



SRI LANKA'S STRATEGIC LOCATION AND FOREIGN POLICY RESPONSE TOWARDS INDIA AND US ON CHINESE INVESTMENTS IN SRI LANKA

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Abstract

Sri Lanka being a small state strategically placed between two powerful States India and China, the island nation is significant for India as closest maritime neighbour and on the other hand China has become an all-weather friend to Sri Lanka who has not interfered into the internal political issues and a supportive character in international politics. Sri Lanka has been sandwiched between great power politics of these powerful nations since U.S. is carrying out its strategy using strategic alliance of the United States, India, UK, Japan and Australia to counter the growing influence of China. Most importantly, Sri Lanka being a small state, having balanced relations with the big powers is effective to foster the development goals of the countries. Having understood that this paper discuss **Sri Lanka's strategic location and foreign policy response towards India and United States on Chinese investments in Sri Lanka**. This paper further discuss external and internal factors, core issues and intentions of above mentioned powerful nations and Sri Lankan foreign policy towards these powerful nations by fostering closer ties in world politics with two regional giants and the United States.

Keywords: *Strategic location of Sri Lanka, Geopolitical environment, Chinese influence, India – Sri Lanka relations, National interest of Sri Lanka*



1. Introduction

“Whoever controls the Indian Ocean dominates Asia. This ocean is the key to seven seas. In the twenty-first century, the destiny of the world will be decided on its waters”(Ali, 2013).

The above statement of Alfred Mahan proves the current importance of Indian Ocean Region. From the ancient time, Indian Ocean Region has attracted the great powers attention due to the economic value rest on the Indian Ocean in context of East and West maritime trade. At present Indian Ocean Region has been performing a very important role which has impacted on the international political environment. Indian Ocean region comprises 38 littoral states, 24 ocean territories and 17 landlocked countries while Indian Ocean covers 20% of earth and it is ranked as the third largest water body of the world. However, US allies and key trading partners are highly dependents on the Indian Ocean for energy such as Japan receives 90% of oil via the Indian Ocean, while 75% of China’s oil imports and 85% of India’s oil imports are transited through the Indian Ocean. When it comes to the economic importance of the Indian Ocean, approximately 30% of world trade is handled in the ports of the Indian Ocean along with the half of the world’s container traffic passes through it. In addition, 40 out of 54 types of raw materials used by U.S. industries are supplied through the Indian Ocean. The economic value of the Indian Ocean has facilitated the other states in the region to uphold such importance for the big powers of the world.

Being part of this strategic ocean mass, as an island and maritime nation, Sri Lanka has attracted the attention of the world’s big powers due to its strategic location in the region. Further, Sri Lanka is one of the most strategically prominent states in the Indian Ocean region as a small state. As Sri Lanka lays a close proximity to the regional super power as well as to the main sea routes, it is observed that the two giants in the Asian region have made the presence in Sri Lanka by various means. With the China’s Maritime Silk Road initiative, the strategic importance of Sri Lanka has been enhanced by being part of the ‘String of Pearls’ strategy over Indian Ocean. As a small state in the South Asia, Sri Lanka has tightened her knot with China as well as India in to sustain



the country's development process. Due to the location of Sri Lanka in Indian Ocean despite of its size, the role Sri Lanka in terms of ensuring the maritime security of Indian Ocean is significantly vital. Sri Lanka is a major base for military bases and maritime security in the Indian Ocean. Sri Lanka is a very important place to establish a naval base to monitor the Indian Ocean and the increasingly busy shipping lanes. No other country in the South Asian region can match the geographical location of Sri Lanka. Countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh, and the Maldives have their geographical and strategic importance but from a naval strategic point of view, Sri Lanka is reaping more benefits, including the protection of Sri Lanka's strategic qualities, coastline, and maritime traffic. In the 1990s, the port of Trincomalee in Sri Lanka was allowed to be used by the US Navy for rest. It was rumoured at the time that the US was going to develop its naval base at Trincomalee. (David A. Anderson & Anton Wijeyesekera, 2011) At this point, Sri Lanka will be the key player in ensuring the maritime security in the region.

2. Literature review

2.1. Geographic importance of Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's geographical location can play an important role in maintaining India's security due to the close proximity to the regional giant, India is one of the most significant strategic values of Sri Lanka in the region. Further, less territorial distances between Sri Lanka and India, close relations of the two countries always ensure the mutual security requirements. Further, Sri Lanka is located at the centre of maritime trade routes in West and East Asia, as well as in the middle of Africa, the Arab, and Eastern worlds. Merchant ships sailing from the ports of Kolkata and Yangon [Rangoon] to the Suez Canal use the best ports in Sri Lanka, Colombo, and Trincomalee. The island of Sri Lanka is a major hub for communications, trade, and naval movement in the Indian Ocean region. Trincomalee serves as the main naval base. The entry into Sri Lanka could allow outside regional powers to dominate the sea route. This could hamper India's Waterway shipping. Waterways in the Indian Ocean have become



important for India's global trade expansion. Indian oil was transported in large quantities through the Indian Ocean. It is essential to meet India's ever-increasing energy needs. India sees Sri Lanka as a security guard for its security in the Indian Ocean. Sri Lanka is India's southernmost security nation. That is why, unity and corporation between India and Sri Lanka has considered essential for the security of India.

Another factor in terms of strategic value of Sri Lanka is that as the Indian Ocean is rapidly becoming one of the most important ocean mass in global maritime trade, many of the trade sea routes are running around Sri Lanka. In the shipping traffic destiny maps it can be clearly identify that the key arteries of the maritime shipping trade which run South of Sri Lanka. A slightest disturbance to any of the ships which transit in Southern tip of Sri Lanka can cause huge impact on the international maritime trade. Moreover, in term of protection to these routes, Sri Lanka is directly linked to the security of Sea Lines of Communication which is a primary objective of China to establish their roots in Indian Ocean Region. In terms of trade, the three major commercial ports in Sri Lanka are Colombo, Galle, and Trincomalee. In addition, the port of Hambantota in the south of Sri Lanka was developed recently by China. This has developed into a commercial port. The port of Oluvil on the east coast of Sri Lanka is also being developed as a major commercial and fishing vessel. Perhaps in the next two decades, Sri Lanka will emerge as one of the world's major maritime trade centers.

In Another aspect, Sri Lanka's geographical location in the Indian Ocean is such that it is very important for all oil-thirsty countries in East Asia, not just India. Crude oil, which travels from the Arab world to almost all countries by sea, passes through the seas of Sri Lanka. The geopolitical and strategic importance of Sri Lanka is evident from this single point.(Anushka Wijesinha, 2016) For this reason, Sri Lanka's geostrategic location has gained a great deal of importance.

2.2. Chinese influence

Especially due to Sri Lanka's strategic location in the Indian Ocean, China has been the focus in recent times. Initially, China was more focused on the Northeast and



Southeast Asian regions in line with China's Asian policy. But in recent times, South Asia has also gained prominence in China's foreign policy. Moreover, after India started looking east, China started looking south against India. In this context, Sri Lanka is important for China's strategic interests. Five key factors shape China's policy in Sri Lanka are as follows:

- 2.2.1** Sri Lanka's position is strategically important. The oil-rich Middle East and Southeast Asia is the central route. This gives direct access to the international sea route in the Indian Ocean of China. This will increase the security of its trade.
- 2.2.2** Sri Lanka is rich in natural resources such as coal, iron, hydrocarbons, natural gas, and oil. Mainly, natural gas and oil has not been exploited yet. Due to the growing economy and population of millions in the region, there is a huge potential for trade and a large market for Chinese goods.
- 2.2.3** China has a lot of opportunities in the Indian Ocean region and poses serious security threats such as piracy, terrorism, drugs, arms smuggling, and weapons of mass destruction. In this context, China can act as a buffer nation against the Sri Lankan threat.
- 2.2.4** Apart from this, Sri Lanka will play a very important role in China's 'Sea Silk Road' project. Under this ambitious plan, China has a road construction plan. China will redevelop the ancient Silk Road connecting Central Asia and Europe with the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Economic Corridor. The purpose is to connect the various ports in the area to expand the Silk Road trade. Thus the project will be beneficial not only for China and Sri Lanka but also for the South Asian region.

In this back drop, China's policy in South Asia is mainly focused on India. In the last few years, India has emerged as a regional military power with economic power, nuclear power, and missile capability. Development of India as a regional military power is challenging the interest of China in the region. At the same time, India's growing strategic partnership with the United States and Japan is a major concern for China's security. This is emerging as a competitor in the future Asia and beyond. In this



regard, China has been somewhat successful in increasing its influence in Sri Lanka. This has become a security concern of India.

According to Beijing's policy, it is to increase China's influence in Sri Lanka and reduce India's influence. It is also making an overall effort to increase its influence in Sri Lanka to control the capabilities of potential adversaries like the US and Japan to threaten the Indian Ocean and China's interests in the region. (Kumar & Surendra Kumar, 2017) In President Rajapakse's period, Sri Lanka deepened its ties between China unprecedentedly. In this period there were several high level meeting between Sri Lanka and China and in year 2007 was celebrated as China Sri Lanka friendship year to mark the fiftieth anniversary of establishing diplomatic ties between two countries. In 2013, president Rajapakse visited Beijing and two countries decided to upgrade their relation to strategic corporation partnership, maintain high level exchanges, and expand the bilateral trade, security and defence. In this period president Rajapakse visited China for 7 times and as a result in 2014 Leader of China Xi Jinping visited Sri Lanka as the first Chinese president visited Sri Lanka. Two way trade between Sri Lanka and china grown rapidly. More than bilateral trade, the growing Chinese investment in infrastructure that has enhance Chinese influence in Sri Lanka. Chinese investments in Sri Lanka are construction of a Puttalm coal power plant, Hambantota port, Katunayake- Colombo and Southern Express way, Port city project in Colombo and Lotus tower etc. China is larger financier in Sri Lankan projects. On the other hand in terms of military cooperation China has been the largest supplier to conventional arm to Sri Lanka. Further high level visits by military officials place uplifting military ties to a new level like Chinese defence minters visit in 2012. Further in 2014, Vice chairmen of China's central military commission visited Sri Lanka. Chinese naval ships visited Sri Lankan harbours and Sri Lanka allowed Chinese submarine and a warship to dock at its port in the capital Colombo in 2014 both countries successfully developing military ties with Army, Navy and Air force.

2.3 Indo Sri Lanka relationship and ambition of India



India is Sri Lanka's closest neighbour. The relationship between India and Sri Lanka is historical and it counts more than 2500 years and share social, cultural and linguistic values. Nearly thirty years long armed conflict between Sri Lankan forces and the LTTE came to an end in May 2009. During the conflict India supported Sri Lankan government positively to defeat the terrorism. At the same time India paid much more concern about Tamil civilian population and India emphasized about their rights and welfare. After eradicating the Terrorism, more than 250,000 Tamil civilians became IDPs. This humanitarian challenge was crucial for Sri Lankan government due to the fact that Indian concern over resettlement of IDPs in their original living areas as soon as possible pressurized the Sri Lanka government.

After India - Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement in March 2000 trade between two countries has grown up rapidly. Bilateral trade touched USD 2.02 billion in 2009 with Indian exports accounting for USD 1.7 billion and Sri Lankan exports accounting for USD 326 million.(Sohini Pradhan, n.d.) Within the SARRC countries Sri Lanka is the largest trading partner of India and globally India is Sri Lanka's largest trade partner. With FDI approvals of nearly USD 500 million, India is the fourth largest investor in Sri Lanka and IOC, Tatas, Bharati Airtel, Ashok Leyland, L&T and Taj Hotels are amongst the prominent Indian names present in Sri Lanka.(Sohini Pradhan, n.d.)

However, diplomatic relations have been strained with the Rajapakse government as Sri Lanka gave China unprecedented access to Sri Lanka. Due to above mentioned reason it is obvious that India feels insecure with the growing presence of China to India's Southern flank. Currently, China's foot hold in Sri Lanka has been a great cause of concern for India, which sees Chinese incursions in the Sri Lanka as a part of Belt and Road initiative project which intended to encircle India in the Indian Ocean.

On the other, hand India has already become one of the primary naval forces of the Indian Ocean. India seeks even greater maritime presence in the region to protect its national security and economic interests as a regional power. As India's ambitions



grow it leads to grow the economic and military convergence of interests between India and the US within the region. It is clear that at present India and the U.S. working closely for maintaining maritime security in the Indian Ocean. The U.S. believes that its relationship with India could enlarge India's security perimeter to achieve a position of greater influence in the region to counter China's influence. The important factor here is the growing geo-strategic relationship between India and the U.S. in the region and how it affect to Sri Lanka in terms of close Chines relations.

3. Limitation of the study

The difficulty to find literature about Sri Lankan foreign policy objectives is one of the main limitations of this study. Further Since there is no white paper available to reveal Sri Lanka's national interest and foreign policy objectives is also another gap in this paper. This Paper will focus only analysis Sri Lankan foreign policy to India and Western world on close relation with China.

4. Conceptual framework

The study is trying to understand National interest of Sri Lanka, Foreign policy objectives and what are the most appropriate entrances to achieve foreign policy objectives in the face of regional rivalry between India and China, and United States involvement in using India as Sri Lanka's closest neighbor to deter China in the region.

5. Result and discussion

Sri Lanka is being an island and her defence, security, development, and future challenges should be looked through the premise of her as a maritime nation. Sri Lanka's location in the Indian Ocean region as an island State is of geostrategic importance to all major global powers. It is also a strategically important maritime hub in the Indian Ocean. In this context, it very important for Sri Lanka as a small country in a geostrategic location to maintain good bilateral and multilateral relations with regional powers and as well as the superpower. The relationship between India and Sri Lanka is very important, India as Sri Lanka's closest neighbour and regional super



power. The regional power rivalry between India and China and US support to India to deter China is very much important when achieving foreign policy objectives of Sri Lanka.

5.1 National interest of Sri Lanka, ways and means

National Interest of Sri Lanka can be identified from the speeches of the president of Sri Lanka since there is no whitepaper published so far. National interest of Sri Lanka and its foreign policy objectives tend to change with the shifting of the government by the public. Point to consider here is what would be a response of a small state like Sri Lanka when face with the two ascending powers like China and India. However, political environment of Sri Lanka would try to achieve internal stability in the post war scenario without letting emerge ideology of separatism and try to manage country in the face of economic downturn. Further balance Sri Lanka's position in the global and regional environment while Sri Lanka is experiencing repercussions of regional power rivalry between India and China and focus on economic prosperity of Sri Lanka while exposing into trade benefits from India, China and U.S. and stick in to non-alignment policy. In this context, the priorities of national interest of Sri Lanka can be identified as follows:

5.1.1 Priority one is the national security from internal and external environments

in the form of direct and indirect threats. The highly concern internal threat that Sri Lanka encountering is spread of separatist ideology since the country is experiencing post conflict era after eradication of the separatist terrorist organization in year 2010. This is fuelled by politicians of Southern State of Tamil Nadu, India. The external threat is from Tamil Nadu state from India, The strong political lobby influence Indian Government with the idea of separate state for Tamils in Sri Lanka. Further other important concern is that the threat posed by the ISIS to achieve their global engagement choosing Sri Lanka as a platform.



5.1.2 Priority two is Economic prosperity of Sri Lanka while establishing commercial

relation with India, China and with the West. The commercial relation with India and China is favourable but Europe being one of the important trading partners of Sri Lanka, the U.S. and major EU countries were reluctant to make binding investments on the grounds of allegations made against the state army on HR violations during the final phase of the eradication of terrorism from the country. They demanded proper investigations into war crimes before making any serious commitments and even suspended the trade facilities (GSP+) until such investigations take place.

5.1.3 Priority three is to have a viable solution to Indian fishermen poaching to Sri

Lankan waters. A maritime dispute between India and Sri Lanka remains unsolved, despite the agreement of 1947. Clash between Sri Lanka Navy and Tamil fishermen who enter the Sri Lankan waters with trawlers having sophisticated fish catching tools to have a better catch unlike most of poor Sri Lanka fishermen make the political environment hot. Ownership of Katchatheevu Island, in 1974, was ceded to Sri Lanka after an agreement was signed by Indira Gandhi between the two countries without consulting the Tamil Nadu government. According to the agreement Indian fishermen can use Katchathive Island to have rest but didn't ensure fishing rights.

Sri Lankan objectives in achieving national interest can be define as follows:

- a. Establish diplomatic leadership role among regional countries.
- b. Stick with non-align policy
- c. Deter separatist ideology.
- d. Establish effectively economic trade and aid agreement with India.



- e. Negotiate in diplomatic means in Indian fishing in Sri Lankan territorial Waters.
- f. Negotiate to restrict the spread of separatism by Tamil Nadu government in India.
- g. Create balance between India and China while ensuring India first approach with India.
- h. Establish measures to build confidence on Sri Lanka on HR violations by conducting an investigation to have a better trade with U.S. and EU.
- i. Search for means to come out of China's debt trap.

Being a small country with limited influencing capacity in terms of foreign policy objectives, Sri Lanka most of the time use diplomatic ties to achieve its foreign policy objectives. When it comes to means for foreign policy objectives, means are determined by the resources available in the country. In terms of Sri Lankan geostrategic location and its importance to world actors is one of the most important element. Further Sri Lanka possess oil and gas reserves but those are yet the extracted. As for every other states, means/tools available to Sri Lanka to shape its foreign policy objectives is as follows:

- a. **Military**. While maintaining a very limited military with limited capacity, Sri Lanka doesn't possess much bargaining power in the process of achieving foreign policy objectives using military as a tool. Sri Lanka will mainly use military to deter internal threat posed by terrorist organizations and ISIS, further Sri Lanka Navy will engage with Indian fishermen who involve poaching in Sri Lankan waters. Sri Lanka will use military as a soft power in defence diplomatic means mainly to engage regional powers and other nation states as confidence Building Measure.



b. **Information**. Information and propaganda will be a one of the best methods country like Sri Lanka with have limited power but being a country which eradicated terrorism in military means. This can be conducted through effective use of public media, e platforms and holding conferences, meetings and visits. This will be a good platform for building trust, cooperation and this will be transparent the objectives of foreign policy. This will help reduce mutual distrust, reduce tensions and help to build cooperation and confidence.

c. **Economic**. It is important to note that Sri Lanka being a small country having small economy, Sri Lanka doesn't have a bargaining power in terms of economic as a tool in achieving foreign policy objectives. As commonly known that in this globalize world no country can self-sufficient and have a close economy. Sri Lanka's biggest trade partners in the region is China and India and economy of Sri Lanka mainly depend on import quotas offered by European Union and the U.S. in terms GSP+. Further tourism plays a much important role in Sri Lankan economy. In this context maintain better diplomatic ties with EU and the U.S. is much more important and Sri Lanka should develop ways to develop the relationship with above mentioned actors.

As mentioned in the above Sri Lanka is a small country and strategically placed between two powerful States India and China. It is understood that China can be considered as a super power and India will reach to superpower status within next decade. Further the U.S. along with India, UK Japan and Australia is carrying out a strategy to counter the growing influence of China. In this context, India cannot ignore its strategic and other interests while dealing with Sri Lanka. During the insurgency, China was one of Sri Lanka's major arms supplier besides being the supporter of their cause in the UN. Further China's infrastructure development in Sri Lanka especially Hambantota port in the close proximity of India is one of the major concerns of India and U.S. However, Sri Lanka consulted U.S. and India before constructing a harbour and came to an agreement that not to use the port as military or Naval base of China. But Sri Lanka



government has debt burden with regard to the all the projects conducted by China. Due to this debt trap Sri Lanka had to let China obtained 70% share equity of the Hambantota port on 99-years lease while Sri Lankan government kept 30% in shares.

In the meantime China became the largest import partner for Sri Lanka after India. On the other hand Indian economic and trade interests cannot be ignored. Sri Lanka and India have signed a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in 1998 and it came to effect from year 2000. In this back drop it is important to note that Sri Lanka's major export destinations are highly concentrated on the U.S. and EU but the U.S. and major EU countries were reluctant to make binding investments on the grounds of allegations made against the state army on HR violations during the final phase of the civil war. They demanded proper investigations into war crimes before making any serious commitments and even suspended the trade facilities (GSP+) until such investigations take place.

To address above mentioned issues are being facing by Government of Sri Lanka, following **ways** should be adopted to strike a balance between two regional powers and U.S. and European Union.

- a. To balance the Sri Lankan unbiased position among the interesting actors in the region and in the world Sri Lanka will adopt non-aligned foreign policy this will help to mitigate the tension with India over Chinese investment in Sri Lanka. Further this will help to build the trust with the U.S. and Europe.
- b. Since Sri Lankan economy is mainly depend on the GSP+, there is a certain requirement of building trust and corporation with EU and the U.S. The main obstacle for the GSP+ is the war crimes conducted by Sri Lankan Armed forces and failure to present acceptable solution to the world community. Sri Lanka government should address this issue sensitively and having an international investigation on war crimes is important. Developing trade



agreement to secure GSP+ is another important access but it is challenging due to the very less bargaining power of Sri Lanka.

c. By considering above facts and current economic situation in Sri Lanka, it is very clear that Sri Lanka needs to keep her foot out of China's debt trap circle. As mentioned in the above, Sri Lanka government has much debt burden with regard to the all the projects conducted by China. There is a certain requirement of coming out of the Chinese debt trap if Sri Lanka government needs to have unbiased policy in the world politics. Further it will help Sri Lanka not to lease or sell some projects to China most importantly Hamabantota harbour not to become Chinese Naval base. In this context Sri Lanka essentially need to build close ties with the U.S. and Europe and build the trust of World Bank, IMF and other particular organizations dealing with concession rate loans. This will help Sri Lanka to request loans from these organizations with less interest rates and pay back China and get out of China's debt trap.

d. India also fearing loosing its touch with Sri Lanka and India wants to build good political and Military Corporation with Sri Lanka. However, Sri Lanka still has some lingering suspicions of India, after its hegemonic involvement in Sri Lanka's civil war in 1987 through Indian Peace Keeping Forces (Nayanthara Gamage, 2017). India conducted high level visit to Sri Lanka on 17 October 2021. High-level visits by foreign secretary Harsh Shringla and army chief M M Naravane have helped bridge a trust deficit and prepare the ground for re-energizing relations, Sri Lankan high commissioner Milinda Moragoda said. (ANI/PIB)(Rezaul H Laskar, 2021) This will help to bridge the gap of distrust of two neighbours. Sri Lanka should use its military as a soft power in defence diplomatic terms. Here defence seminars, Defence conference are very important because during these conferences Sri Lanka can make India clear about its doubts on Indian perception about Sri Lanka China relationship. Further, Sri Lanka can share its experience on eradication LTTE with India by conducting bilateral conferences and offering Indian military to training opportunities in Sri



Lanka. This will be helpful to develop military person to person contact and showcase doctrines of both the countries and develop military to military contact and develop trust. Further conducting of military bilateral exercises are very important in this regard.

e. Sri Lanka should follow India first strategy in the region, India being the closest neighbour. This will help Sri Lanka to counter the Tamil Nadu influence to Sri Lankan Tamils to fight for a separate state.

f. While adopting India first Strategy, Sri Lanka can influence Indian government to have negotiations with state of Tamil Nadu to settle the poaching of Indian fishermen in to Sri Lankan waters.

g. Sri Lanka government should search the possibilities to explore natural gas and oil. Since Sri Lanka doesn't have the technology to explore, negotiate with India or with west to have options. This will help Sri Lanka to build corporation with India and West and most importantly to have economic benefits to build the economy of Sri Lanka.

6. Conclusion

Sri Lanka being a small state strategically placed between two powerful States India and China, Sri Lanka should be more attentive in pursuit of foreign policy objectives. In this context Sri Lanka is significant for India as closest maritime neighbour. On the other hand China has become an all-weather friend to Sri Lanka who has not interfered into the internal political issues and a supportive character in international politics. However, the high peaked relations with China have disturbed the relations with India. In this backdrop, Sri Lanka needs to have a strategically neutral approach in dealing with the Indian Ocean strategic competition and should especially take the Indo-Lanka relations very seriously. Sri Lanka has experienced several negative outcomes by India for having close relations with China in the regional and international platforms. In the meantime, China has been one of the strongest supporting giant in international politics. Even though, China is commercially more



benefited to the country, in the regional context, the traditional hegemonic power over small state by India is unavoidable. Apparently, for a small state, having balanced relations with the big powers is effective to foster the development goals of the countries. Same for Sri Lanka, it need to have strong commitment to the immediate neighbour rather than being more close to the non-South Asian regional power. Apart from the strategic partnership between Sri Lanka and China, for the future prosperity of the country, Sri Lanka should build up a neutral position in conducting its foreign policy with the big powers in the South Asian region.

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