



# COMMENTARY

## NAVIGATING TROUBLED WATERS: SECURITY IMPLICATIONS OF PALK BAY DISPUTES BETWEEN INDIA AND SRI LANKA

SHARON SUSAN KOSHY



# SOUTH ASIAN FUTURES FELLOWSHIP

THE SOUTH ASIAN FUTURES FELLOWSHIP ANNUALLY SUPPORTS EARLY CAREER RESEARCHERS BASED IN THE SOUTH ASIAN REGION, INTERESTED IN EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF GEOPOLITICS ON REGIONAL COOPERATION. FELLOWS ARE AT DIFFERENT STAGES OF THEIR CAREERS WITH EXPERTISE ON NON-TRADITIONAL SECURITY ISSUES; THEY PARTICIPATE IN WORKSHOPS, PRODUCE POLICY PIECES, AND ARE PROVIDED THE OPPORTUNITY OF A 1-MONTH RESEARCH RESIDENCY IN A SOUTH ASIAN CITY. DURING THIS RESIDENCY THEY WORK AT A PARTNER THINK TANK, ENGAGE WITH EXPERTS, AND CONDUCT FIELD STUDY ON A TOPIC OF THEIR INTEREST. THE FELLOWSHIP PRODUCES, AND ENGAGES WITH, REGIONAL NARRATIVES AND FACILITATES KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE ON SHARED CHALLENGES IN AN EVOLVING GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT IN THE SOUTH ASIAN REGION.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SHARON IS A PHD CANDIDATE AT THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY, FOCUSING ON TEMPORARY MIGRATION AND GENDER. SHE WAS A VISITING FELLOW AT THE NEPAL INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION AND ENGAGEMENT AND SPECIALIZES IN GENDER POLITICS AND NON-TRADITIONAL SECURITY IN THE INDO-PACIFIC AND SOUTH ASIA. SHARON CONSULTS FOR BORDERS AND BROADER CONVERSATIONS BY THE UNION OF CIVIL LIBERTIES IN BANGKOK AND REVIEWS FOR THE JOURNAL OF PEACE AND JUSTICE STUDIES. SHE HOLDS AN MPhil FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF HYDERABAD AND A MASTER'S FROM THE CENTRAL UNIVERSITY OF KERALA. SHE WAS A RESEARCH ASSOCIATE AT THE CENTRE FOR PUBLIC POLICY RESEARCH, KOCHI, LEADING ITS INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS VERTICAL, WHERE SHE FOCUSED ON INDO-PACIFIC AND NON-TRADITIONAL SECURITY ISSUES. SHE HAS ORGANIZED INTERNATIONAL DIALOGUES ON MARITIME SECURITY AND NON-TRADITIONAL CHALLENGES WITH PARTNERS LIKE THE FREDRICH NAUMANN FOUNDATION AND THE JAPANESE CONSULATE IN CHENNAI.

SHARON IS PASSIONATE ABOUT GENDER IN PUBLIC AND FOREIGN POLICY AND HOSTS THE \*SOUTHBOUND\* PODCAST, DISCUSSING GENDER MAINSTREAMING IN GLOBAL SOUTH CONTEXTS. SHE HAS WORKED WITH TIBETAN REFUGEES AND EGYPTIAN FEMINIST CSOS, GAINING EXTENSIVE FIELD EXPERIENCE IN INDIA.

## **Navigating Troubled Waters: Security Implications of Palk Bay Disputes between India and Sri Lanka**

Dating back to colonial times, India and Sri Lanka have had long-standing issues of maritime dispute and conflict in the 64-kilometer-long Palk Bay.<sup>1</sup> Besides the typical maritime disputes involving sovereignty and national interests, Palk Bay is doubly significant being a thriving fishing ground and a critical source of livelihood, nutrition, and food security for fisherfolk communities on both sides. Additionally, owing to geopolitical considerations, the region has been a hotbed of political controversies, recently figuring in the discussions leading up to the 2024 General Elections in India. Given that border disputes arising out of colonial legacies, such as between Japan and Taiwan, have been successfully negotiated through joint mechanisms to establish long-term peace and economic prosperity<sup>2</sup>, resolution of the issue between New Delhi and Colombo is not only desirable but also plausible.

The 1974 and 1976 agreements brokered between India's Congress government and Sri Lanka's Bandaranaike government were keystone negotiations delineating maritime boundaries of the historic waters in Palk Bay, Gulf of Mannar, and Bay of Bengal. In spite of this, there is recurring inflammation of maritime disputes in Palk Bay, pertaining to the sovereignty of Katchatheevu, a 285-acre uninhabited island with a resource-rich surrounding seabed, and the issue of unsustainable fishing practices. The latter is particularly aggravated on the Indian side of the waters where overfishing, bottom trawling, and IUU (Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated) fishing have caused extensive environmental damage and a steady decline in the fish catch<sup>3</sup>, forcing Indian fisherfolk to cross over to Sri Lankan waters.<sup>4</sup>



Source: Sovereign Limits<sup>5</sup>

For Sri Lanka, too, fishing is an economically significant vocation and Palk Bay alone contributes to at least a third of the country's fish yield.<sup>6</sup> There has been a significant rise in trawling boat registrations in India between the 1980s and 2000s (from 1,568 to 3,339),<sup>7</sup> to meet the rising demand for shrimp consumption in Western countries, Japan, and Western Europe.<sup>8</sup> While Indian marine exports skyrocketed during this period, the unintended consequence was the irreversible damage to marine ecology and fish stocks on the Indian side which earned bottom trawlers the name "hoovers of the shelf bottom"<sup>9</sup>, referring to the potential harm they do to benthic ecosystems and their impact through by-catch.

The practice is banned in Sri Lanka but is still widely practiced by Indian fisherfolks. In effect, tensions are on the rise between artisanal fisherfolk and trawling boats on both sides of the maritime border.<sup>10</sup> These economic and environmental considerations significantly raise the incentive for the Sri Lankan Navy to meet border transgressions with stringent measures including seizure of fishing vessels and even imprisonment.<sup>11</sup> Alternatively, from the Indian perspective, “giving up” Katchatheevu’s sovereignty in 1974 translates to a loss of fishing grounds traditionally enjoyed by Indian artisanal fisherfolk.<sup>12</sup>

Resolving the maritime border issue and strengthening economic cooperation must be a priority for India, especially in the context of emergent geopolitical realities. China’s bid to be a powerful blue navy in the Indian Ocean, with Sri Lanka as a vital component, brings it closer to Indian waters, thereby posing a serious geostrategic threat. These developments are telling of a compelling geopolitical reality in South Asia, wherein small states find it challenging to balance their big, powerful, and competing economic partners, along with their own strategic priorities and domestic politics.

China is an attractive development assistance partner to many South Asian states, including Sri Lanka, with its expedited timelines for infrastructure development funded by long-term loans, notwithstanding their onerous terms. For instance, much to India’s dismay, Sri Lanka reneged on a joint deal with Japan and India to develop the East Container Terminal of the Colombo Port to later award it to China. For Colombo, Beijing appears to be the preferred development partner as illustrated in the case of Mattala Airport and Hambantota Port, too. China had initially offered assistance via the Asian Development Bank to help build wind turbines on three Sri Lankan islands in the Palk Bay<sup>13</sup>, which would have brought Beijing within earshot of Indian territory but was eventually scuttled owing to pressure from New Delhi.<sup>14</sup>

In contrast to New Delhi’s slow pace in executing development projects, Beijing has established a more favorable and comfortable position with Colombo. Joint ventures are being set up in Sri Lanka’s coastal regions to offer sustainable livelihood options, which are seen as being undermined by India’s unsustainable fishing practices in the Palk Bay. The Guilan Sea Cucumber Hatchery and Farm and New Silk Road Foodstuff Factory in Mannar are recent additions to this joint venture between Sri Lanka and China, both of which have been

praised for generating employment. In addition, the distribution of dry rations and nets has secured the goodwill of local Tamil fishermen in Sri Lanka.

Therefore, India must consider a multi-pronged approach to securing its bordering waters, focusing on diplomatic, socioeconomic, and development dimensions. However, the lack of commitment from political parties in Tamil Nadu—where this issue is a crucial factor for securing votes—poses a significant obstacle to establishing effective dialogue mechanisms. While successive Tamil Nadu governments have shown interest in securing the release of their detained fishermen from Sri Lankan custody, this concern unfortunately does not include a sustainable resolution to the issue. Instead, local governments have strong political and economic incentives to ignore the powerful trawlers that consistently refuse to adopt more sustainable fishing practices.

Non-resolution of the issue will have repercussions beyond the geopolitical realms given the centrality of fish in the region's food and nutritional security. Considering the prevalence of similar maritime disputes within the region—namely between India and Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, and Sri Lanka and Maldives—devising a regional and multi-stakeholder fisheries mechanism could safeguard blue food security in South Asia.

## **Conclusion**

The maritime dispute in Palk Bay between India and Sri Lanka carries significant geopolitical and food security implications. Given that the disputes are rooted in historical factors and aggravated by economic and political motivations, the issue is also intertwined with regional politics and global shifts in power. For a permanent resolution of the issue, the continuous participation, oversight, and coordination of both state and non-state actors in Tamil Nadu, along with building consensus between the central and state governments, are essential and cannot be overstated. Incentivizing deep-sea trawlers to progressively shift to sustainable methods of fishing requires additional safeguards to offset loss from reduced season catch which has to be addressed at the policymaking level.<sup>15</sup> For India, the key to maintaining sustained peace in all areas is to present itself as a desirable, reliable, and favorable partner in the Indian Ocean Region, not only to Sri Lanka but also to other maritime neighbors.

## Endnotes

1. Manoharan, N., & Deshpande, M. (2018). Fishing in the Troubled Waters: Fishermen Issue in India–Sri Lanka Relations. *India Quarterly*, 74(1), 73-91.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0974928417749643>
2. “Exploring Regional Solutions to Fishermen Disputes in South Asia.” *South Asia@LSE*, 17 July 2017,  
[blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2017/07/18/exploring-regional-solutions-to-fishermen-disputes-in-south-asia](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2017/07/18/exploring-regional-solutions-to-fishermen-disputes-in-south-asia).
3. Ramachandran, S. (2022, March 9). *Rising tensions in Palk Bay over fishing rights*. The Diplomat.  
<https://thediplomat.com/2022/03/rising-tensions-in-palk-bay-over-fishing-rights/>
4. AMARALAL, K. H., ABEYKOON, N., & DEEPANANDA, K. H. (2021). Indo-Sri Lanka fishing conflict in the Palk Bay and its implications for fisheries. *Journal of the Indian Society of Coastal Agricultural Research*, 39(2), 140.  
<https://doi.org/10.54894/jiscar.39.2.2021.110627>
5. “India - Sri Lanka Maritime Boundary Agreements: 1974 and 1976.” *Sovereign Limits*,  
[sovereignlimits.com/boundaries/india-sri-lanka-maritime](https://sovereignlimits.com/boundaries/india-sri-lanka-maritime).
6. “India- Sri Lanka in Soft Conflict.” *Synergia Foundation*,  
[www.synergiafoundation.org/insights/analyses-assessments/india-sri-lanka-soft-conflict](https://www.synergiafoundation.org/insights/analyses-assessments/india-sri-lanka-soft-conflict).
7. Menon, A., Bavinck, M., Stephen, J., & Manimohan, R. (2015). The Political Ecology of Palk Bay Fisheries: Geographies of capital, Fisher Conflict, ethnicity and nation-state. *Antipode*, 48(2), 393–411. <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12181>
8. Amaralal, Abeykoon & Deepananda, loc. cit.
9. International Collective in Support of Fishworkers. (1994). (conference proceedings). *The struggles of fishworkers: new concerns for support* (pp. 339–346). Cebu. Retrieved April 2, 2024,.
10. Sandip. “Fishermen of the Palk Strait: Future of the India-Sri Lanka Fishing Conflict | Asia in Global Affairs.” *Asia in Global Affairs*, 24 Feb. 2021,  
[www.asiainglobalaffairs.in/reflections/fishermen-of-the-palk-strait-future-of-the-india-sri-lanka-fishing-conflict](https://www.asiainglobalaffairs.in/reflections/fishermen-of-the-palk-strait-future-of-the-india-sri-lanka-fishing-conflict).

11. Ramachandran, loc. cit.
12. Gaan, N. (1997). Environmental Scarcity of Fish and Conflict: The Case of India and Sri Lanka over Kachchativu Waters. *International Studies Notes*, 17-23.
13. Suryanarayan, V. "The India–Sri Lanka Fisheries Dispute: Creating a Win-Win in the Palk Bay." *Carnegie India*, 9 Sept. 2016  
[carnegieindia.org/2016/09/09/india-sri-lanka-fisheries-dispute-creating-win-win-in-palk-bay-pub-64538](http://carnegieindia.org/2016/09/09/india-sri-lanka-fisheries-dispute-creating-win-win-in-palk-bay-pub-64538).
14. "India to Build Sri Lanka Wind Farms After China Pushed Aside." *The Economic Times*, 29 Mar. 2022,  
[economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/renewables/india-to-build-sri-lanka-wind-farms-after-china-pushed-aside/articleshow/90513780.cms?from=mdr](http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/renewables/india-to-build-sri-lanka-wind-farms-after-china-pushed-aside/articleshow/90513780.cms?from=mdr) .
15. *Resolution of the India-Sri Lanka Maritime Border Conflict and Fisheries Dispute – NUS Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS)*.  
[www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/resolution-of-the-india-sri-lanka-maritime-border-conflict-and-fisheries-dispute/](http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/resolution-of-the-india-sri-lanka-maritime-border-conflict-and-fisheries-dispute/).



© 2023 COUNCIL FOR STRATEGIC AND  
DEFENSE RESEARCH

21, BLOCK C, QUTAB INSTITUTIONAL  
AREA, NEW DELHI, DELHI 110016

PHONE: 011-43104566  
EMAIL: [OFFICE@CSDRONLINE.ORG](mailto:OFFICE@CSDRONLINE.ORG)  
WEB: [WWW.CSDRONLINE.ORG](http://WWW.CSDRONLINE.ORG) TWITTER:  
[@CSDR\\_INDIA](https://twitter.com/CSDR_INDIA)