections with China due to the connections Sri Lankan kings maintained, such as the trade relations King Parakramabahu upheld with Mainland China (Alahakoon, 2015, p. 97; Navaratne, 1976, p. 6). Historical relations such as these tracing back many centuries illustrate the diversity of fields via which Sri Lanka maintained relations with China. According to the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Sri Lanka, the two countries in discussion in this research “...are close neighbours and partners enjoying centuries of friendship” (Mohan, 2017, para. 9).

It was not only via the maritime sphere that these two countries shared common historical ties. Abeywardhana (1994, p. 7) highlights that due to the trading relationship between Sri Lanka and China, the Chinese showed a keen interest in the political affairs of Sri Lanka. Dewaraja (2006, pp. 66-67), Paranavithana (1960, pp. 663-664) and Bastiampillai 1990, p. 11), note a battle between Zheng and Alakesvara¹ during the former's third visit to the island and to Alakesvara being taken prisoner to the Imperial Court in Beijing. In addition to Admiral Zheng's visits from mainland China, the call of a Sri Lankan King from the Kingdom of Kotte to China, illustrates the distinct bond between the two Asian

countries. Paranavithana (1960, pp. 665-670) indicates that king would be Parakramabahu VI and notes that he had “personally visited the Chinese Court, bearing tribute, in 1416 as well as in 1421.” Dewaraja (1960, p. 70), however, records more than these two visits by King Parakramabahu VI.ⁱⁱ There is further reference to a Chinese national being a descendant of King Parakramabahu VI, who ruled the Kingdom of Kotte in 1459 when the prince is said to have sailed to China (Ayub, 2016, para. 3; Wettimuny, 2016, para. 7; Navaratne, 1976, p. 4). Even though no further mission to the Chinese Court took place after 1459, trade relations continued (Dewaraja, 1960, p. 70; Paranavitharana (1960, pp. 665-666).

Moreover, Sri Lanka was a hub for Buddhist studies in the region, attracting eminent scholars such as “...Chinese Monk Faxian in the early fourth centuryⁱⁱⁱ” (Alahakoon, 2015, p. 106). This indicates that religious ties between the two states appear to have been the main linkage in the ancient times, with the visit of the Chinese Monk Faxian to Sri Lanka in the 400s during the Jin Dynasty. According to the *China Daily*, having spent two years in Sri Lanka, Faxian wrote the book *Romance of a Buddhist Country*, upon his return to China in 410 (2005a, para. 1). Gunasingha (1961, p. 184) notes that several other exchanges of Buddhist delegations took place in 429 C.E. and in 434 C.E. in addition to Fa Xian’s visit in 412 C.E. Nihal Rodrigo acknowledges that some of the ancient relations such as the Buddhist links between the two countries dating back to the fifth century have a contemporary relevance on the bilateral relations (2007).

Malaysia

Jean Martin (1985, p. 81) mentions that some of the earliest traders to the Malaysian Peninsula were “the Chinese who has a long tradition of trade with the *Nanhai* – the South China Seas [emphasis original].” Leong Sau Heng (1991, p. 4) highlights that ports such as Sungai Mas and Pengkalan Dujang in the Malay Peninsula were considered as entrepotes where goods from “the Near East, India, Sri Lanka, and China were landed, sold and reshipped...” This is illustrated by “shreds of a wide variety of Chinese trade wares” found at these archeological sites indicate that there was a trading relationship with Imperial China (Leong, 1991, p. 4). These entrepots pre-dated the status received by Malacca in the early

historical period (Leong, 1991). Historical records indicate that Malaysian vessels carried products such as Cinnamon from Southern China on their forays in to the Indian Ocean (Tarling, 1999, p. 186).

The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia (Tarling, 1999, p. 186) illustrates that since the Malays were known from around the third century BC, it was possible that the Chinese “began to sail through the Straits of Melaka (Malacca) and Sunda into the Indian Ocean”, thereby establishing links with South Asia. Wyatt (2012, p. 32) notes that “Chinese had since at least the beginning of the seventh century C.E. engaged in regular and thriving maritime trade along the South China Sea coast with the people they called *kunlun*.” Furthermore, a note from the Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368) refers to the ‘kingdom of *kunlun*’ and directions on how to reach there (Wyatt, 2012, p. 32). Leong Sau Heng (1991, p. 5) notes that:

Early entrepots are found on the west coast of the Malay Peninsula at the northern entrance to the Straits of Melaka. The presence of these early entrepots from about the mid first millennium clearly attest to the growing importance of the Straits of Melaka as a major sea-lane linking regions west of the Bay of Bengal and those bordering on the South China Sea and further north.

These historical facts establish that China was engaging with the maritime nation of Malaysia from ancient times and that Malaysia was a key node in maritime trade in early history.

During the Song period (960 – 1279), China exported silk and textiles to this region (Martin, 1985, p. 85). Since the eight century, relations between the Malay empire of Sri Vijaya and China improved, leading to regular commercial contacts between the two countries (Bastiampillai, 1990, p. 6). Shulami and Rahman (1991, p. 18) indicate that rare “products of Southeast Asia were exchanged for Chinese gold and silk.” Furthermore, Jean Martin (1985, p. 81) indicate that ceramic ware found from the island of Tioman in the southeast coast of the Malaysian Peninsula “illustrates the part played by the peninsula and its island in the maritime trade of the region [as] the ceramic date from the 11th to the 19th century, match ... pattern[s] of trading and settlements stretching from China...”

Martin (1985, p. 81) notes the following as some of the products sought by the Chinese:

Spices, such as nutmeg, cloves and pepper.... Aromatic products, such as camphor from Borneo, sappan wood for incense, medicinal herbs resins, dyes, textiles, ebony and hardwoods for furniture, drugs, tin and other minerals were traded with even more exotic luxuries: ivory, turtle shells, giant clams, bezoar stones, ambergris, rhinoceros horn, coral, amber and other precious stones....

Moreover, ceramic ware found in Tioman indicates there was robust trade relations with Southern China in the 11th and 12th centuries (Martin, 1985, p. 85).

As the Malacca Sultanate was at the height of its power in the 15th century, it was considered a trade-worthy, so much so, the Tioman island is called “*Zhuma shan*, the Mountain of Rami [emphasis original]” in Chinese shipping charts (Martin, 198, p. 82). Furthermore, records indicate, Admiral Zheng He visited Malaysia with both men and tonnes of cargo during his naval expeditions in to the Indian Ocean (Sariyan, 2020). Similar to Sri Lanka, Admiral Zheng visited Malacca during his first voyage between 1405 and 1407 (Dewaraja, 2006, p. 62) and in 1409 (Martine, 1985, 82). Thereafter, Paranavitharana (1960, p. 665) notes that “in 1445, the Sinhalese envoys to China went in company with those from Malacca. These illustrate that there was a close relationship not only between China and Malaysia, but also Sri Lanka and Malaysia with each country trading wares from the other.

Even though trade with Malaysia reduced after the arrival of the Portuguese, the Trengganu on the Malaysia east coast, continued trade with China by exporting “pepper and gold and a whole variety of local products form abalone to bird’s-nests to China” (Martin, 1985, p. 82). David (2013) asserts that even though there were ships “...laden with porcelain, silk and jade, perfumes, copperware, iron tools and implements, and gold, silver and bronze coins” traversing the seas, these voyages “were also a source of technical and agricultural knowledge – it is said, for example, that the large scale cultivation of maize in Malacca started after the visits.”

Besides the trade relations, China and Malaysia were connected through Buddhism. Wales (1940, p. 85 as cited in Ray, 1991, p. 8) points at evidence “from the 4th century onwards and found in the state of Kedah.” Further, O’Connor (1972, p. 39 as cited in Ray, 1991, p. 8) and Allen (1986-87, p. 41 as cited in Ray, 1991, p. 8) highlight various images and inscriptions that were found as well as “2nd inscribed slab of roughly the same period has also been found on the west coast of Malaysia”. These instances illustrate the robust trade and connections that took place in the early history between China and Malaysia.

Ancient Silk Route and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road: A Comparison

Sri Lanka recognised the People’s Republic of China in 1950 and established formal diplomatic relations in February 1957. However, in October 1952, the two countries established economic ties, commencing an unconventional form of relationship. In more recent history, Malaysia was the first Southeast Asian country to recognise and normalise relations with China in 1974 (Nagara, 2018; Seng, 2018, para. 6). This illustrates that China was better engaged with South Asian countries since the formation of the PRC, when compared with the Southeast Asia region.

21st Century Maritime Silk Road

The 21st Century Maritime Silk Road is one of two main prongs of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) China launched in 2013. The BRI was previously known as the One Belt-One Road (OBOR) initiative and was launched in two phases. The Silk Road Economic Belt (or the Belt) which refers to the overland routes for rail and road connectivity was launched in Kazakhstan in August 2013. The ‘road’ or the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road was launched in October 2013 in Indonesia and focuses on connecting countries through sea routes. Two years later in 2015, the PRC renamed this mega initiative as the Belt and Road Initiative. Thereafter in 2017, the BRI was formally constitutionalised. This unprecedented behaviour indicates the significance given to the initiative by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Therefore, the implementation and the success of the BRI by 2049 is now the entire nation’s responsibility. Furthermore, constitutionalising the BRI

translates it into a policy, which then is the responsibility of all succeeding CCP members.

The BRI can be understood as means for China to connect with other countries via spheres such as politics, economics and culture. With over USD 1 trillion being invested in over 100 countries, the BRI is the largest infrastructure investment project implemented in the 21st century. In order to facilitate investment via the BRI, the Chinese government established the Silk Road Fund (SRF) in December 2014 to provide “investment and financing support for trade and economic cooperation and connectivity under the framework” of the BRI (Silk Road Fund, n.d.). The Silk Road Fund (n.d.) further indicates that it is “designed to promote common development and prosperity of China and other countries and regions involved in the Belt and Road Initiative ... to ensure medium and long-term financial sustainability and reasonable returns on investment.” Therefore, this indicates that the Fund is positioned to finance viable projects that are introduced under the BRI. In addition to the SRF, the Chinese government also established the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (BRF) in 2017. It has since met with partner countries once more to promote cooperation and strengthen multilateralism to address global challenges. The Joint Communique further indicated that the countries “believe that an open, inclusive, interconnected, sustainable and people-centered world economy can contribute to prosperity for all” (The Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, 2019).

Of the two arms of the BRI, the ‘road’ or the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road is relevant to the two cases analysed herein, as it stretches from the southern coast of China, through Hanoi, to Kuala Lumpur via the Strait of Malacca to Colombo to reach the east coast of Africa and Europe. Therefore, the successful implementation of the MSR requires that China engage with Sri Lanka and Malaysia in the present century.

Since 2004, the United States and India has been referring to the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road as the ‘String of Pearls’. It is based on the premise that China “...wants to secure port access throughout the South China Sea and adjacent Indian Ocean, which connect [*sic*] the hydrocarbon-rich Arab-Persian world to

the Chinese seaboard” (Kaplan, 2013, p. 199). The term String of Pearls first appeared in the 2004 report titled *Energy Futures in Asia*, which was commissioned by the U.S. Department of Defense and conducted by the security contractor Booz Allen Hamilton. This denotes that China is building several naval and logistical hubs surrounding India, in order to prevent India from engaging with its neighbours. Accordingly, the report defines the ‘string of pearls’ as “...strategic relationships along the sealanes [sic] from the Middle East to the South China Sea in ways that suggest defensive and offensive positioning, not only to protect its energy interests, but also to serve broader security objectives” (MacDonald, Donahou and Danyluk, 2004 as cited in Conrad, 2012, p. 1). Therefore, it can be ascertained that the term ‘String of Pearls’ indicates an Indian perspective of insecurity through an American report. This concept is especially important in understanding the Indian perceptions towards Chinese involvement in Sri Lanka, especially in answering the research problem in this paper pertaining to Sri Lanka.

Commenting on the existing literature on the BRI in Southeast Asia, Liu and Lim (2018, p. 1) indicate that a majority have “focused almost exclusively on China’s interests and strategies”, with minimal attention given to the concerns raised by small states in Southeast Asia. Similarly, the scholarship (see Blanchard, 2017; Liu and Lim, 2018; Malik, 2017) draws attention to the importance of the Southeast Asian region in implementing the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. Similarly, Senaratne (2020) indicates that the literature on China-Sri Lanka relations is based on Chinese intentions in Sri Lanka.

Protection (non-interference in the internal affairs of a country)

During the Imperial era, China provided protection to the Malacca Kingdom or pledged support to do so. Accordingly, through its tributary system, China provided protection to those paying tribute. Furthermore, “... these sovereign nations and China observed mutual respect and supported each other. Although China was more powerful, it neither conquered nor interfered in their internal affairs, but helped protect their sovereignty from encroachment by neighbors....” (Nagara, 2018, para. 5-6). This is indicative of China’s policies in Malaysia, where it has assured protection in exchange for tributes. However, regardless of

the assurances for protection, there have been instances in which “... this protection was limited or even absent, as China opted for non-intervention. For example, the Ming Emperor, ...did nothing when Vietnam attacked Champa in the 14th and 15th centuries” (Nagara, 2018, para. 6). It further denotes that China was not keen on being embroiled in other state’s problems, regardless of various reassurances given.

However, recent events emerging from the South China Sea indicate that China is embroiled in an international legal dispute on maritime claims. In an attempt to lay claim to ‘historic waters’, China is currently encroaching on the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of Malaysia. Hence a definite change in how China conducts its relations with Malaysia can be witnessed through these new developments, as it implements the ‘nine-dash line’ map, a revised map of the 1947 ‘eleven-dash line’ version. Implementing this map enables China to expand its EEZ and access approximately 80 percent of the area’s resources such as petroleum and gas deposits, fish, mineral deposits etc. in the South China Sea. However, because the South China Sea connects the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean, countries such as Australia, Japan and the United States are apprehensive of the increased Chinese engagement and role in this area. On July 13, 2020, the U.S. Department of State issued a statement on the ‘U.S. position on Maritime Claims in the South China Sea’ which indicated:

The United States champions a free and open Indo-Pacific. Today we are strengthening U.S. policy in a vital, contentious part of that region – the South China Sea. We are making clear: Beijing’s claims to offshore resources across most of the South China Sea are completely unlawful, as is its campaign of bullying to control them.

In the South China Sea, we seek to preserve peace and stability, uphold freedom of the seas in a manner consistent with international law, maintain the unimpeded flow of commerce, and oppose any attempt to use coercion or force to settle disputes. We share these deep and abiding interests with our many allies and partners who have long endorsed a rules-based international order. (U.S. Department of State, 2020, para. 1-2)

Moreover, Aukus, a trilateral security pact was signed between Australia, the United Kingdom and U.S.A on September 15, 2021 as a means of curtailing the Chinese presence in the Indo-Pacific, especially the Southeast Asian region (Murphy and Hurst, 2021). This illustrates that even though Malaysia was able to rely on China in ancient times, it is now unable to do so, thereby having to rely on other security mechanisms.

Malaysia has traditionally attempted to negotiate and resolve these threats to its maritime security through international law. In a 2020 Defence White Paper ([DWP], p. 11), Malaysia notes that the document presents "...Malaysia's current interests and future aspirations as **a maritime nation with continental roots**, exploring the nation's unique role as **a bridging linchpin** between the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions [emphasis original]." The DWP (2020, p. 22) further underscores the importance of diplomacy and international law such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in settling disputes of this nature: "Malaysia maintains friendly relations with all countries and seeks peaceful resolution of disputes based on international law. The South China Sea should be a platform for cooperation and connectivity, not an area of confrontation or conflict area...."

In the past, Malaysia followed a more cautious approach in engaging with China on the South China Sea dispute. However, bolstered by the U.S. position in the South China Sea calling for China to respect international laws, Malaysia is being more assertive towards its sovereign claims. Accordingly, in a letter to the United Nations in July 2020, Malaysia indicated that it "rejects China's claims to historic rights, or other sovereign rights or jurisdiction, with respect to the maritime areas of the South China Sea encompassed by the relevant part of the 'nine-dash line'" (Moriyasu and Khan, 2020, para.2). This is indicative of Malaysia's confidence in safeguarding their national interests by way of ensuring Maritime Security.

This showcases a distinct shift in the protection China previously afforded to Malaysia during the era of the Ancient Silk Route. However, with the onset of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, China is being more assertive in its approach in the Southeast Asian / South China Sea neighbourhood.

China's relations with Sri Lanka are contrasting to those it maintained with Malaysia. Unlike with Malaysia, historical records do not indicate China being protective of Sri Lanka via the Ancient Silk Road. This is indicative of the rise in Arab merchants in Sri Lanka and the colonisation of the island by the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British. It must also be noted that there was a decline in Imperial China's seafaring status in the 18th century as China sought to focus more on its internal security such as in fighting rebellions and invasions from its northern quarters. Furthermore, there is reference to an invasion of ancient Sri Lanka by the Chinese in the 15th century, during Alakesvara's time in order to have him respect the Imperial Court of China (Paranavitana, 1960, p. 664). These illustrate the nature of the relations China had with ancient Sri Lanka, which were politically motivated.

On the contrary, China is more protective of Sri Lanka through the 21st century MSR as it is conscious of the island's strategic location. Towards this end, Sri Lanka is provided economic and political support as was witnessed in the immediate aftermath of the conflict in 2009 during Sri Lanka development drive and in the United Nations, respectively. In September 2021, China indicated its displeasure and stated that "it opposes interference into Sri Lanka's domestic affairs under the guise of human rights" (Farzan, 2021). Furthermore, the increased power rivalry in the IOR has driven China towards Sri Lanka as it comprehends the strategic importance of Sri Lanka's location. Accordingly, China is keen on investing in Sri Lanka to protect Sri Lanka's interests and to demonstrate China's economic prowess. This illustrates that China's contemporary relations with Sri Lanka are more economically inclined.

Trade

Due to the increased exchange external states have with those in the Indian Ocean, and the position countries such as Sri Lanka and Malaysia play in facilitating the exchange of goods, ideas and people, these states can be recognised as 'Gateway States' (S. B. Cohen, 2003, pp. 49-50). Saul Cohen's description is derived from the capacity of such states to take advantage of their location for economic development (2016, pp. 49-52); a role, countries like Sri Lanka and Malaysia have been playing for many centuries.

When analysing Imperial China's trade relations, it was clear that they used economic power to woo countries and engage with them. This was China's strategy of maintaining positive relations with interested countries. Relations in the 21st century too are being projected through a trade lens, especially with the launching of the 21st century Maritime Silk Road (MSR). Here too China is attracting countries it has had relations with in ancient times. Liu and Lim (2018, p. 1) argue "that the political elites in a relatively weak and small state such as Malaysia are adept in engaging with a rising China to advance key projects, furthering their own agenda." From a Neoclassical Realist perspective, this highlights that the Malaysians are conscious of their domestic requirements and are therefore, engaging with China to further them. This illustrates that these decisions are taken consciously. Moreover, three factors determine the results of this: "fulfilment of Malaysia's longstanding pro-ethnic Malay policy, a mutual vision between the state and federal authorities, and advancement of geopolitical interests for both Malaysia and China" (Liu and Lim, 2018, p. 1)

Conclusion

When analysing China's relations with Sri Lanka and Malaysia there are differences in how Imperial China maintained relations with the two States. In Sri Lanka, Imperial China maintained less of a protective stance, and instead, was welcoming of foreign connections the island maintained with, for example, Arab seafarers. Contrastingly in Malaysia, Imperial China was more involved as Malaysia was one of its tributary states. This indicates that during the time of the Ancient Silk Route, Imperial China was more conscious of safeguarding its neighbourhood and ensuring that strong alliances were made. However, the incident with Alakesvara in the early 15th century illustrate that Imperial China was keen on being respected the world over. It further demonstrates that they did not appreciate being defied and sought recognition from countries beyond the Southeast Asian region.

Contemporary relations during the 21st century Maritime Silk Road are defined by the investments and engagement China maintains with Sri Lanka and Malaysia. These are further impacted by the increased power rivalry in the Indo-Pacific. It was examined that China's relations with maritime countries in the 21st

century has altered significantly due to several reasons such as firstly, the prominence given to the Indo-Pacific region by the United States of America since 2010; secondly, China's MSR initiative since 2013; thirdly, India's Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) initiative since 2015. However, from a Neoclassical Realist perspective, it revealed that trade and commercial ties remain the backbone of the interactions between China and the two maritime states, as there is a domestic requirement for states to engage with a partner that is more cooperative.

However, the importance of Sri Lanka's strategic location has contributed to the close scrutiny of Sri Lanka-China relations not only by Western powers, but by the QUAD (India, Japan, Australia and US) in the emerging cold war between China and USA. Moreover, Sri Lanka with its inherent strategic importance is becoming a bone of contention between India and China both claiming close and historical relations with the country. In the Southeast Asian region, Malaysia is attempting to defend its interests in the South China Sea against Chinese encroachments.

In conclusion, it can be ascertained that China's modern interactions with maritime nations continue to be underpinned by economic interactions, and secondly, that China's contemporary interactions with Malaysia and Sri Lanka are underscored by geopolitical considerations. Therefore, it can be ascertained that China is attempting to woo countries through economic / trade relations, as it is important for China to keep tabs of these countries. This is in consideration of the strategic location and historical ties. This has resulted in western powers being overly cautious of the Chinese motives and behaviour in Southeast and South Asia.

ⁱA.k.a. Alagakkonara

ⁱⁱDewaraja (1960, p. 70) notes "Since then Sri Lanka relations continued to the reign of Parakramabahu VI of Kotte. According to Ming shi envoys from Sri Lanka bearing tribute reached China in 1416,1432,1433,1436, 1445 & 1459. Although the Chinese sources say that these missions were headed by the Sri Lankan king in person there is no evidence from Sri Lankan sources that the king was away from the country at any time. Perhaps a relative of the king or a high official may have represented the monarch."

ⁱⁱⁱAnuradha Seneviratna (1994, pp. 19-20) refers to Fa-Hsein visiting Anuradhapura in the fifth century.

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