



## THE EMERGING REGIONAL POWER DILEMMA IN THE INDO-PACIFIC REGION: BANGLADESH AND SRI LANKAN PERSPECTIVES

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### ABSTRACT

*Fluidity in economic equations, shifts in the balance of power, instability in geopolitical relations, and geoeconomics of disruptive technologies are four cornerstones of international relations of our time, as they determine the rise and fall of powers. For this article, two countries of South Asia were examined – Bangladesh and Sri Lanka as rising South Asian powers, and two major contending global powers – the U.S. and China that are setting the geo-economics and geostrategic courses in international political structure. In conclusion, economically strengthening the great power involvements within the Indo-Pacific context would mean ensuring a rule-based system that will deliver economic goods to the Indo-Pacific countries. Strategically, it would mean strengthening Bangladesh and Sri Lanka's strategic autonomy in the Bay of Bengal through economic, technological, and institutional cooperation. This article advances the debate about the rise of new regional powers and their dilemmas with the major powers involved in the Indo-Pacific region.*

**Keywords:** Bangladesh, Indo-Pacific, Sri Lanka

### INTRODUCTION: THE CHANGING REGIONAL ARCHITECTURE

Fluidity in economic equations, shifts in the balance of power, instability in geopolitical relations, and geoeconomics of disruptive technologies are four cornerstones of international relations of our time. These four cornerstones are the critical determinants of the rise and fall of powers in regional sub-systems and international systems as fluidity, shifts, instability, and technologies influence power distribution and thereby measure the relativity of power. If one takes John Mearsheimer's argument, either or global and regional hegemony are bound to go through a process of relative decline, or at least can maintain enough resources in the international or regional system to dominate its power orbit (Mearsheimer, 2001). Perhaps, the Offensive Realist theory would argue that dominant powers will attempt to share their power with regional hegemony to prevent the rise of competitors in other regions. In turn, the regional hegemonies, concerned about threats stemming from the rise of regional states, will resort to predatory political and defence strategies. It means, in a regional system, the linkage between the global power and the regional power is based on transactional realism in which national power is seen through indicators such as gross domestic product (GDP); military spending; or the Composite Indicator of National Capability (CINC) (Beckley, 2018). These combine military spending, troops, urban population, iron and steel production, and



energy consumption, often subject to systematic manipulation and exaggeration (Singer, Bremer, & Stuckey, 1972).

Beckley argued, even in the context of a regional setting, “a country with a big population might produce vast output and held a large army, but it also may bear massive welfare and security burdens that drain its wealth and bog down its military, leaving it with few resources for power projection abroad” (Beckley, 2018). That means the relationship between global power and regional power is aimed to establish the balance of power or a balance of threat. However, the balance of power remains the key influencer in international relations, even often referred to as the “balancing act between the East and the West” in South Asia. It is vital for economic and trade decisions, alliance politics, international and collective cooperation, multilateralism, and domestic politics. As states compete to project their national power, political decision-making and rational strategic choices require precision in understanding and measuring “limits of power” and “limits of interdependence” between the global and regional powers. This precise understanding can enable a realist political mind to undertake “vital decisions regarding grand strategy, alliance commitments, economic policy, military procurement, and the use of force hinge on estimates of relative power” (Beckley, 2018).

However, in the post-pandemic South Asia, the rising vacuum in power relations at the regional level, both for the perceived hegemon and the regional states, creates multifaceted tensions that accentuate a political and economic space for the presence of counter-balancers. The regional countries, then, “do not usually feel threatened” by an extra-balancer, and “they often seek its support” of external powers (Levy & Thompson, 2010). Perhaps, the counter-balancers or even the “counter-regional balancers” do not provoke “balancing coalitions against themselves” (Mearsheimer, 2001). That creates a space for the relative rise of new regional powers and a relative decline and strategic uncertainty for the existing regional power equation. Shiffrinson (2020) would argue that “as some states undergo a relative rise in power and others a relative decline, strategic uncertainty can increase; windows of opportunity or vulnerability may open and close; and patterns of cooperation and competition can change in terms of resources, specifically national resources and military assets” (Shiffrinson, 2020). Here, the argument is compelling that the new regional powers would offer political stability and economic growth to indicate wealth and well-calibrated relations with major powers as their strategic assets. Hence, these new powers can offer strategic deterrence to the major powers.

For this article, two countries of South Asia can be examined – Bangladesh and Sri Lanka as rising South Asian powers, and two major contending global powers – the U.S. and China that are setting the geo-economics and geostrategic courses in international political structure. The article asks a recent strategic question: How can the interlinked complex relations among Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the U.S., and China shape the waters of the Bay of Bengal in the coming



years? I take Bangladesh and Sri Lanka as the rising powers, given their ongoing political stability as a constant variable and the interests of the U.S. and China in engaging with these two countries through strategic, economic, and political prisms. Bangladesh and Sri Lanka offer access to the Bay of Bengal, an Indo-Pacific pivot crucial for the US-China naval and maritime interests. Interestingly, Bangladesh sees the Indo-Pacific as a source of common economic resource for the region even though the overall Indo-Pacific is emerging as a source of tension among significant powers. As Ross noted, “In contests between maritime and continental powers, the maritime power consistently responds to the emergent threat with resources sufficient to maintain supremacy. The continental power, on the other hand, unable to resolve its land border insecurity, cannot approach military parity with the maritime power” (Ross, 2009). Hence, the contest over the waters of the Indo-Pacific will continue to grow to exert either “naval nationalism” or “resource power” in which Bangladesh and Sri Lanka will continue to be a party.

### **THE GEOPOLITICS OF TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: RISE OF BANGLADESH AND SRI LANKA**

South Asia witnessed three critical old fashioned geopolitical overtures over the past five years – the Doklam crisis that has reset the course of China-India strategic relations, a massive influx of refugees from Myanmar to Bangladesh redefining Bangladesh’s relations with the regional and international powers, and the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan that has fundamentally altered the geopolitics of Central-South Asian politics in and around Afghanistan. Meanwhile, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka presented new-fashioned geopolitical determinants beyond the old-fashioned ones. After all, countries that rely on the market, multilateralism, and stable liberal capitalism are expected to rise as a regional power. The new geopolitics of the twenty-first century relies on economic development, technological advancement, and sound regional governance. That means, learning from the experiences of conservative political systems, it would be “too uncreative and unproductive to compete economically and militarily with liberal states or major powers. Their political regimes are also shaky since no social form other than liberal democracy or economic empowerment provides enough freedom and dignity for a contemporary society to remain stable” (Mead, 2014). Henceforth, rather than focusing on the misperception of ‘security,’ these two countries defined security in the context of development, social stability, and common regional stability.

Bangladesh emerged as a country that has remained politically stable so far, offering multilateral and bilateral economic and strategic resources to China and the U.S., allowing collective security and benefits for the region. Bangladesh remains the top trading partner of India in the region. Bangladesh’s import from China allows its export markets to benefit from cheaper goods. Its demographic resilience has helped keep the economy comparatively stable during and post-pandemic, along with its impressive human development indicators that have allowed foreign direct investment to grow. The United Nations Committee for



Development Policy (CDP) has confirmed that Bangladesh is eligible to exit from the Least Developed Country category, having crossed the threshold of three defining criteria, namely per capita GNI, Economic and Environmental Vulnerability Index (EVI), and Human Assets Index (HAI) (Bhattacharya, 2021). However, given the COVID-19 pandemic and taking note of a request by the Bangladesh government, the graduation year was deferred by two years, i.e., in 2026 (Bhattacharya, 2021).

Bangladesh's economic success and political stability have made it confident to seek increased participation in international trade and foster international strategic ties. The World Bank projects, "In Bangladesh, the recovery [pandemic] is expected to be gradual, with the growth of 3.6% in F.Y. 2020/21, which starts in July, and 5.1% in F.Y. 2021/22, as private consumption is supported by normalizing activity, moderate inflation, and rising garment exports" (The World Bank, 2021). Moreover, as part of its effort to ensure regional economic stability during the pandemic, the country has entered into an agreement with the Sri Lankan government for providing a bilateral loan in the form of a currency swap (The Daily Star, 2021). Such an initiative clarifies that the country has emerged as an influential regional power and increasingly becoming a critical factor in the Indo-Pacific region (Brewster, 2021). In the case of Sri Lanka, quite remarkably, three high ranking officials from Moscow, Beijing, and Washington (Chinese Foreign Minister and State Councillor Wang Yi and Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov, the U.S. Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Alice Wells) visited Colombo on January 13, 2020 – to establish initial outreach to the new Rajapaksa dispensation in Sri Lanka (Khan, The New Geopolitical Reality in the Bay of Bengal: Implications of Competition and Cooperation on Bangladesh-Sri Lanka Bilateral Relations., 2020). The timing and sequence broadly underscored each of their growing focus on Colombo (Khan, The New Geopolitical Reality in the Bay of Bengal: Implications of Competition and Cooperation on Bangladesh-Sri Lanka Bilateral Relations., 2020). The US and China are essential partners in Bangladesh and the Sri Lankan political economy of national development and social stability.

### **REGIONAL POWER OUTLOOK: THE POWER FULCRUM IMPERATIVES**

The waters between Bangladesh and Sri Lanka – hence the Bay of Bengal, became a critical factor with the rise of the US-backed Indo-Pacific strategic vocabulary that surfaced over the past few years. The Chinese-led magnum opus – the Belt Road Initiative (BRI) – collided with the Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) as both the initiatives have maritime and naval components as their integral objectives. The classic offensive realism fits in here. Hence, a growing narrative among the I.R. scholars in both countries seems to question the robustness and clarity of the Indo-Pacific Strategy and BRI's economic contents. Thus, the Bay has grown as an economic flashpoint and is increasingly becoming a geostrategic pivot. Hence, the domestic dimension of the U.S. and Chinese engagement with Bangladesh and Sri Lanka gradually became integrated with the IPS and the BRI dimensions.



Bangladesh has converted the Bay of Bengal, after peacefully resolving maritime disputes with India and Myanmar through the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) and the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA), as a significant investment bloc for the international community while retaining absolute 'strategic autonomy' and 'control' over its maritime territory. To ensure strategic autonomy, the armed forces have initiated diverse defence advancement and procurement strategy, attracting major powers to invest in Bangladesh's defence market. The Government of India and the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) jointly undertook a research expedition to discover accumulations of natural gas hydrate in its maritime territory in July 2016. The expedition was comprised of scientists and representatives of Oil and Natural Gas Corporation Limited of India, the USGS, the Japan Drilling Company, and the Japan Agency for Marine-Earth Science and Technology (Sarkar, 2020) (USGS, 2016). On the other hand, the Australian company Woodside Energy discovered gas off the coast of Myanmar (January 2016) in blocks shared with Myanmar Petroleum Resources and French oil major Total. A month later, Woodside made another gas discovery in a block operated by Daewoo International of Korea (Shin, 2016).

After settling the disputes with India and Myanmar, Bangladesh has a total number of 48 gas blocks. Of these, 22 are onshore, and 26 are offshore blocks. Of the offshore blocks, 11 are shallow blocs, while the remaining 15 are deep-sea blocks (The Financial Express, 2020). The U.S. companies produce over 55 percent of Bangladesh's domestic natural gas supply and are among the largest investors in power projects. The US-made power turbines currently provide 80 percent of Bangladesh's installed gas-fired power generation capacity (export.gov, 2018). In March 2017, without public tender, the government and state-run Petrobangla signed a Production Sharing Contract with POSCO Daewoo Corporation of South Korea for oil and gas exploration in deep-sea block 12 (export.gov, 2018). On February 17, 2014, India's largest international oil and gas E&P company ONGC Videsh (OVL), signed a Production Sharing Contract (PSC) with Bangladesh for two shallow-water exploration blocks SS-09 & SS-04 in the Bay of Bengal of Bangladesh (Offshore Energy, 2014). Australian Santos and Singapore's KrisEnergy jointly carried out a 3D seismic survey in block SS11 to explore hydrocarbon resources (The Financial Express, 2018).

While the Bay has become an open channel for investment, it has become a corridor for the IPS and BRI supply chain and maritime movements – ideally an alternate to the Chinese Malacca syndrome. The Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Myanmar in 2020, focusing on China-Myanmar Economic Corridor under B.R. projects, the Maldives and Sri Lanka in 2014, Pakistan in 2015, and Bangladesh in 2016 to sign BRI agreement, Nepal in 2019 and India in 2014, 2016, and 2019. In turn, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited China five times between 2014 and 2019 (Khan, The New Geopolitical Reality in the Bay of Bengal: Implications of Competition and Cooperation on Bangladesh-Sri Lanka Bilateral Relations., 2020). The Chinese government, under its flagship BRI, has initiated a deep-sea port at Kyaukphyu (Myanmar) on the Bay of Bengal, a railway project to connect the southwestern Chinese



province of Yunnan to Myanmar's coastal cities, an inland waterway through the Irrawaddy River and a mega-hydropower dam project are either stalled or making little progress (Yhome, 2020). Much of the investments in Myanmar are viewed as Beijing's securing footprint in the Bay.

Parallel to the Chinese investments, India completed the construction of a seaport and the inland water terminal in Sittwe, Rakhine State in Myanmar. This forms part of the US\$ 484 million Kaladan multi-modal transit transport project mooted in 2008, linking Kolkata Port (India) to Sittwe (Chern, 2019). Despite the Chinese and Indian efforts to build connectivity, the fact remains that the intra-regional connectivity among the BIMSTEC and SAARC countries remain absolutely below any rational level: while world exports in 2017 stood at around US\$ 17.8 trillion, rising from around \$ 16.1 trillion in the previous year, South Asian total trade is about 2.7% of the 'global trade (Khan, *The New Geopolitical Reality in the Bay of Bengal: Implications of Competition and Cooperation on Bangladesh-Sri Lanka Bilateral Relations.*, 2020). At present, intra-regional trade contributes only 5% of South Asia's total trade compared to 25% in ASEAN (The World Bank, 2021). It is 20% cheaper for India to trade with Brazil than Pakistan (Dasgupta, 2018). That shows that the regional connectivity, in which India plays a vital geographical role in terms of facilitating intra-regional trade, is inefficient compared to Southeast Asian countries. Bangladesh has embarked on developing Chittagong economic corridor and subsequently enhanced deep-sea port facilities toward the Bay and the Indo-Pacific. In this endeavour, Japan and China play critical roles as investors in infrastructure and market facilitators.

Bangladesh's maritime and eastward focus complement Sri Lanka's regional interests linked with harnessing ocean resources, extractions from the seabed, and control over supply chains – both in terms of commercial and strategic. Chinese built Port of Hambantota, situated in the strategic southwestern part of Sri Lanka and right along with the global merchant maritime traffic, dominates the Western discourse of national security and South Asian narrative of Indo-Pacific strategy or worries thereof (Khan, *The New Geopolitical Reality in the Bay of Bengal: Implications of Competition and Cooperation on Bangladesh-Sri Lanka Bilateral Relations.*, 2020). This is perhaps one reason when former Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe's vision of positing Sri Lanka as a multi-dimensional hub in the Indian Ocean and consequently floating Sri Lanka's idea of securing the Indian Ocean as a zone of growth and prosperity since 2017 was markedly fraught with ambivalence by 'QUAD' which may have become a fragile coalition after the rise of a better equipped Indo-Pacific tri-lateral security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States (AUKUS). However, the Sri Lanka government has diversified its strategic investment portfolio, allowing Japan and India to invest in crucial areas.

The Sri Lanka Ports Authority (SLPA) signed a Memorandum of Cooperation (MOC) to jointly develop the East Container Terminal (ECT) of the Colombo Port, next to the Chinese-run



container jetty in Colombo harbour. India and Japan will likely deepen and develop this facility to allow large container ships to enter seamlessly (Khan, *The New Geopolitical Reality in the Bay of Bengal: Implications of Competition and Cooperation on Bangladesh-Sri Lanka Bilateral Relations.*, 2020). Indian ports such as Vizhinjam and Colachel are entering the logistics chain. Two trans-shipment ports, the Vallarpadam port in Cochin and the under-construction Vizhinjam port in Trivandrum, are already in existence. The proposed Colachel port would be the third major trans-shipment port in the region. The logic of competing with Colombo port was used while building the Vallarpadam trans-shipment port at Cochin and in clearing the Vizhinjam trans-shipment port in Trivandrum (Jamwal, 2017). The Western powers, including Australia and the U.S., have sought to counter-balance China's growing influence across the region by launching their infrastructure funds, e.g., US\$ 113 million U.S. fund announced in August 2018 for the digital economy, energy, and infrastructure projects (Jeffrey, 2019).

While the balance and counter-balance efforts continued, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka continued to focus on domestic priorities. Bangladesh's foreign policy measured two challenges: (a) renewed potential for an escalated arms race and military engagement; and (b) strategic conflicts between BRI and IPS. These two dynamics are further linked with the Chinese Maritime Silk Route (MSR) that aspires to build alternative maritime governance rules and norms than the Western-led existing maritime governance systems, and international seabed authority's approval to allow exploration of polymetallic nodules, polymetallic sulphides, and cobalt-rich ferromanganese crusts from the deep seabed. The exploration area will include the Clarion-Clipperton Fracture Zone, Central Indian Ocean Basin, and Western Pacific Ocean (International Seabed Authority, 2021). The contracts will eventually pave the way for unmanned competition for deep-sea exploration in the Indo-Pacific waters having strategic and geopolitical fallouts. Given these past, present, and future changes and assessing the capabilities of the regional countries, calibrating strategic relations with and balancing relations between Beijing and Washington has become vital priorities. Henceforth, the whole approach to the great power game has made Bangladesh and Sri Lanka emerging power fulcrums in the Bay of Bengal region over the past five years.

Reflecting on the geopolitical environment and economic priorities of Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, it's clear that these two countries have provided robust opportunities for the major powers to invest in economic spheres. Both the countries have prioritized multilateralism and sought to maintain regional stability without being defence heavy. As seen earlier in this paper, the Bay of Bengal has become a critical factor for the major powers due to power competition among the major powers in the Indo-Pacific. While the traditional geopolitical sphere is important for Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, i.e., China and U.S.'s interests and presence in the region, non-traditional issues such as maritime piracy, climate change, pollution, illegal fishing, unmanned vessel movements, and human and narcotics trafficking through sea routes are the pressing issues that require regional solutions. In this interaction between



traditional and non-traditional security issues, historically, India has seen itself as the natural leader of the adjoining ocean that even carries its own name (Singh, 2018). While itself having a cartographic crisis with Nepal, border crisis with China and Pakistan, and mounting domestic pressures rising from the ultra-rights, India's perceived role as "net security provider," often backed by its diaspora, now requires strategic, economic, and political supports from Bangladesh and Sri Lanka to sustain (Singh, 2018) (Kathmandu Post, 2020). Nonetheless, Singh (2018) rightly argued, "yet, neither historically nor now has India's assumed dominance been to the exclusion of the part played by other nations, most notably from outside the region. The arrival of China, however, sets this international context in a totally different light" (Singh, 2018).

Given the role of Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and India, then need to call for greater cooperation through existing regional settings in which Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives, Myanmar, and Thailand are already stakeholders. What remains imperative is to strengthen the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the only South-Southeast Asian platform – Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), along with newly emerged institution such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). The SAARC comprises of 1.7 billion population, which is equivalent to 21% of the world's population, covers 3% of the world's area and 4.21% (US\$3.67 trillion) of the global economy (International Monetary Fund, 2019). BIMSTEC covers around 1.5 billion people and constitutes around 22% of the global population, with a combined gross domestic product (GDP) of 2.7 trillion (BIMSTEC, 2021). These two regions combined present the possibility of becoming a US\$10 trillion economy over the next decade. Modern technologies and economic opportunities, changing consumer attitudes, aging, women empowerment, and pandemic impacts are rapidly diversifying and segmenting the markets in these two regions (McKinsey Global Institute, 2021). Therefore, reforming SAARC and BIMSTEC, taking the business chambers and private sector on board, is necessary to deliver better regional cooperation.

What it means is that the regional power fulcrum has two dimensions – national strength and regional cooperation. Bangladesh has entered strategic dialogues with the U.S. and U.K. It has strategic partnerships with China and India. It has diversified its defence cooperation beyond binary Sino-US orbits, paving ways for an open and free Bay of Bengal. Therefore, these countries must manage more effectively this shared maritime domain (Hardy, 2019). Among these three countries, Bangladesh acts as a security provider to the Bay of Bengal, Burmese Rohingyas, Indian Northeast, regional economy, and overall, to the world as the largest peacekeeper in the U.N. missions. It, too, shows that the power fulcrum has significantly shifted. What is needed for these three countries, then, to allow regional cooperation to thrive and focus on the sustainable use of the ocean within the framework of the blue economy as Bangladesh and Sri Lanka see. As Hussain et al. identified, "the Bay is still at an emergent stage and there would undoubtedly be gains if the various states can agree





priorities and joint development. The preparation, for instance, of a zoning plan for the Bay would maximize yields on a sustainable basis” (Hussain, Failler, & A Al Karim, 2018).

In line with Hussain et al.’s arguments, the Bay should be seen through the prism of transparency and equitable governance. Larkin (2016) identified that “over the next decade, the market-driven explosion of surveillance sensors and data analytics will bring an unprecedented level of transparency to maritime affairs. Commercial satellites will capture daily images of the entire globe, offering inexpensive and automated reports on everything from crop yields to maritime activity” (Larkin, 2016). Therefore, it will be only rational to pursue an open and transparent Bay policy in the coming years. This transparency policy will be crucial for stability in South Asia, the Bay of Bengal region, and beyond. *Ceteris paribus*, the blurring space between geopolitics and geoeconomics, attests that Bangladesh is gradually, if not already, assuming political and economic leadership in the region (Khan, *The Bangladesh-US Bilateral Relations: Rethinking through the Blurring Space between Geopolitics and Geoeconomics in the Indo-Pacific Region*, 2021). While many developing countries have trumpeted balancing acts between superpowers, in most cases, the political economy did not meet the rhetoric, and the geostrategic conundrum gave way to compromises with either East or West. Bangladesh has shown an independent international stance (Khan, *The New Geopolitical Reality in the Bay of Bengal: Implications of Competition and Cooperation on Bangladesh-Sri Lanka Bilateral Relations.*, 2020). This is a classic example that must be factored in after reviewing the US-Chinese policies toward the Bay and the region (Khan, *The New Geopolitical Reality in the Bay of Bengal: Implications of Competition and Cooperation on Bangladesh-Sri Lanka Bilateral Relations.*, 2020).

### **CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A NEW DISCOURSE OF RELIABILITY AND ALLIANCE?**

In the economic realm, further strengthening the great power involvements within the Indo-Pacific context would mean ensuring a rule-based system that will deliver economic goods to the Indo-Pacific countries, whereas, in the strategic realm, Indo-Pacific cooperation would mean strengthening Bangladesh and Sri Lanka’s strategic autonomy in the Bay of Bengal through economic, technological, and institutional cooperation. This will have a positive economic spill over effect on its neighbouring countries too. Bangladesh is aware that negotiating Beijing’s role in the Indo-Pacific will be no option. However, some Indo-Pacific states may seek U.S. help to preserve their strategic interests in the face of China’s rise (Campbell & Doshi, 2021) (Khan, *The New Geopolitical Reality in the Bay of Bengal: Implications of Competition and Cooperation on Bangladesh-Sri Lanka Bilateral Relations.*, 2020). As discussed in this article, what is needed for all these four countries is to review the level of “alliance reliability” from their perspectives under this evolving and complex situation.

The ‘reliability’ factor has become a critical issue in foreign policymaking, public perception toward the powers, and political behaviour in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. With the growth of modern



technologies and shifts in demography, acceptability, and political implication of ‘tilt’ toward a power has become a fundamental concern for the political leadership, at least in Bangladesh. As a result, the reliability on a major power will depend on “the relative value of particular interests and the manner in which the interests should be pursued” (Henry, 2020). Given the histories of the U.S. strategic engagement in South Asia or the Sri Lankan experiences with the Chinese investment, the most critical manifestation of a dependable ally is that “it does not pose a risk of abandonment or entrapment” (Hardy, 2019). However, it does not automatically mean that the allies will have to agree on all the issues, but the magnitude of convergence and divergence of interests should be synchronized with national and regional stability.

Therefore, this article has advanced the debate about the rise of new regional powers and their dilemmas with the major powers involved in the Indo-Pacific region. Bangladesh and Sri Lanka’s presence in the Indo-Pacific has paved a new strategic power play that has gone unnoticed in media optics. In contrast, these two countries have emerged as a critical source of stability in the region. While the U.S. may argue on the political front that the Chinese are challenging the liberal order, but it will be hard to use this argument in South Asia with the rise of new forms of political practices – fundamentally different than liberal democracy to a great extent. On the other hand, the Chinese narrative that the U.S. is distorting the regional stability is relatively weak. Regional stability is linked mainly with domestic politics than regional interests. South Asian countries expose a classic example of an absence of regional consensus on the basic principles of trade, investment, and connectivity, let alone political cooperation, as evident from intra-regional trade. Henceforth, China’s relationship to international and regional orders is a reality; the U.S. projection of power in the Indo-Pacific will continue to grow is another set of reality. Amid these two sets of structures, the Bay of Bengal can potentially offer a ‘stability buffer’ shall ‘alliance reliability’ be used accurately. This will require strengthening the regional institutions, establishing regional norms and governance regimes, and an inclusive approach to regional traditional and non-traditional security issues. At the end of the day, the global economic system will continue to remain highly interdependent, despite future pandemics or catastrophes of any form, and the Indo-Pacific will serve as a crucial pivotal in facilitating and sustaining international economy and human connectivity across the world.

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