

# A Tale of Two States under the Dragon's Gaze: Sri Lanka and the Maldives in Beijing's Indian Ocean Strategy

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## Abstract

The ongoing growth of Chinese naval presence in Indian Ocean and PRC's rapport with Maldives and Sri Lanka denote the importance of Indian Ocean to the Chinese. This article is an attempt to understand how China's own set of rules lying beyond the rule-based international order help to penetrate the weak and fragile states. Seen from the perspective of the contemporary worldview, China's rivalry with the existing norms prevailing in the liberal international order is similar to a clash between different worldviews, where some try to commit to the ideals espoused by the Atlantic Charter, such as self-government, economic prosperity, free trade, and the preservation of global goods, while others challenge its legitimacy. China's abhorrence to the Western dominant international order reflects its own world view that differs from the West. This article seeks to examine China's nuanced maritime policy towards the Indian Ocean and Beijing's attempts to exploit the weaker states in the region. While examining these factors, this article aptly analyses China's threat perception which leads Beijing to galvanize its security implications. Also, the results emerging from this paper will elucidate on how small states like Sri Lanka and the Maldives are likely to become the phony states in the security cauldron of South Asia.

**Keywords:** China, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, naval power, rule-based international order  
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## Introduction

"One of the greatest paradoxes of China today [...] is Xi Jinping's effort to position himself as a champion of globalization, while at the same time restricting the free flow of capital, information and goods between China and the rest of the world" (Economy, 2018: x). As Elizabeth Economy correctly argues, the perplexing nature of Xi Jinping's state policy tends to bemuse the analysts in the West. Xi's famous "national rejuvenation" narrative is a profound appeal to evoke China's glorious past, in which China remained the epicenter for inventions, navigations and many other contributions to humanity. Reflecting on the grandeur of the past, Xi often proclaims the utmost need of all Chinese citizens to devote themselves to the fulfilment of the great Chinese Dream (*Zhongguo meng*), which inherently differs from the individualistic American dream (Singh, 2023). The trajectories that encompass the vision of fulfilling the Chinese dream consist of multiple layers such as increasing economic growth, military capacity and the social well-being of the people.

Yijian rightly points that "[P]ossession of a big and powerful naval force is of great strategic importance in defending national security promoting a nation's economic development, and maintaining a nation's international standing" (Yijian, 2016: 14). The undeniable strength attained by the PLAN (People's Liberation Army Navy) during the past two decades made some unprecedented moves to China to challenge the rule-based international order. The first instance in the recent past showing the macho nature of the Chinese in its maritime ambitions was the South China Sea dispute and Beijing's denial of complying with the ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration, which found that China's constant claims had no legal basis. More than rejecting the ruling of PCA, Beijing is adamant in its position, which claims that China has undisputed claim for the South China Sea based on its historical roots (Luo, 2023).

The stark reality that lies in current Chinese strategic thinking mainly comes from Beijing's ever growing perception of threat filled with a sceptic attitude towards the West, which needs to be understood in light of the historical humiliations that the Chinese encountered with the West. Regarding China's ambivalence towards the universalization of liberal international law, Ruskola (2013) suggests it may have arisen from the Chinese psyche, which still echoes the period of unequal treaties that China had undergone before the Western powers in the 19th century. The West's explicit denial of China's claim for the South China Sea in the aftermath of the Chinese military exercises there in 2021 increased Beijing's wrath further as China has been claiming its legitimacy towards the South China Sea since 2009. China's rights to the South China Sea are mainly based on its historical claim that dates back to the Han dynasty in the 2nd Century B.C., which makes no rational ground to Western scholars as the UN Convention for the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) does not grant signatories right to build such a claim. The constant naval excesses performed by the US in the South China Sea is a provocative gesture that continues to increase Chinese threat perception which eventually leads to buttressing China's naval strategy.

Secondly, the rise of Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean sends a palpable signal to the West and unleashes tremendous pressure upon the stability of Indian Ocean region (IOR). In his commentary to Foreign Affairs, Stephan M. Walt argues the benign intention projected by the US foreign policy apparatus towards a rule-based international order is at stake before China's lofty ambition by setting up its own rules (Walt, 2022). Many decades ago, a celebrated IR theorist in the West, Hedley Bull, defined international society as a group of states, bound by a set of common rules (Bull, 1977). After waking up from its long slumber, China adhered to a rule-based international order by embracing the changing world realities in the post-world order, which culminated in China's ascendancy to the World Trade Organization in 2001. However, a much stronger China led by Xi Jinping since 2013 has shown a notable willingness to ignore the international rules. Before beginning any critical inquiry into the Chinese notion of the centrality of the sea power, it becomes indispensable to examine the impetuses that buttressed China's own version of international order, which is by all means an anathema to the rule-based international order led by Washington.

## Literature review

Seen from the perspective of the contemporary worldview, China's rivalry with the existing norms prevailing in the liberal international order is similar to a clash between different worldviews, where some try to commit to the ideals espoused by the Atlantic Charter, such as self-government, economic prosperity, free trade, and the preservation of global goods, while others challenge its legitimacy. China's abhorrence to the Western dominant international order reflects its own world view that differs from the West. The historical encounter between China and the West that reached its zenith in the Opium War (1839-1842) is depicted as a cultural misunderstanding by the Chinese as it ended China's pride. Teemu Ruskola explicates this in the following way: "This imperial conception of political space as graduated, uneven, and discontinuous – rather than abstract, empty, and homogeneous – was matched by a profoundly teleological notion of time that had no room for isomorphic nation states moving in tandem along an endless highway of history. In the orthodox Confucian view, the arc of history bends backward, toward a long- lost Golden Age that Confucius himself sought to recover on the basis of the classic works of Chinese antiquity. A ruler's task was to reverse the decay caused by time and return the world to the state of harmony of a bygone era when peace and virtue reigned" (Ruskola, 2013: 110). As Ruskola aptly observed, China maintained a strict policy of placing itself as the epicenter of the world, where China's refusal to accept the post-Westphalian norms such as protocols for receiving diplomatic representatives and equality excluded China from being admitted to the full membership of the nations (Ibid.).

The nourishment that pervaded the Chinese ideology throughout its history played a pivotal role in shaping China's outlook. Two major philosophical thoughts named *Le* (Confucianism) and *Fa* (Legalism) bolstered the formation of Chinese society, which can be simply compared to the dichotomy between natural law and positive law in the Western

tradition (Pan, 2011). *Li* refers to the use of moral rules to regulate individual behavior in accordance with natural law. *Fa*, which is often comparable to “legalism” or “law”, is traditionally different from the western concept of law. While *Li* remains persuasive and enforced by the social sanctions, *Fa* is known for its punitive nature. The Chinese idea of international order is a direct offshoot of the philosophical speculation prevailed in the Chinese mind and it was a notable factor that China itself aspired to find *Li* in international order as a universally harmonious mandate of all the states. Tieya Wang and Min Wei, two of the leading authorities in the Chinese attitude towards international law, define international order as “the sum total of principles, rules, regulations and systems which are binding and which mainly regulate interstate relations. While states are subject to the binding force of international law, they are also the makers of international law. Therefore, the basis for the legal effect of international law can only be attributed to states themselves, that is, the will of states” (Wang and Wei, 1981: 1). However, what China confronted in its colonial encounters and the realities that encompassed them after the modern liberal international order emerged was a stark contrast to the Chinese notion. The Chinese idea of international order is a direct consequence of the philosophical speculations prevalent in the Chinese mind. It should be noted that China itself seeks to find *Li* in international order as a universal harmony of all states.

China remained on the sidelines for a significant period of time, not adhering to the international order, until Deng Xiaoping brought the country out of self-imposed isolation in the 1970s. Yet, this mechanism intended to be a gradual rise without arousing unease among its neighbors as Deng Xiaoping advocated his famous watchword *tao guang yang hui* which translates plainly as “develop capabilities while keeping a low profile” (Men, 2003: 45). The so-called “Peaceful Rise of China” acknowledges a later version of the “Great China Dream” idealized by Xi Jinping, whose narratives extol civilizational greatness while acknowledging that *Li* is not recognized as a universal norm in the international order. Xi’s obsession with the concept of *Zhongguo* (Middle Kingdom) is more than a blunt rhetoric because of its broader appeal that lies beyond geography. From a vantage point, the Middle Kingdom denotes that China is the cultural, political and economic center of the world with a greater legacy that lasted until China stumbled into an epoch of humiliation before the Western powers. When Xi invoked the idea of restoring China’s lost glory, he referred to China’s ability to lead to global institutions and norms in a way that will embody the ethos of Beijing (Economy, 2014: 85).

Xi Jinping, who is regarded as the most powerful Chinese leader after Mao, seems to have been fascinated with the idea of maintaining a duality towards the international order. On the one side, Beijing strived to gain a clout in the international organizations, in which Beijing increased the presence of its nationals in most of the organizations. After surpassing Japan by becoming the second largest economy in the world in 2010, China accelerated its presence in international monetary institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (Shambaugh, 2016). On the other side, China began to develop its institutions by taking more dominant stances, which eventually challenged the equilibrium

of the international order that lasted since the end of the Second World War. Shanghai Cooperation Organization created by the People's Republic of China in 1996 became a vehicle for Beijing to consolidate its influence upon the countries as a substitute for the Washington consensus. Notwithstanding this conspicuous duplicity, the West dwelled in a notion that China would become more responsible in contributing to the international governance. In 2005, Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick publicly urged China to become a responsible actor in the international system (Zoellick, 2011). On the contrary, China opted for a more subverted position, in which Beijing placed itself at the core. When Xi Jinping created the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013, his vision was clear, as it embodied a new international order with Chinese characteristics.

## Discussion

The ongoing geopolitical rivalries based on the Indo-Pacific region expose China's yearning to overcome the primacy of India, which is a state that adhered to the rule-based international order and as an US ally. China's entry into the Indian Ocean forges the security cooperation between India and the West as it created various alliances such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) and I2U2 (a partnership between India, Israel, the UAE, and the US). Despite the security vulnerabilities, which alter the equilibrium of the Indian Ocean, China tends to seize the opportunities arising out of the fragile conditions of the region (Amarasinghe, 2023). The fragility of the political and economic discontent that prevailed in South Asia seemed to have generated an apt path for Beijing to exploit the situation. It may not be an exaggeration to argue that most of India's neighbors in the region do not maintain a candid relationship with New Delhi based on India's own dubious history of interventions in the internal matters of the countries. Given the anti-Indian stances remaining beneath the highest echelons of powers in South Asia, Beijing uses its unconventional methods to get into stride. The use of methods denied by the rule-based international order is quite a distinctive feature of the Chinese policy towards the fragile states in South Asia. Chinese presence in Sri Lanka is emblematic of the long-term chicanery deployed by the Chinese in the island nation to accomplish their goal, which dates back to the last phase of Sri Lanka's civil war, in which China continued to provide arms and ammunition to the Rajapaksa regime in Colombo regardless of the international criticism of the alleged violations of human rights in Sri Lanka. In the post-war scenario, China rose to eminence as the biggest investor in Sri Lanka under the fullest support of the Rajapaksa regime (*Ibidem.*). Many of the investment projects were given to the Chinese through the informal methods wherein Chinese had no concern in the domestic politics of the island and also Beijing was much enthusiastic in providing the technical support for many of the development projects in the country. Another crucial factor in China's Sri Lanka foray is its stringent position on the local political elites in the island.

When Chinese influence began to soar in Sri Lanka, then Sri Lankan president Mahinda Rajapaksa pretended to depict it as another strong friendship derived historically which

would not undermine Lanka's affinity with India at any cost. Gradually China penetrated the higher pillars of the state apparatus of the country as China sought a mechanism to leverage its presence. In many instances, the Chinese generously supported the political campaign of Mahinda Rajapaksa and during the 2015 Presidential Election, one Chinese company paid \$ 7.7 Million to his election campaign (Abeyagoonasekera, 2022). Besides bribing the political elites in Sri Lanka, China turned to the civil society represented by the academia and clergy to bolster its public image among the Sri Lankans as a country that wishes Sri Lanka's progress. In this context, China confronted the strong Indian civilization roots in Sri Lanka society as historically India was considered as the land from where Buddhism reached Sri Lanka. Emboldened by the shared Buddhist values in the past, China projected Buddhist diplomacy as an ideal soft power in Sri Lanka, which depicted how Chinese monks in the antiquity visited Sri Lanka to study Buddhism, which was akin to a transmission of knowledge among the civilizations (Amarasinghe, 2023).

The Chinese interest in the Maldives came much later compared to its hobnobbing with Sri Lanka. The fragility of the Maldives as a small state depending on the stronger powers has been a historical anemology that dates back to the British era. After the departure of the British, the Maldives gradually fell into the orbit of India and it maintained stronger security ties with New Delhi. By virtue of its strategic advantage in the Indian Ocean, China has accelerated its ties with the Maldives recently by becoming a stronger economic partner, which has overcome the traditional dominant position held by India. As per the Maldives customs service, China exported goods and services worth approximately \$ 488 million to the Maldives in 2018 compared to the Indian exports that totalled \$ 287 million (Rajagopalan, 2024).

While examining the impetuses that bolster China to enhance its interest towards the Maldives, it is imperative to revisit China's specific Indian Ocean strategy as it reflects the benign vision of Beijing in reshaping the 21st-century world order. The Chinese national defence policy adopted in 2004 and revised in 2015 epitomizes the overarching security interests of China entangled by its own strategic dilemma. The novel concept introduced by the national defence policy called "frontier defence" invoked the robust expansion of PLAN beyond the traditional Chinese geographic boundaries to the new open-ended frontiers of national and economic interests. The departure of PLAN's conventional continental security mentality marked the advent of Beijing's tectonic shift to the high seas. Like Sri Lanka, the perennial strategic value imbued with the Maldives is a catalyst factor for the Chinese interest in the chain of islands (Hai Loc, 2024). The affinity between India and the Maldives for decades based on Malay's security dependency on New Delhi has enthroned India as a de facto influencer on the external relations of the Maldives. When the government of Abdul Gayoom faced a coup supported by the Tamil mercenaries from Sri Lanka in 1988, then-Indian premier Rajiv Gandhi sent Indian paratroopers to rescue the Maldivian president. Since then the Indian element has become a pivotal factor in carving the external affairs of the Maldives (Phadnis, 1984).

However, the change of the domestic political trajectories in the Maldives recently was duly utilized by China in the same unprecedented manner they followed in Sri Lanka. Having realized the Maldives' geographical positioning near the maritime chain, which is crucial to China's energy supply, Beijing began to leverage its economic grip over the administration in the Maldives. The first few years of China's efforts to consolidate its presence in the Maldives lacked static results as the governments in the Maldives continued its revered pro-Indian foreign policy. Given this context, the emergence of President Ibrahim Solih in 2018, who advocated for "India Foreign Policy", was widely interpreted as a loss for China and a victory for India. Under the Solih administration, India made significant progress in establishing a presence in the Maldives, in line with its military strategy of making the Maldives as its "First line of defence". The Maldivian government signed an undisclosed pact with India called the UTF agreement without parliamentary authorization. The deal sparked considerable debate among both the parliament (Peoples Majlis) and the general public. Notwithstanding the numerous demands from the opposition and the general public, the government refrained from revealing the specifics of the agreement.

The jubilation that erupted among many Indian think tanks became a fallacy by the later development in the Maldives. Especially, Beijing's new horizons began to spread fervently, challenging the Indian position by the array of methods used in the Maldives, which included overlooking the authoritative tendencies in the Maldives administration. Unlike India, which often meddled with the domestic politics of the Maldives in a rather patronizing manner, China refrained from challenging the internal political norms of the Maldives.

Since the establishment of the Chinese embassy in Male, Beijing has successfully endured its influence in the Maldives, which reached its culmination by the recently concluded China-Maldivian defence as an emblem that intends to foster China's presence in the Maldives. Contrary to the pro-Indian stances maintained by his predecessor, Ibrahim Solih, the newly elected president of the Maldives Mohamed Muizzu is known for his strong anti-Indian rhetoric. Breaking the tradition of a new Maldivian president making the maiden visit to New Delhi, Muizzu paid his first state visit to China, where the reception looked pompous, which depicted Beijing's interest in the small island nation. China has duly seized the anti-Indian sentiments igniting from public opinion on India's alleged interference with the national sovereignty of the Maldives, which is akin to the pattern of Chinese penetration to Sri Lanka in the aftermath of the civil war.

The pro-Indian tendencies championed by Ibrahim Solih exasperated the people in the Maldives resulting in the "India Out" campaign, which paved the path for the emergence of Mohamed Muizzu with a strong anti-Indian rhetoric. The 2023 election was won by the PNC candidate based on the promise to rectify the anomalies that occurred during the Solih administration between India and the Maldives. The sending out of military personnel in charge of the two helicopters and the Dornier Aircraft stationed on Addu Atoll and Laamu Atoll was crucial. Then the opposition candidate, now President Dr. Mohamed Muizzu,



pledged during the election to demand the withdrawal of all Indian military personnel from the Maldives within the initial three months of his assuming office.

The elevated ties between the Muizzu administration and China rebuked New Delhi and the Indian navy involved in a series of raids on Maldivian fishing vessels, which appears to be a blatant response to Male's deviation from New Delhi's orbit. The government in Male did not provide any comments on the matter. The captain of the fishing vessel reported that the Indian Navy was operating within the international boundaries of the Maldives. Through the lenses of the Melian dialogue in Thucydides' *History of Peloponnesian War*, what the Maldives faced recently is a striking feature of the realism in the international system, in which small states have no choice (Allison, 2015). Yet the circumstances that have befallen the Maldives prove to be different from the usual realist argument, as Muizzu's government remains unshaken after the Indian naval interference with the fishing vessels of the high sea. On the contrary, Muizzu's government aggravated the tense situation by finalizing the Sino-Maldivian defence pact and Indian troops stationed in the island nation began to leave. Making a fresh statement, president Muizzue stated that all Indian troops based in the Maldives would depart by May (Rajagopalan, 2023). In the same pattern adopted by the Rajapaksa regime in Sri Lanka that allowed China to improve Hambantota Port, which finally became a Chinese asset in Sri Lanka, now Muizzu's government has allowed a Chinese company to reclaim lands on the island of Uthuru Thila Falhu, the closest island to India. This raises a plausible doubt whether the Chinese company that has taken over the island may develop military facilities as the company involved in Uthuru Thila Falhu has previously helped PLA militarised islands in the South China Sea (Ibidem.).

The growing Chinese activities in the Indian Ocean regardless of the collective security efforts made by India and the West indicates that the Indian Ocean Region is likely to be a new theatre of a geopolitical tension (Krothwal and Kumar, 2023). As already mentioned, China is aware of the paramount importance of having a formidable navy for protecting its maritime network. The naval presence that China has been striving to secure in the Indian Ocean consists of ports such as Gwadar in Pakistan and Hambantota in Sri Lanka. The tilt towards the Maldives is a bonus for the Chinese strategy of encircling Indian shores as a such a strategy will grant a dominance to China on the western side of the Indian Ocean.

On the face of it, the Chinese encroachment in the Indian Ocean has been attributed to Beijing's manner of handling the fragile states of the region by ignoring the established rules in the international order. As this paper argues, China's anathema to the rule-based international order and the norms created by the West is aptly visible in Beijing's attitude towards the South Asian states, which are notorious for human rights abuse, lack of rule of law and nepotism. Shogo Suzuki states that "[T]he lack of common values between China and European International Society meant that the Chinese elites perceived no 'shame' in China's negative reputation as a 'semi-civilized' state, and consequently felt little need to improve its social position within the Society. Adherence to international law was a marker of 'civilized' status within European International Society, but in the eyes of many Chinese elites, China was equally (if not more) civilized than the European powers. There was no



need to demonstrate their 'civilized' identity by adopting international law, bar in the face of coercion and the necessity to occasionally deal with the troublesome Westerners" (Suzuki, 2009: 5)

The current Chinese ambivalence to the rule-based international order reflects the above-mentioned passage from Suzuki. The states that have been shrewdly influenced by the Chinese in South Asia like Sri Lanka and the Maldives are prone to endemic corruption. In the case of Sri Lanka, the Chinese realized the pre-eminent threats that Sri Lanka envisaged after the defeat of Tamil terrorism, which mainly included the West's allegations about human rights abuse and the lack of good governance under Rajapaksa regime. Ignoring the concerns raised by the West, the Chinese aptly exploited the investment opportunities in Sri Lanka as Rajapaksa administration badly needed foreign investors to boost the post-war economy. When Colombo woke up from its slumber, the Chinese influence on the island nation had come to a point of no return, which resulted in handing over of the Hambantota port to China for 99 years in 2017. Furthermore, China sent a research ship Yuan Wang 5 to Hambantota in 2022 amidst the severe opposition coming from India as Delhi suspected ulterior motive behind the vessel (Amarasinghe, 2020).

Emboldened by the anti-Indian public sentiment that has permeated the Maldives, China has moved to consolidate its influence in the Maldives region. It is a crucial factor that one should not ignore, given the most recent landside political victory of the ruling part of Muzzu in the parliamentary elections where the People's National Congress Party secured 70 seats out of 93 seats in the Maldives legislature (Barsarkar, 2024). This is another event indicating the gradual ebb of Indian influence in the internal political apparatus of the Maldives as this new political upheaval is a contrast to the previous political changes in the Maldives which were significantly affected by India's RAW (Research and Analysis Wing) influence. The emergence of a Pro-Beijing regime underpins the Belt and Road Initiative and its imperative surrounding the Maldives. After Sri Lanka's foray, China seems to have attained a conspicuous success in the Maldives in its most ambitious project in circumventing India, which would eventually open the IOR as a Chinese dominant theater. Displaying its astute diplomacy after the landside political victory of Muzzu's party, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs states that "China would like to work with the Maldives and carry forward the traditional friendship and cooperation in all fields, deepen our comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership and build a community of shared future between the two countries that benefits the two peoples" (quoted in Singh, 2024: 13). China's hallmark of non-interference in internal affairs is reaffirmed in this statement and is also a fresh reminder of building people-to-people ties between the two countries. This is a soft shift from the dogged style filled with old-age diplomacy of addressing only the officials. Having realized the importance of soft power (where India is a regional leader), the Chinese are now clearly turning to projecting public diplomacy in the Maldives, as they are aptly doing in Sri Lanka.

Both Sri Lanka and the Maldives are now emerging as new centres of gravity related to Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean and this goes beyond mere academic assumptions.

Even after the departure of Rajapaksa from the political scene after the ousting Gotabaya Rajapaksa in 2022 July, Beijing's influence in Sri Lanka continues significantly. Especially, the continued Chinese presence in the Colombo Port City and the Hambantota Harbor are the main formidable positions that China holds in Sri Lanka. The assessment provided by AidData in 2023 July mentions Hambantota as most likely overseas military that China would develop (Kuruwita, 2023).

## Conclusion

The focal point of this article lies in examining the dynamics arising out of China's interest in Sri Lanka and the Maldives. While addressing the chronological events that marked the Chinese grip over both island nations, this article examined the ontological impetus that fostered China's sheer rejection of rule-based international order. The idea of international legal order perceived by the West is not appealing to China as it is based on a humiliating history that the Chinese encountered with the Europeans in the 19th century. Both Sri Lanka and the Maldives have always been influenced and to a certain extent intervened by India in several instances of the post-colonial history. While seizing the disappointing position of both the Maldives and Sri Lanka under the continuous macho gesture from Delhi, China has openly become a bulwark for those states. In addition Beijing's long-term goal of penetrating the Indian Ocean maritime route is directly related to both Sri Lanka and the Maldives. At the core of Chinese encroachment into these two nations lies its intrinsic approach to the international order devoid of orthodox rules. As this article argued, building sea power has become vital to China to secure its trade interests in the sea routes. Building a formidable maritime network in the Indian Ocean for protecting the commercial interests became one of China's major strategic concerns in the context of the American-led naval dominance in the Indo-Pacific. Once Ho Jintao bemoaned China's Malacca dilemma, which referred to China's inability to control the entry-exit point of the Strait of Malacca (see Gilmartin, 2008) .

Looking at Beijing's response to the so-called Malacca dilemma and the naval challenges through the Chinese prism is indispensable in ascertaining how Sri Lanka and the Maldives have become Chinese concerns. The above-mentioned analysis focusing on the Maldives and Sri Lanka illustrating the Chinese sphere of influence in those countries can be linked to the ambitious Chinese project of confronting its naval challenges that have encompassed Beijing. In his article to *Indo-Pacific Review*, the Indian military officer Mohit Choudhary describes how China's nemesis in Malacca encouraged the Chinese to choose IOR, which eventually resulted in the emergence of China's „Two-ocean strategy“ to spread the influence over both the Indian and Pacific Oceans. He further argues that “the Indian Ocean is the maritime highway for China's raw material and energy needs while the Pacific Ocean remains the pathway for its export-led economy” (Choudhary, 2023). To confront the challenges looming before Beijing from the continuous US naval presence in the Indo-Pacific, the Chinese have clung to a more nuanced mechanism by increasing its gaze over Sri

Lanka and Maldives. Delhi's consistent efforts to stave off China's presence in its backyard has not been completely successful regardless of some clandestine operations carried out by RAW in Sri Lanka and Maldives (Gunawansa, 2023). For instance, when the current president Ranil Wickremasinghe came to power after the culmination of "Aragalaya" in 2022, which ousted the then president Gotabaya Rajapaksa, many of the analysts described it as a favourable situation for India's interests as Ranil Wickremasinghe is widely known for his pro-Indian-Western stances. Notwithstanding the significant changes that have taken place in the echelons of political powers in Sri Lanka, China still continues its key projects in Sri Lanka. The situation in the Maldives is a contrast to Sri Lanka as the current Maldivian ruling party including the President amplifies anti-Indian rhetoric by exposing the island nation to the deeper influence of China. On the whole, the assumption held in this paper reveals the trajectories of Chinese interests in the Maldives and Sri Lanka driven by the strategic ambitions to undermine the equilibrium of the Indian Ocean. Furthermore, this article made an astute inquiry into tracing the roots of China's rejection of the rule-based international order as a reflection of its distrust towards the West, which has led to reviving their own traditional understanding of international order with Chinese characteristics.

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