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Q5(e)

Despite deep ties, India's relations with Sri Lanka have seen strains due to China's growing influence in Sri Lanka through investments and economic dominance. Analyse.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · PSIR GS 2 · 10 marks · Recent developments in Indian Foreign policy

Recent developments in Indian Foreign policy: India's position on the recent crisis in Afghanistan, Iraq and West Asia, growing relations with US and Israel; vision of a new world order.

Core demand of the question

- State the depth of India-Sri Lanka ties
- Show China's investment and port footprint, especially **Hambantota**
- Analyse strains and India's remaining cards after the **2022 crisis**

Revision summary

India and Sri Lanka share people-to-people, security and neighbourhood-first ties, including the civil-war and 13th Amendment file.

Chinese infrastructure credit, **Colombo Port City** and the **Hambantota** lease created economic presence with strategic meaning for Delhi.

Colombo used China to hedge Indian political weight, especially on Tamil issues.

The 2022 debt crisis restored India's role as first financier and IMF-era partner.

Strain is real omni-enmeshment, not a finished Chinese capture of the island.

Introduction

India and **Sri Lanka** share religion, language zones, a narrow strait, and a long security intimacy, including India's role in the civil-war years and in the **13th Amendment** debate. Those **deep ties** have been strained as **China** financed infrastructure and gained **economic presence**, most famously at **Hambantota**. The analysis must hold both facts: strain is real; geography and the **2022 crisis** still pull Colombo toward Delhi.

Body

Deep ties

Tamil Nadu politics, fisheries, Buddhism, and Indian tourists and investment are everyday links. India is a first responder in disaster and, in 2022, in **credit, fuel and currency support** when Sri Lanka's sovereign debt collapsed. Defence dialogues and the neighbourhood-first claim treat the island as vital ground in the Indian Ocean, which is why the Indo-Pacific vocabulary of 5(d) includes Sri Lanka whether Colombo likes the label or not.

China's economic dominance as politics

Chinese loans and contractors built ports, highways and the **Colombo Port City** vision. **Hambantota** port's long lease after debt distress became the global example of a strategic

asset shifting under commercial stress. For India, a Chinese-run deep port on the southern flank, plus possible dual-use visits, is a **security externalities** problem like Bhutan's border, only maritime. Colombo's earlier governments used Chinese money to reduce dependence on India, especially when Delhi was associated with Tamil concerns and with 1987 intervention memory.

Strains show up as delayed energy projects with India, mixed messages on Chinese 'research' vessels, and domestic Sri Lankan politics that treat Indian proximity as interference and Chinese proximity as development.

Analyse, do not flatten

China did not buy Sri Lankan identity. It bought **time and concrete** when Indian and Western finance were slower or more conditional. The 2022 default damaged the Chinese model's reputation as costless. India's aid, IMF-linked recovery, and renewed talk of connectivity (ports, power, tourism) showed that **economic dominance is reversible in influence if not in every lease**. Tamil aspirations and fishermen's livelihoods remain Indian domestic constraints that China does not carry.

- **The relationship is therefore a triangle:** Colombo hedges; Beijing builds; Delhi both resents and remains indispensable. Strain is the price of a neighbour's omni-enmeshment. It is not a completed loss of the island.

Flow diagram

Deep India-Sri Lanka ties -> Strain
China loans ports -> Hambantota
Hambantota -> Strain
2022 crisis Indian support -> Residual Indian cards

Conclusion

India-Sri Lanka ties remain thick in people, security and crisis finance. Chinese investment, **Hambantota** and port-city politics have strained that intimacy by giving Colombo another paymaster. The 2022 crash showed the limit of that paymaster. Analysis should register strain without writing India out of the map.

Facts & figures

Hambantota

Southern port built with Chinese finance; a long lease after debt trouble became India's emblem of strategic risk.

2022 crisis

Sri Lankan default and political collapse; India extended substantial credit and fuel support.

Colombo Port City

Chinese-backed urban and financial project on reclaimed land, a symbol of economic presence beyond a single port.

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