

Ripples in the Indian Ocean: Chinese Research Ships and Sri Lanka's Diplomatic Dilemma

By Shakthi De Silva

Nestled in the heart of the Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka assumes a **strategic importance** resonating far beyond its palm-fringed shores. With a rich tapestry of history, culture, and commerce, the island nation stands as a testament to the convergence of maritime trade routes from the East to the West, rendering it a linchpin in the intricate web of global geopolitics.

Scholarly inquiry into Sri Lanka's ties with resurging Asian powers predominantly centres on **debt, infrastructure, and trade**. Often overlooked in these analyses are developments which may not garner immediate changes on the ground but reflect the strategic calculations of nations competing for influence in the Indian Ocean. A case in point is the arrival of Chinese "**research vessels**"—or what India has taken to calling "**spy ships**"—into Sri Lankan waters, ostensibly for oceanographic research.

Chinese Research Ships and Sri Lanka

In recent years, China's naval modernisation efforts has enabled it to **surpass** the United States (US) Navy in number of battle force ships. A key component in China's naval toolkit are its research vessels—outfitted with



instruments to survey water currents and features on the seafloor—crucial information for conducting submarine operations. The importance Beijing ascribes to these research activities is evident in its **14th Five-Year Plan**, which highlights deep-sea exploration as a key focus for scientific and technological advancement, as well as in the 2021 **directives** of the Ministry of Natural Resources.

A **news article** in August 2023 reported that at least nineteen Chinese research vessels had visited Sri Lanka in recent years. Indeed, their increased presence has sparked significant discussion, particularly the arrival of Yuan Wang 5 and Shi Yan 6. This article will delve deeply into both cases, discussing the developments surrounding the arrival of both vessels, how they were received by India and the US as well as the steps taken by Sri Lanka to balance their interests with that of Beijing.

In August 2022, the Chinese research vessel Yuan Wang 5, one of four ships **operated** by the China Satellite Maritime Tracking and Controlling Department, reached Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka. India **protested** against the port visit, despite the vessel's seemingly benign purpose of replenishing its supplies. Initially, Sri Lankan policy makers urged the vessel to delay its arrival following numerous high-level meetings with Indian and US officials. US Ambassador Julie Chung for example, met with President Ranil Wickremasinghe to express concerns about the ship's arrival, drawing criticism from China for what they deemed as "**gross interference**" from other nations. Clearance for the vessel to dock was granted on the **condition** that it activated its Automatic Identification System (AIS) and refrained from conducting any scientific research in Sri Lankan waters. While these conditions were largely perceived as being imposed on the Chinese vessel at India's insistence, it remains noteworthy that the final decision to permit the vessel's entry into Hambantota Port **rested** with the Sri Lankan government, despite China Merchants Port Holdings owning **85 percent** of the port shares.

In October 2023, the Chinese research vessel Shi Yan 6 docked in Colombo for an extended period. The vessel was **reportedly** engaged in geophysical scientific research in collaboration with Sri Lanka's National Aquatic Resources Research and Development Agency (NARA). Sri Lanka's state-run University of Ruhuna had initially **entered** into an agreement with the vessel

to jointly conduct research on the ocean floor alongside NARA. However, the university withdrew from the collaboration, citing a **lack of experts** necessary to participate in the joint research with Shi Yan 6.

India expressed **concerns**, contending that Shi Yan 6 might gather sensitive data on underwater features, submarine routes, and biological resources "within India's perceived sphere of influence." US Under Secretary of State Victoria Nuland met with the Sri Lankan foreign minister in New York, during which she personally **conveyed** America's concerns regarding the ship's visit. Nevertheless, the vessel entered Sri Lankan waters and conducted research with NARA for several days. Professor Emerita Ruchira Cumaratunga, who founded the oceanography department at Ruhuna University, highlighted the lack of transparency regarding the data collected. She observed that in previous collaborations with foreign vessels, the data collected could be "**accessed by anyone,**" but in the case of Shi Yan 6, there was little public information over exactly what data was collected and where it was stored.

Both visits have significant geopolitical implications and underscore the strategic calculus of India, the US and China. Firstly, the presence of Chinese research vessels in Sri Lankan waters underscores China's expanding maritime interests and its desire to establish a stronger foothold in the Indian Ocean.

The deployment of these vessels may become precursors to a more sustained naval presence in South Asia and the Bay of Bengal, justified on the grounds of deep-sea research and dealing with the threat of piracy. Recent analogies in **Vietnam** in relation to unpermitted entry of Chinese research vessels—escorted by China’s coast guard—into Vietnam’s exclusive economic zone (EEZ) adds to Sri Lanka’s apprehensions. Thus far however, research vessels have sought permission before entry and Sri Lanka’s requests, such as to switch off onboard equipment while in the island’s waters, have been **accepted**. As China expands its engagement and influence in the region however, it remains to be seen whether they would continue adhering to these practices.

Indian and US protests against these port visits highlight their concern over China’s growing presence in the Indian Ocean. India, since independence, has been wary about regional and extra-regional great power involvement in what it considers its ‘backyard’. China’s **base** in Djibouti coupled with its growing **presence** in South Asia’s port infrastructure landscape weakens India’s influence in the region. Recent **elections in Maldives** might portend greater alignment between Malé and Beijing, intensifying New Delhi’s concern. Thus, given the geopolitical backdrop, India and the US have been visibly concerned about Beijing’s ability and desire to deploy research vessels. What Beijing intends to do with the data that is harvested also remains **unclear**.

Sri Lanka’s Response

Against this backdrop, Sri Lanka implemented a moratorium on foreign research vessels visiting the country, commencing on January 1, 2024. The government’s justification for this measure has lacked consistency. A spokesperson for the Sri Lankan Foreign Ministry asserted that the one-year moratorium aimed to enable local universities and research centres to enhance their capacity for conducting joint research with foreign counterparts. This, ostensibly, would facilitate Sri Lanka’s participation in such activities as **“equal partners.”** Conversely, Sri Lanka’s foreign minister **contended** that the “arrival of these [foreign] ships creates serious diplomatic tensions and it [2024] is an election year . . . such ship visits can be highly disruptive . . . because of the pressure the government may come under.”

The Sri Lankan Foreign Ministry also vigorously **refuted** Indian media reports suggesting that the moratorium was specifically targeted at Chinese ships to appease New Delhi. Nevertheless, as a consequence of this moratorium, Xiang Yang Hong 3, another Chinese vessel, was no longer permitted to dock in Sri Lankan waters. The vessel had sought permission to map the ocean from January 5, to the end of May 2024.

While some reports suggest that the moratorium was implemented to allow the government time to develop its own marine research capabilities, doubts arise regarding

the accuracy of these claims, especially since NARA did not cite any difficulties when collaborating with the previous Chinese research vessel. It remains unclear what measures the University of Ruhuna will undertake to enhance its marine research capabilities. However, based on their earlier explanation, it can be inferred that this may involve training existing staff or recruiting new personnel to collaborate with Chinese researchers as equal partners. Given the **low public approval ratings** for the Wickremasinghe government, it is plausible that this justification was provided as a convenient excuse.

As mentioned earlier, the fact that the moratorium is specified for one year suggests that it was primarily influenced by the upcoming elections scheduled for 2024. The presidential election is likely to be **held** between September and October 2024, while parliamentary elections must take place before August 2025. Recent polls indicate that the incumbent, Ranil Wickremesinghe, can only secure around **13 percent** of the total vote, placing him at the bottom tier of candidates likely to win the presidential election. As the elections approach, minimising complications over issues such as the arrival of foreign research ships is crucial for the president. Therefore, even if Sri Lanka's decision is interpreted as an attempt to address New Delhi's immediate concerns regarding Chinese research vessels arriving in Sri Lanka, it is difficult to assume that the island's policy makers will extend the moratorium beyond 2024.

Nevertheless, the moratorium if consistently applied, will help alleviate pressure exerted by both India and the US on the Sri Lankan government.

A recent **decision** by Sri Lanka to grant permission to the German research vessel, the RV Sonne, to dock in the island indicates that the ban was primarily imposed to address pressures from India, China, and the US. **Reportedly**, a senior delegation from the People's Liberation Army visiting the island was "furious" regarding such perceived selective treatment, prompting the Sri Lankan government to clarify that "the ban on foreign ships is for research purposes, not replenishment." The government appears to have taken note of China's criticisms as it denied entry to a US research ship from entering Sri Lankan waters for replenishment in April this year. Upon a request made by it for fuel and food supplies, the Sri Lankan government **opted** to send a vessel to international waters to provide the necessary replenishments. To pre-empt future criticisms of this nature, it is imperative for Sri Lanka to adopt a consistent policy, uniformly applied across all nations, at least during this moratorium period, vis-a-vis research and replenishment activities.

How Should India and the United States Respond?

India would be better served not by pressuring Sri Lanka to refuse entry to Chinese research vessels but rather by fostering stronger ties with the **likely successor** to the present government.

This approach would enable New Delhi to address its concerns with the Sri Lankan government and mitigate potential espionage activities by Chinese research vessels. Continued economic support is also crucial to garner goodwill among the public and bureaucracy, particularly amid Sri Lanka's ongoing efforts at debt restructuring.

Meanwhile, Washington should persist in utilising aid and investments to bolster its favourable image in Sri Lanka. Recent initiatives, such as the US decision to invest more than **half a billion dollars** to bolster the development of the West Container Terminal in the Port of Colombo, are encouraging. This development would provide competition to the CICT Terminal, operated by a Chinese state-owned enterprise.

Sri Lanka's future government must remain mindful of the concerns of all major powers, especially India, and ensure that its foreign policy stance aligns with its **long-term national interests**, particularly regarding the sensitive issue of Chinese research vessels. The formulation of a standard operating procedure for visits by foreign ships, currently under consideration by policy makers, represents a positive step. Moreover, prioritising closer engagement with India and other Western economies, such as France and the US, to identify synergies in maritime domain awareness and capacity-building assistance, are strategies the island should pursue.

Shakthi De Silva is a Non-Resident Vasey Fellow at Pacific Forum International (2023-24) and a Visiting Lecturer at the Royal Institute of Colombo where he teaches courses on International Relations. He previously served as a Lecturer at the University of Colombo (Sri Lanka) and as a Researcher for think tanks in the Sri Lankan Defence Ministry and Ministry of Foreign Affairs. His publications have been featured in *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, *Journal on Defence & Policy Analysis* and *South Asian Survey*. He posts on X (formerly Twitter) at [@shakthi721994](https://twitter.com/shakthi721994).