



INDIA'S MARITIME NEIGHBOURHOOD AND THE POLITICS OF STRATEGIC ACCESS

Sri Lanka, The Maldives and Bangladesh

Dr. Shivendra Shahi

Assistant Professor, Department of Defence and Strategic Studies, Shri Varshney College, Aligarh

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ABSTRACT

India's maritime neighbourhood has become a central arena in the reorganisation of Indo-Pacific power. Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Bangladesh occupy different maritime subregions, yet each sits close to routes, chokepoints, ports and surveillance spaces that shape India's economic security and naval strategy. Their significance is frequently interpreted through the language of Chinese 'encirclement' and Indian 'primacy'. Such formulations capture an element of competitive geopolitics but obscure the political character of access. Ports do not automatically become bases; infrastructure ownership does not by itself establish military control; and smaller states are not passive terrain upon which great powers act. Strategic access is produced through negotiation among host governments, commercial actors, security institutions, domestic constituencies and external partners.

This chapter develops a multidimensional conception of strategic access encompassing commercial connectivity, logistics, maritime-domain information, defence cooperation and crisis response. It compares Sri Lanka's port-centred bargaining, the Maldives' security dependence combined with sovereignty-sensitive domestic politics, and Bangladesh's connectivity strategy in the Bay of Bengal. The comparison demonstrates that India's advantages derive from proximity, economic interdependence, first-responder capacity and institutional familiarity, whereas China's appeal often rests on infrastructure finance, construction capability and political optionality. Neither advantage is self-executing. Access remains contingent upon legitimacy within the partner state and upon the perceived distribution of benefits and risks. The chapter argues that India will secure more durable maritime influence by replacing an exclusionary sphere-of-influence logic with a consent-based architecture of reciprocal access, local capacity, transparent infrastructure, non-traditional security cooperation and credible respect for sovereign agency.

KEYWORDS: Maritime security, peninsular geography, strategic assess, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bangladesh.

INTRODUCTION

India is at once a continental and maritime power. Its peninsular geography projects into the Indian Ocean, while its external trade, energy flows and strategic communications depend heavily upon the sea. Yet maritime power is never generated by coastline and fleet strength alone. It also depends upon political relationships with neighbouring littorals and islands that provide connectivity, information, replenishment, rescue coordination and diplomatic support. Sri Lanka lies beside the principal east-west sea route and commands approach near India's southern coast; the Maldives stretches across an expansive exclusive economic zone astride routes in the central Indian Ocean; Bangladesh anchors the northern Bay of Bengal and offers connectivity to India's landlocked Northeast.¹

The contemporary politics of these relationships is frequently compressed into a triangular contest between India, China and a smaller neighbour. Chinese participation in Hambantota and Colombo, infrastructure expansion in the Maldives and projects in Bangladesh are read as components of a maritime strategy; Indian projects and security cooperation are then interpreted as countermeasures. Competition is real, but a simple action-reaction model is insufficient. It assumes that infrastructure has a fixed strategic meaning, underestimates commercial and regulatory institutions, and reduces the foreign policy of smaller states to alignment with one external power.

Strategic access is better understood as a bundle of permissions, capabilities and expectations. It may involve the

routine entry of commercial cargo, use of ports for trans-shipment, white-shipping information, coastal surveillance, hydrographic cooperation, refuelling, repair, humanitarian assistance, evacuation, joint patrols or the politically sensitive presence of foreign military personnel. These forms of access differ in duration, exclusivity, visibility and sovereign consequence. A state may welcome investment while restricting military activity; share maritime information with India while buying platforms from another supplier; or permit crisis access without accepting permanent deployment.

The chapter advances three propositions. First, geography creates structural interest but not automatic influence. Second, domestic legitimacy determines the durability of access arrangements. Third, India's most defensible comparative advantage lies in providing public goods and interoperable capacity without converting cooperation into hierarchical entitlement. The analysis proceeds from a conceptual framework to separate studies of Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Bangladesh, followed by a comparison and a policy architecture for a stable maritime neighbourhood.

Strategic Access as a Geopolitical Relationship

Classical geopolitics emphasises location, maritime routes and the distribution of power. Mahan connected sea power with commerce, naval capability and strategic positions, while later work on the Indian Ocean highlighted the importance of bases, chokepoints and island chains.²



Contemporary access politics requires a broader lens. Foreign forces increasingly operate through logistics agreements, information networks, port calls, exercises and dual-use infrastructure rather than formal colonial-style bases. The strategic value of a facility depends upon host-state permission, technical compatibility, legal authority, operating conditions and the political risks attached to its use.

Five dimensions may be distinguished. Commercial access concerns cargo movement, trans-shipment, hinterland connectivity and participation in port development. Logistical access includes replenishment, repair, crew support and emergency entry. Informational access covers radar feeds, vessel identification, hydrography and maritime-domain awareness. Defence access encompasses training, exercises, platform support and-at the most sensitive end-deployment. Crisis-response access permits relief, evacuation, salvage and search-and-rescue operations. These dimensions interact but should not be conflated.

Access also has a domestic political economy. Port projects distribute land, contracts, jobs, debt and environmental costs. Security arrangements raise questions about secrecy, foreign personnel and autonomy. Opposition parties may frame cooperation as dependence, while governments may invoke external competition to obtain better financial terms. Small states practise hedging not because they are indifferent to power but because diversification protects policy autonomy and increases bargaining leverage.³

For India, the central dilemma is asymmetry. Its proximity and size make it indispensable during emergencies but also produce fears of domination. Chinese distance can be politically useful to smaller states because it supplies capital and an external counterweight, even when dependence upon Chinese finance creates different vulnerabilities. Durable Indian access therefore requires reassurance: transparency, local ownership, civilian benefits and acceptance that partnership will coexist with the neighbour's relations with other powers.

Sri Lanka: Port Geography, Economic Vulnerability and Strategic Ambiguity

Sri Lanka occupies an exceptional position immediately south of the Indian peninsula and close to the main sea lane connecting the western Indian Ocean with Southeast Asia. Colombo is a major trans-shipment hub whose performance is closely linked to Indian cargo. Trincomalee possesses one of the region's finest natural harbours and long-standing strategic resonance. Hambantota lies near the principal east-west route and has become the most internationally debated symbol of Chinese maritime influence.

The 99-year lease of Hambantota's commercial operations to a Chinese-controlled joint venture in 2017 followed Sri Lanka's difficulty in generating sufficient port revenue and wider balance-of-payments pressures. The episode is often described as proof of 'debt-trap diplomacy'. That label is analytically contested because Sri Lanka's debt crisis arose from a broader composition of domestic and external liabilities, while the lease converted an asset into foreign exchange rather than directly swapping the port for cancellation of its Chinese loans.⁴ Yet rejecting the simplified narrative does not remove the strategic issue. Long-duration commercial control, adjacent land development and possible service to visiting state vessels

generate concerns about future optionality even where present contracts prohibit military use without Sri Lankan approval.

Colombo reveals a more plural access pattern. Chinese entities are central to the Colombo International Container Terminal and the Port City project; India and Japan have also pursued participation in terminal development. India's involvement in the West Container Terminal, energy projects and connectivity represents an effort to embed economic interdependence rather than merely to deny China a foothold. The coexistence of external investors demonstrates that Sri Lanka is not choosing a single maritime patron. It is allocating projects in a manner that attracts capital, maintains room for manoeuvre and manages domestic criticism.

Security sensitivity becomes most visible in foreign research and military vessel visits. Chinese submarine calls at Colombo in 2014 and later controversies concerning survey or research ships sharpened Indian anxiety about seabed knowledge, signals collection and the normalisation of People's Liberation Army Navy access. From Colombo's perspective, however, sovereign port policy cannot be publicly reduced to Indian veto. The resulting practice is one of managed ambiguity: Sri Lanka seeks commercial benefit and diplomatic diversity while attempting to reassure India that its territory will not be used in ways prejudicial to Indian security.

India's response combines defence cooperation with economic and crisis support. During Sri Lanka's 2022 economic emergency, Indian assistance-credit, currency support and supplies-demonstrated the strategic power of proximity and responsiveness. The December 2024 joint statement committed both sides to closer defence and maritime-security cooperation, and a defence-cooperation memorandum was signed during the Indian Prime Minister's April 2025 visit.⁵ Training, naval exchanges, hydrography, maritime-domain awareness and the Colombo Security Conclave create a dense security relationship that is less dramatic than a base but potentially more durable.

The limits remain substantial. Tamil political questions, fisheries disputes in the Palk Bay, memories of India's intervention, and nationalist resistance to foreign projects shape public perceptions. The recurrent arrest of fishers is not peripheral to maritime strategy; it affects the social legitimacy of the bilateral order. Similarly, Trincomalee energy and connectivity proposals must demonstrate local benefit and transparent governance. Sri Lanka will resist any arrangement that appears to convert geographical closeness into a restriction upon sovereign choice.

The Maldives: Archipelagic Geography and Sovereignty-Sensitive Security

The Maldives consists of dispersed atolls extending across a large maritime space southwest of India. Its location near important sea routes and its limited surveillance and response capacity make maritime security inseparable from external cooperation. India has historically provided training, platforms, medical evacuation and disaster assistance; Operation Cactus in 1988 and relief after the 2004 tsunami established a narrative of India as first responder. The relationship nevertheless oscillates because operational dependence coexists with intense concern about sovereignty.

Indian cooperation has included coastal radar, white-shipping information, hydrographic surveys, joint exclusive-economic-zone patrols and development of facilities for the



Maldives National Defence Force, including the Uthuru Thila Falhu harbour project.⁶ These activities enhance Maldivian capacity, but domestic opponents have sometimes represented Indian personnel and projects as a concealed military presence. The 'India Out' campaign illustrated how technical security arrangements can be transformed into symbols of political subordination.

The change of government in 2023 initially intensified these concerns and led to demands concerning Indian military personnel associated with aviation platforms. Replacement by civilian technical personnel reduced the immediate dispute, while high-level engagement subsequently restored pragmatic cooperation. The October 2024 joint vision defined a Comprehensive Economic and Maritime Security Partnership, and the July 2025 summit reaffirmed defence-capacity support and the common interest in Indian Ocean stability.⁷ This sequence demonstrates that access is renegotiable: institutional cooperation survived a nationalist challenge because both sides adapted its political form.

China's role in the Maldives expanded through infrastructure finance, tourism, housing and the Maritime Silk Road. Chinese projects give Malé alternatives and can support national development, but they also produce debate over debt, land and possible dual use. The most alarmist projections of an imminent Chinese base underestimate legal and domestic constraints. At the same time, India cannot assume that geographical proximity will indefinitely exclude Chinese security activity. Commercial presence, vessel visits and technical partnerships may gradually build strategic familiarity.

Climate vulnerability gives Maldivian access politics a distinctive human-security dimension. Sea-level rise, coastal erosion, freshwater stress and disaster exposure make resilience infrastructure a strategic public good. An Indian policy focused exclusively on military denial would miss the foundation of legitimate influence. Water and sanitation, health connectivity, renewable energy, harbour safety, search and rescue, and rapid disaster assistance can embed partnership in everyday security. Such cooperation must remain transparent and visibly Maldivian-owned.

The Maldives therefore represents a paradox. It may need India more urgently than larger neighbours during security or medical crises, yet the visibility of that dependence can provoke stronger sovereignty politics. The appropriate Indian response is not to minimise Maldivian agency but to design arrangements that survive electoral change: clear legal mandates, limited and disclosed personnel roles, local training, parliamentary or public explanation where feasible, and rapid transfer of operational responsibility.

Bangladesh: Bay of Bengal Connectivity and Strategic Diversification

Bangladesh occupies the apex of the Bay of Bengal, where the Ganges–Brahmaputra–Meghna system meets the sea and where maritime routes connect eastern India with Southeast Asia. The 2014 arbitral settlement of the India–Bangladesh maritime boundary removed a major source of uncertainty and created space for blue-economy and security cooperation.⁸ Chattogram remains Bangladesh's principal port; Mongla serves the southwest; Matarbari is being developed as a deep-sea port with Japanese support; and Payra reflects Dhaka's continuing search for capacity and geographic diversification.

For India, Bangladeshi ports have significance beyond naval strategy. Access to Chattogram and Mongla can shorten supply routes to the Northeast and integrate inland waterways, coastal shipping, road and rail. The 2018 agreement and 2019 standard operating procedures permitted movement of Indian goods through designated multimodal routes, following earlier coastal-shipping and protocol-waterway arrangements.⁹ Strategic access here is primarily connective: it reduces the economic penalties imposed by partition and strengthens subregional interdependence.

Bangladesh's maritime diplomacy is deliberately diversified. China is a major defence supplier and infrastructure partner; Japan's Bay of Bengal Industrial Growth Belt and Matarbari project connect Bangladesh to a wider Indo-Pacific economic vision; India supplies proximity, transit markets and security cooperation; and Bangladesh maintains relations with the United States and other partners. Dhaka's objective is not to become an appendage of any external strategy but to convert geographic centrality into development and autonomy.

Chinese interest has generated speculation about strategic access, particularly in relation to port construction and the Bangladesh Navy's submarine base at Pekua, developed with Chinese assistance. A distinction is necessary between defence dependence, infrastructure provision and permission for foreign deployment. Bangladesh's procurement of Chinese submarines and construction support deepen technical relationships but do not by themselves establish a Chinese operating base. Nonetheless, lifecycle maintenance, training and visits can create long-term influence, and India has legitimate reasons to monitor the cumulative pattern.

India-Bangladesh security cooperation has included coordinated action against insurgent networks, coast-guard collaboration, training and an agreement concerning a coastal surveillance system. The maritime dimension also covers cyclones, trafficking, illegal fishing, marine pollution and search and rescue. Bangladesh joined the Colombo Security Conclave in 2024, widening the mechanism from its original central Indian Ocean core into the Bay of Bengal.¹⁰ Its participation creates an opportunity to connect maritime-domain awareness with non-traditional security priorities while avoiding the appearance of an anti-China coalition.

Political change in Bangladesh after 2024 introduced uncertainty into a relationship closely associated with the previous government. Indian strategy must therefore move from leadership-centric intimacy to wider institutional and societal engagement. Connectivity arrangements will be sustainable only if Bangladeshi constituencies perceive reciprocal gain rather than unilateral transit. Port fees, local employment, infrastructure investment, environmental safeguards and access to Indian markets are consequently part of maritime statecraft.

Comparative Patterns of Access and Small-State Agency

The three cases display a common structure but different bargaining environments. Sri Lanka possesses mature ports and is exposed to intense competition over commercial nodes close to India. The Maldives has limited indigenous capacity and high crisis dependence, making defence and surveillance cooperation especially important but politically sensitive. Bangladesh's importance arises from the Bay of Bengal, industrial growth and its capacity to connect India's Northeast



with maritime routes. India therefore seeks different access portfolios in each case.

Small-state agency is visible in project diversification, regulatory control and diplomatic signalling. Sri Lanka distributes infrastructure relationships among China, India and Japan; the Maldives recalibrates the visible form of Indian security involvement while retaining essential cooperation; Bangladesh combines Chinese defence links, Japanese port development and Indian connectivity. Hedging is not evidence of unreliability. It is a rational response to asymmetry and uncertainty.

Domestic politics functions as a strategic filter. Agreements negotiated only with executive elites remain vulnerable to elections and protest. Infrastructure that appears opaque, environmentally harmful or unequally distributed can become a vehicle for nationalist mobilisation. Conversely, cooperation linked to jobs, mobility, disaster response and public services develops constituencies of support. The decisive unit of strategic analysis is therefore not merely the port but the political settlement surrounding it.

China and India offer different but overlapping advantages. Chinese institutions have demonstrated capacity to finance and construct large projects rapidly. India offers proximity, market access, cultural connections, military interoperability and rapid emergency response. India's difficulty lies in implementation delays and the political burden of asymmetry; China's lies in debt concerns, limited transparency and suspicion regarding dual use. Neighbouring states use this competition to widen choice, but excessive external rivalry can narrow their autonomy by securitising ordinary development decisions.

China, Dual-Use Infrastructure and the Problem of Strategic Inference

The China factor is unavoidable, but its analytical treatment requires discipline. Beijing's Maritime Silk Road, commercial port enterprises, naval modernisation and growing Indian Ocean deployments create a cumulative strategic context. Chinese firms participate in construction, finance, operation, telecommunications and industrial zones across South Asia. The People's Liberation Army Navy has also developed experience in distant-water operations through anti-piracy deployments, evacuations, exercises and port calls. India is consequently justified in examining whether commercial networks might support a larger operational footprint.

The concept of dual use is nevertheless prone to overextension. Almost every modern commercial port can provide fuel, provisions, repair or crew services to a state vessel. This technical capacity does not establish legal access, political permission, stored military supplies, command arrangements or protection during conflict. Strategic analysis should therefore move from labels to indicators. Relevant evidence includes the contractual authority of the operator; restrictions imposed by the host government; dedicated berths and secure areas; communications infrastructure; frequency and character of naval visits; pre-positioned materiel; maintenance relationships; and the ability to operate when the host faces coercive pressure.

Host-state institutions mediate these possibilities. Sri Lanka retains sovereign authority over military use of Hambantota despite long-term commercial operation. The Maldives can regulate foreign personnel, vessel access and land

transactions. Bangladesh determines whether foreign-supplied naval infrastructure serves national forces or facilitates continuing external presence. The strength of parliamentary scrutiny, port regulation, coast-guard control and public transparency is thus a component of regional security. Weak institutions create vulnerability regardless of whether the external partner is China, India or another power.

China's attraction also cannot be reduced to strategic manipulation. South Asian governments face genuine infrastructure deficits and often value the speed and scale of Chinese delivery. Projects may be commercially optimistic or politically allocated without being designed as bases. India will be more persuasive when it distinguishes economic miscalculation from military intent and when it proposes financing, technical partnerships or multilateral standards that solve the development problem. A policy based only upon warning neighbours against China risks appearing to demand strategic deference without assuming development cost.

At the same time, commercial normality can produce strategic option over time. Familiarity with port procedures, hydrographic data, local contractors, communications and diplomatic routines reduces the cost of future access. The relevant concern is therefore not an inevitable chain from loan to base, but the gradual accumulation of enabling conditions. India requires sustained maritime-domain awareness, dialogue with host authorities and credible alternatives-not alarmist predictions that may be disproved and thereby weaken trust.

The same standard should apply reflexively to India. Facilities supported by India in the Maldives or elsewhere are often described by critics as covert bases. India can rebut such claims most effectively through disclosed purpose, host-state ownership, transparent personnel arrangements and demonstrable transfer of capacity. Consistency strengthens the normative case against opaque or coercive access by any external power.

Human Security, Blue Economy and the Social Foundations of Access

Maritime strategy is frequently written from the perspective of navies and ports, yet the legitimacy of the maritime order is experienced in fishing grounds, coastal settlements, ferries, disaster shelters and commodity markets. Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Bangladesh face severe non-traditional threats: cyclones, coastal inundation, illegal and unregulated fishing, narcotics trafficking, marine pollution, coral degradation and accidents at sea. These pressures affect state capacity and human welfare more regularly than conventional naval conflict. Strategic partnerships that address them build access through recognised public value.

Fisheries illustrate the intersection of livelihood and sovereignty. The Palk Bay dispute involves bottom trawling, depleted stocks, historic practices, maritime boundaries and the survival of fishing communities on both sides. Arrests and boat seizures repeatedly burden India-Sri Lanka relations. A sustainable settlement requires ecological restoration, transition away from destructive gear, alternative livelihoods, predictable enforcement and direct consultation with fishers. Treating the issue only as a consular irritant allows a local conflict to erode the broader maritime partnership.

In Bangladesh, cyclones and riverine-coastal interaction require early warning, resilient ports, evacuation logistics and rapid restoration of communications. India's geographic



proximity enables pre-positioned relief and cross-border coordination. Cooperation through meteorological data, coast guards, naval relief assets and regional exercises can turn crisis-response access into an institution rather than an improvised permission. It must, however, support national authorities and local preparedness instead of using disaster visibility for geopolitical spectacle.

For the Maldives, climate change is existential rather than sectoral. Harbour construction, coastal protection, desalination, waste management and renewable energy determine whether communities remain viable. External infrastructure may create maladaptation if it damages reefs or transfers unsustainable maintenance costs. India's projects should therefore integrate climate science, community consultation and lifecycle finance. A security partnership that helps preserve inhabited islands acquires legitimacy unavailable to a narrowly military relationship.

The blue economy offers opportunities in fisheries value chains, marine biotechnology, offshore renewable energy, tourism, shipping services and seabed knowledge. It also raises distributive questions. Large port or tourism projects can displace coastal users, privatise access or concentrate revenue. Maritime cooperation should strengthen national regulatory capacity, marine spatial planning and transparent environmental assessment. Universities and research institutions across the four countries can develop shared ocean data while protecting sensitive information.

Trafficking and transnational crime demonstrate why informational access must be governed carefully. Radar and vessel-identification networks can support interdiction, but surveillance may also affect privacy, fishing practices and sovereign data. Federated architectures—in which states retain national control while sharing defined alerts—may generate more trust than centralised extraction. Joint investigation, financial intelligence and judicial cooperation must accompany maritime interception; otherwise networks adapt while low-level carriers bear the visible burden.

Human security is therefore not an altruistic supplement to geopolitics. It is the social infrastructure of strategic access. Communities and institutions that associate partnership with rescue, ecological recovery and livelihood protection are less receptive to narratives of foreign domination. Conversely, ports and surveillance systems that deliver little local benefit remain vulnerable to electoral reversal even when they are strategically sophisticated.

The Colombo Security Conclave and Mini-lateral Order

The Colombo Security Conclave (CSC) originated in trilateral maritime-security consultations among India, Sri Lanka and the Maldives in 2011, was revived in 2020, and subsequently expanded. The Charter and memorandum establishing a secretariat were signed in Colombo in August 2024. Its five pillars cover maritime safety and security; counter-terrorism and radicalisation; trafficking and transnational crime; cybersecurity and critical infrastructure; and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.¹¹ Bangladesh's membership gives the framework a Bay of Bengal dimension.

The CSC is strategically valuable because it begins with practical threats recognised by participating states. Information sharing, exercises, capacity building and standard operating procedures can produce habits of cooperation without the alliance commitments that smaller states resist. Its agenda also

treats maritime security as more than naval competition. Trafficking, cyber vulnerability and disasters affect the legitimacy of governments and the welfare of coastal communities.

Institutionalisation, however, must not become Indian dominance by another name. A Colombo-based secretariat, rotating leadership, consensual decisions and distributed centres of expertise can protect ownership. The CSC should complement rather than displace the Indian Ocean Rim Association, BIMSTEC and global maritime law. It should also avoid intelligence demands that exceed member confidence. Functional success will build trust more effectively than premature strategic ambition.

Toward a Consent-Based Indian Strategy

India's maritime policy has been articulated through SAGAR-Security and Growth for All in the Region—and, more recently, the broader language of mutual and holistic advancement. The normative promise is important: India presents itself as a net security provider whose capabilities generate shared benefit rather than exclusive control. Implementation should be judged by whether neighbouring states gain autonomous capacity.

First, India should separate legitimate security concerns from categorical opposition to third-country investment. It should identify specific risks—military access, data control, opaque debt, or critical-infrastructure vulnerability—and offer technically credible alternatives. Demanding exclusion without supplying finance or timely implementation reinforces perceptions of hierarchy.

Second, port and connectivity projects require political-risk design. Feasibility must include local employment, environmental assessment, debt sustainability, procurement transparency and consultation with affected communities. India's comparative advantage can rest on high legitimacy even when it cannot match every financial offer. Completion discipline is essential; delayed projects impose strategic costs that no diplomatic narrative can erase.

Third, maritime-domain awareness should be built as a federated public good. Coastal radar, automatic-identification information, hydrography and white-shipping exchange can improve safety and enforcement, but data ownership and access rules must be explicit. Partner officers should occupy meaningful roles in fusion centres, and systems should strengthen national agencies rather than bypass them.

Fourth, India should place human security at the centre of access. Cyclone response in Bangladesh, coastal resilience in Sri Lanka, climate adaptation in the Maldives, fisheries governance and marine pollution create opportunities for cooperation that citizens can evaluate directly. Humanitarian access established through preparedness, interoperability and trust may be more strategically reliable than access pursued through secrecy.

Fifth, defence cooperation should privilege local capacity and limited-footprint support. Training, maintenance, domain awareness, coast-guard equipment, search and rescue, and joint exercises are less politically combustible than permanent presence. Where Indian personnel are necessary, mandates, duration and replacement by trained local staff should be specified.

Finally, India must accept pluralism in its maritime neighbourhood. Strategic partnership does not require



diplomatic exclusivity. A confident maritime power should distinguish between a neighbour's normal diversification and arrangements that create demonstrable security threats. Restraint can itself generate access by reducing the political cost of cooperation with India.

CONCLUSION

Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Bangladesh reveal that maritime geography creates enduring interdependence but does not settle the politics of access. Ports, radar systems, logistics facilities and connectivity corridors acquire strategic meaning through laws, contracts, institutions and public legitimacy. The same facility may serve commerce, crisis relief and military logistics under different permissions. Analysis that labels every Chinese-funded port a base, or treats every Indian security project as benign, fails to examine these conditions.

India retains substantial structural advantages. It is the nearest major power, a large market, a source of training and equipment, and often the only actor able to respond immediately to a regional emergency. Yet proximity generates apprehension as well as confidence. Smaller neighbours seek external options partly to avoid excessive dependence, and they will continue to engage China, Japan and other partners. Their diversification should be understood as agency rather than automatic alignment.

The strategic task is therefore to make Indian access useful, legitimate and resilient. This requires reliable delivery, transparent infrastructure, local capacity, respect for sovereign procedure and cooperation on threats experienced by ordinary citizens. The objective should not be exclusive command over maritime nodes, but a regional order in which no external actor can convert commercial presence into coercive advantage and in which neighbouring states find partnership with India compatible with autonomy.

Strategic access secured through pressure is temporary; access sustained through reciprocal dependence and political consent is cumulative. India's maritime neighbourhood will remain competitive, but competition need not become a contest for possession. A plural, rules-based and capacity-building approach offers the strongest foundation for both Indian security and the sovereign confidence of Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Bangladesh.

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