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## 8. Trincomalee: The Emerging Epicenter of Global Power Politics in the Indian Ocean

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### **Abstract**

This chapter explores the underutilized strategic potential of Sri Lanka's Eastern seaboard, the Trincomalee Harbor, and investigates as to how far Trincomalee will become a theater of global power politics in the Indian Ocean region. Scholarly attention pertaining to Sri Lanka's maritime affairs have primarily centered around the ports of Colombo and Hambantota. But, the Eastern seaboard and the Trincomalee Sea Port have received very little attention. However, Trincomalee, which has an area jurisdiction of 1,630 hectares of water (approximately 4,000 acres) and 5,261 hectares of land (approximately 13,000 acres), is the fifth largest natural deep-water harbor in the world, and strategically located in the Bay of Bengal, has significant potential to enhance the maritime dynamics of the region. It is worthy of mention that the Trincomalee harbor was once used by the British and other colonial powers as their primary Naval Base in the region in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries, especially during the First and Second World Wars. The Indian Ocean region is critical for East-West maritime trade and security. Sri Lanka being strategically located at the center of the Indian Ocean is therefore exceptionally important for parties interested in the region. Building and strengthening their political and maritime relations with Sri Lanka is therefore imperative. As the present regional powers, India, China and Japan

looks forth to diversify trade routes and enhance their naval presence in the region. Among the unexploited resources, Trincomalee port offers the best strategic advantage, vis-à-vis transportation, logistical handling, trade and security for these players. This chapter is dedicated to exploring such possibilities through the lens of maritime geo-economics and argues that the further development of the Trincomalee Harbor will re-position Trincomalee as a focal strategic point in the Indian Ocean region, and thereby, attract the influence of global power bases such as USA and China, and regional players such as India and Japan.

**Keywords:** Trincomalee Harbor, Indian Ocean Geopolitics, Maritime Geo-economics, Strategic Deep-Water Port, Great Power Competition

## 1. Introduction

### 1-1 Sri Lanka's Maritime Geography and its Centrality in the Indian Ocean

South Asia is a primary gateway for trade and commerce between the East and West, offering an abundance of natural resources, large human resource populations, and fast economic growth in the last two decades as strengths of the region. More compelling, if viewed through the lens of geo-economic considerations, it draws interests and attention of the world owing to its positioning on the trade routes of global commerce. “This region is historically well known for its great strategic salience

and enormous market potential" (Hashimi, 2001<sup>1</sup>). The Indian Ocean, being the third largest water-body on the planet, is host to over two thirds of global trade, half of the world's container ships, and 80% of the world's seaborne oil trade travels through this region. The Indian Ocean region is expected to account for 22% of world's GDP by the year 2025 (kannangara, 2019)<sup>2</sup>. Robert Kaplan (2010)<sup>3</sup>, mentions that the Indian Ocean region will be the "center of global conflicts" and where the "21st century's global power dynamics will be revealed." Kaplan cites two reasons for this; first, "most international business supplies will be conducted through this route" and secondly, "it is in this region that interests and influence of India, China and the United States are beginning to overlap and intersect."

Sri Lanka, dubbed the 'Pearl of the Indian Ocean', is strategically located almost at the center of the Indian Ocean shipping routes, making the island nation an ideal hub of sorts in the region for global trade and commerce. Thus, the need for global powers to strengthen and maintain a 'foothold' in Sri Lanka. This strategic importance of the country has existed through history from the earliest records going back to the visit of the Chinese Admiral Zheng He to the region in 1405. This was almost a century prior to Vasco da Gama visiting South Asia in 1498 (Winser, 2011)<sup>4</sup>. This fact was further emphasized by the former U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary for Sri Lanka, Thomas Vajda who said, "We view Sri Lanka as

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<sup>1</sup>Hashimi, Z. (2001). US Policy in South Asia. *Strategic Studies*, 21(1), 104-116. Retrieved from: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45242238>

<sup>2</sup> Kannangara, P. (2019). *Sri Lanka's Port Development and the Role of BRI*. Retrieved from The Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute. <https://lki.lk/blog/sri-lankas-port-development-and-the-role-of-bri/>

<sup>3</sup> Kaplan, R. D. (2010). *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power*. New York: Random House.

<sup>4</sup> Winser, S. (2011). Vasco da Gama. Retrieved from BBC. [https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/tudors/vasco\\_da\\_gama\\_01.shtml](https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/tudors/vasco_da_gama_01.shtml)

a critical partner in the region and located at the nexus of the Indo-Pacific, Sri Lanka has the opportunity to shape the region's future." (Premaratne & Thrishali, 2020)<sup>5</sup>. Facts and observations such as these, are an affirmation of the strategic importance of South Asia, and Sri Lanka in particular, for global trade and commerce.

### 1-2 The Dominance of Colombo and Hambantota in the Maritime Policy of Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's two main ports, Colombo and Hambantota, have been the focus of national policy and undergone noteworthy capacity expansion in recent times. The port of Colombo acts primarily as a transshipment gateway and the Hambantota Port is utilized for industrial production and logistics. The Colombo Port, which is primarily a container port, is a rapidly growing maritime hub in South Asia. Due to its strategic location, the Colombo Port efficiently connects cargo originating and destined to East and South Asia, East Africa, Europe and the Persian Gulf. Over the many years this port has reached historic levels of growth. The container throughput in the year 2015 was 5.1 million Twenty-foot Equivalent Units (TEUs), in 2017 it handled 06 million TEUs, in 2023 an increase to 07 million TEUs and in 2024 the Colombo Port recorded handling a total of 7.78 million TEUs (Sri Lanka Ports Authority, 2025)<sup>6</sup>. This growth was from consistent capacity enhancement with terminal development and

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<sup>5</sup> Premaratna, S. P. & Thrishali, A. (2020). *Sri Lanka and the Geopolitics of Indo-Pacific: Perceptions, Opportunities and Challenges*. Retrieved from Journal of Polity and Society, 12 (1). <https://journalspoliticalscience.com/index.php/i/article/view/19>

<sup>6</sup> Sri Lanka Ports Authority. (2025). *SLPA Terminals Record All-Time High of 2.41 Million TEUs in 2024 Amidst Competition*. Retrieved from Sri Lanka Ports Authority. <https://news.slpa.lk/index.php/2025/01/01/slpa-records-all>

modernization programs. Going forward, the Colombo West International Terminal, also known as South Asia's Premier Terminal, commenced its operations in April 2025. This is a deep-water section, predominantly with automated facilities, to add another 3.2 million TEUs (Colombo West International Terminal, (2025)<sup>7</sup>. These developments reinforce Colombo's competitiveness even when it comes to ultra large container vessels. It has also helped mitigate congestion risks which previously threatened the Port's efficiency.

The Hambantota Port, which is located just ten nautical miles from global shipping routes is Sri Lanka's most diversified deep-water, multipurpose port. It offers a range of services for the port and maritime industry of Sri Lanka. Its focus is on new technologies and environmentally sustainable practices. The port operates across a number of business sectors: Roll-on/Roll-off (RO-RO), containerized cargo, conventional cargo, dry bulk cargo, breakbulk cargo, project cargo, liquid bulk cargo (LPG, LNG), petrochemicals, marine bunker fuel, and cruise terminals. In addition, the Hambantota Port has huge potential in energy services and thus is responsible for 50% of the world's maritime oil trade already (Hambantota International Port, 2025a)<sup>8</sup>. The port also provides a number of industry specific services such as bunkering, ship repairs, ship handling, sea marshals, underwater services, surveys and crew changes. These services ensure that customer fleets are consistently kept

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time-high-of-2-41-million-teus-in-2024-amidst-competition/

<sup>7</sup> Colombo West Terminal. (2025). Retrieved from Colombo West International Terminal. <https://www.cwit.lk/about-us/#our-story>

<sup>8</sup> Hambantota International Port. (2025a). Retrieved from: <https://www.hipg.lk/>

operational. Accordingly, the Hambantota Port achieved a growth of 22% year on year in 2023 and 2024 (Hambantota International Port, 2025b)<sup>9</sup>.

To further the maritime infrastructure of the country, the Sri Lanka Ports Authority (SLPA) has recently undertaken many development projects at the Colombo Port. In 2023, The East Container Terminal (ECT) at the Colombo South Harbor, completed the construction of a 600-meter quay wall, an operational berth of 440m, an 18-hectare yard, peripheral roads, and related gate facilities. The West Container Terminal - I at Colombo South Harbor, is being developed to a 1400-meter quay to accommodate three Ultra Large Container Carriers (ULCC), each of 400 meters or more in length. This terminal is expected to handle 03 million TEUs annually. Further, the extension of the Breakwater of the West Container Terminal - II (WCT-II) has immense potential. This expansion will increase the existing western breakwater by 50-70 hectares of land, the creation of a south harbor basin featuring a 1200-1400-meter quay wall with a depth of 20 meters to cater capacity for 3.5 million TEUs. With these developments, the entire Port of Colombo will have a 2600 - 2800 meter straight quay wall at a depth of 18-20 meters (Sri Lanka Ports Authority, 2023)<sup>10</sup>. In addition, the South Asia Commercial and Logistics Hub is an important infrastructure project being developed at this Port. This project, which is an

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<sup>9</sup> Hambantota International Port. (2025b). *Hambantota International Port: Sustained Growth and Strategic Vision in 2024*. Retrieved from Hambantota International Port. <https://www.hipg.lk/2025/hambantota-international-port-sustained-growth-and-strategic-vision-in-2024>

<sup>10</sup> Sri Lanka Ports Authority. (2023). *Annual Report*. [https://www.slpa.lk/application\\_resources/other/2023-annual\\_report.pdf](https://www.slpa.lk/application_resources/other/2023-annual_report.pdf).

investment of USD 392 million (The Morning, 2023)<sup>11</sup>, aims at being the largest commercial and logistics complex in South Asia, which will encompass an eight-story building complex with five million square feet of storage capacity (530,000 cubic meters). Due to increasing demand, the SLPA aims to open a new port in the northern part of the Colombo Port: The Colombo North Port. The North Port will be utilized to handle liquid bulk, dry bulk, RO-RO, and containers. Discussions on its feasibility are currently underway (Sri Lanka Ports Authority, 2023)<sup>12</sup>.

The Hambantota Port has also seen several developments in recent years. A state-of-the-art yacht building facility commenced construction in 2022 with an investment of USD 58 million (Hambantota International Port, 2022a)<sup>13</sup>. Moreover, a Plug and Play Park-in-Park Facility (ready-to-use infrastructure in dedicated zones), a USD 300 million tire manufacturing plant, two warehousing complexes (one with 17,300 square meters and the second with 5,000 square meters) is being constructed; not only to attract new cargo volumes but, also to sustain the Port's goal of being the regional hub for bulk cargo. In addition, a USD 65 million Laugfs Gas terminal, a USD 5 million Sinopec Fuel Oil Lanka facility to carry out the business of ship refueling and oil trade in South Asia, and a facility for Intertek Lanka to operate its field-testing laboratory is also established (Hambantota International Port, 2022b)<sup>14</sup>. Furthermore,

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<sup>11</sup> The Morning. (2023). *South Asia's largest logistics complex in Colombo Port*. Retrieved from The Morning. <https://www.themorning.lk/articles/cEmpY6XXbdAHhAAmnoCU>

<sup>12</sup> Sri Lanka Ports Authority. (2023). *Annual Report*. [https://www.slpa.lk/application\\_resources/other/2023-annual\\_report.pdf](https://www.slpa.lk/application_resources/other/2023-annual_report.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Hambantota International Port. (2022a). *Hambantota Port Declares 2022 the 'Year of Construction'*. Retrieved from Hambantota International Port. <https://www.hipg.lk/2022/hambantota-port-declares-2022-the-year-of-construction>

<sup>14</sup> Hambantota International Port. (2022b). *Several projects at HIP's Industrial Park nearing completion*. Retrieved from Hambantota International Port. <https://www.hipg.lk/2022/several-projects-at-hip-s->

the Hambantota Port has expanded its bunkering services in January 2025 by integrating High Sulphur Fuel Oil into its range of bunkering services. Now, the port offers a complete suite of marine fuels which includes Very Low Sulphur Fuel Oil and Marine Gas Oil (Hambantota International Port, 2025c)<sup>15</sup>. This development further strengthens the Port's and Sri Lanka's position in the global maritime landscape as it now caters to a broader range of vessels which navigate the world's busiest shipping routes. Due to these developments and many others, the Hambantota Port saw an impressive growth of 22% in 2023 and 2024 respectively. The Port's bulk and break-bulk cargo business saw an increase of 134% in 2024 compared to 2023. Gas operations improved with LPG volumes increasing by 46% in the first half of 2024 and a 100% increase in the second half compared to the previous year (Hambantota International Port, 2025d)<sup>16</sup>.

According to the SLPA's 2023 Annual Report, the Port of Trincomalee plays a pivotal role in the economic landscape of the region, primarily due to its strategic location, deep-water port infrastructure, extensive hinterland suitable for industrial establishments, and land connectivity through a network of expressways to the port of Colombo. The Trincomalee Port features dedicated facilities for liquid bulk (oil) with the Lanka IOC and SLPA oil berths, dry bulk (cement, coal, gypsum) at terminals like Tokyo

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industrial-park-nearing-completion

<sup>15</sup> Hambantota International Port. (2025c). *Hambantota International Port Expands Bunkering with New HSFO Facilities*. Retrieved from Hambantota International Port. <https://www.hipg.lk/2025/hambantota-international-port-expands-bunkering-with-new-hsfo-facilities>

<sup>16</sup> Hambantota International Port. (2025d). *Hambantota International Port: Sustained Growth and Strategic Vision in 2024*. Retrieved from Hambantota International Port. <https://www.hipg.lk/2025/hambantota-international-port-sustained-growth-and-strategic-vision-in-2024>

Cement, and general cargo. It also includes a grain terminal for Prima Flour, a Tea Facility operated by the TTA, and the historic Oil Storage Tank Farm located near the port. The objective of the government and the SLPA is to position the Trincomalee Port as a regional nexus for industrial and tourism activities. Discussions are on the way to establish a more vibrant Oil Farm project (Sri Lanka Ministry of Energy, 2025)<sup>17</sup>, and a Logistics and Heavy Industry Park (Economynext, 2024)<sup>18</sup>, along with other developments surrounding the port. A three storied engineering workshop building was commenced in 2023 and an effective pipe borne water system catering to the needs of the port and visiting vessels was established.

The above is an account of the current infrastructure of this port and Sri Lanka's aspirations for its maritime future. Trincomalee, which is also the world's fifth largest natural deep-water harbor, is left open for countries with regional interest to partner the government of Sri Lanka in its development programs. From a geo-economic point of view, the material brought to light through this introductory chapter is reasonable content to arouse the interest of the reader to delve deeper into the potential of this port in the East Coast of Sri Lanka and to understand the significance it offers for regional presence.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

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<sup>17</sup> Sri Lanka Ministry of Energy. (2025). *To Execute Port Development in line with Trincomalee Oil Tank Farm to Boost Greater Foreign Exchange for the Country*. Retrieved from Sri Lanka Ministry of Energy. <https://energymin.gov.lk/index.php/2025/01/15/to-execute-port-development-in-line-with-trincomalee-oil-tank-farm-to-boost-greater-foreign-exchange-for-the-country/>

<sup>18</sup> Economynext. (2024). *Sri Lanka to establish Trincomalee logistic hub; aims up to \$1.5 bn investment*. Retrieved from Economynext. <https://economynext.com/sri-lanka-to-establish-trincomalee-logistic-hub-aims-up-to-1-5-bn-investment-177663/>

Geo-economics is the practice of how states leverage economic policies and tools such as trade policies, sanctions, investment policies, development aid and secure access to critical resources such as oil, gas, food, etc. to achieve their political objectives and exert influence on the global system. Geo-economics is also considered as a systematic framework of handling one's economic, technological and geographic effect on the international system. James Lee (2024)<sup>19</sup> defines geo-economics as "how economics, technology, and geography affect the distribution of capabilities in the international system." The study of geo-economics is quite new to international relations (IR) and therefore, he asserts that this framework should be given much attention due to its intensity of evolution and rapid advancements in related technologies. Lee also discusses how a state's power is now not only measured by its military strength but, it is also measured by its geographic, technological and economic strength. For example, the USA is no longer considered the most powerful or influential state in the world, because it lags behind other countries on many important factors that go to make a country influential in the international arena. e.g., China is considered to be an equal 'super-power' in this regard. However, China's military capabilities will not equal the US's until the year 2049, at least it is expected to be so. Thus, China's rising power is primarily from its economic strength. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) takes precedence and is received very favorably by many countries.

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<sup>19</sup> Lee, J. (2024). *Geoconomics Defines a New Phase of International Competition*. Retrieved from University of California Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation. <https://ucigcc.org/blog/geoconomics-defines-a-new-phase-of-international-competition/>

In addition, Robert Blackwill and Jennifer Harris call geo-economics “the use of economic instruments to promote and defend national interests, and to produce beneficial geo-political results; and the effects of other nations’ economic actions on a country’s geopolitical goals” (Lee, 2024)<sup>20</sup>. Crawford (2024)<sup>21</sup>, defines geo-economics as the “ability of governments to use their country’s economic strength from existing financial and trade relationships to achieve geo-political and economic goals.” Crawford further goes on to mention the importance of the study of geo-economics in today’s context, especially with the super-power balance being contested between the USA and China. Countries with geo-economic advantages are able to leverage their economic strength such as, lending and access to manufacturing resources and thereby pressure governments and firms to undertake costly actions like tariffs, markup on goods, surcharges on loans and import-export restrictions on industry and/or countries. China’s BRI project provides that perfect example as it facilitates emerging markets/countries with ‘package deals’ for lending, infrastructure and manufacturing, in exchange of political concessions and other bilateral and multilateral benefits.

Maritime geo-economics takes this concept to the oceans and seas, bringing focus on the economic and strategic significance of maritime spaces and infrastructures. This framework examines how ocean related activities such as shipping, port development, security of sea-lanes, fisheries and

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<sup>20</sup> Lee, J. (2024). *Geoeconomics Defines a New Phase of International Competition*. Retrieved from University of California Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation. <https://ucigcc.org/blog/geoeconomics-defines-a-new-phase-of-international-competition/>

<sup>21</sup> Crawford, K. (2024). *The power of ‘geoeconomics’ to make sense of a turbulent world*. Retrieved from Stanford University, Institute for Economic and Policy Research. <https://siepr.stanford.edu/news/power-geoeconomics-make-sense-turbulent-world>

offshore resource extraction are shaped by geo-political and economic interests of states/countries. In other words, maritime geo-economics is the strategic economic interplay in the maritime domain where the control over sea routes, chokepoints and port infrastructure can be leveraged for both national development and geopolitical influence or presence.

According to Jacobs & Haar (2024)<sup>22</sup>, “the maritime domain serves as a cornerstone of today’s global economy.” The shipping industry, which is responsible for over 90% of global trade, strings together global supply chains by moving huge quantities of goods across continents. And, at a subsea level, there is an expansive network of cables and pipelines which serve as the backbone of world digital connectivity and energy grids. Jacobs & Haar goes further to mention how strategically located ports and sea-lanes can be leveraged as maritime geo-economic assets. A perfect example of this clearly is China’s Belt and Road Initiative, where China has strategically invested in ports across South East Asia, South Asia and the Mediterranean. These investments secure essential sea routes and protect Chinese trade flows. Beijing has quietly but decisively expanded its influence over global information flows by building vast undersea cable networks and pioneering state-led blockchain systems. These projects, which other nations might dismiss as technical upgrades, are in fact central to Beijing’s broader strategy to achieve technological and financial sovereignty (Mouza Almarzooqi, 2025)<sup>23</sup>. Thus, the strategic

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<sup>22</sup> Jacobs, M. & Haar, T. T. (2024). *Geoeconomics in the Maritime Domain*. Retrieved from Geoeconomics Group. <https://www.geoeconomicsgroup.be/geoeconomics-in-the-maritime-domain>

<sup>23</sup> Almarzooqi, M. H. (2025). *Wired for Dominance: China’s Undersea Cable Strategy*. Retrieved from Trends Research and Advisory. <https://trendsresearch.org/insight/wired-for-dominance-chinas-undersea-cable-strategy/>

interests in sea-lanes, ports and sea-bed infrastructure are a critical element of maritime trade and business. It represents a broader geo-economic strategy used by major powers to secure economic interests whilst enhancing both regional and global influence.

Further, the development of high quality port infrastructure has been a prerequisite for successful growth, particularly in countries driven by exports (Humphreys, 2023)<sup>24</sup>. A high quality port would encompass not just efficiency but also the availability of sufficient draught, quay, docking facilities, technology, roads and railway connections. Such developments would in turn attract necessary investment in production and distribution systems, support the growth of manufacturing and logistics, create employment and increase income levels. On the other hand, inefficiencies would result in higher costs, reduced competitiveness, lower trade volumes, and eventually, less money. Therefore, the time is ripe for big players to partner Sri Lanka in building a competitive port in the East of the country: the Trincomalee Port.

As Sri Lanka is strategically located at the center of the Indian Ocean and potentially an invaluable hub for East-West maritime trade, the framework of maritime geo-economics can be a powerful tool to examine the strategic-economic interplay of Sri Lanka's maritime future. According to Wakkumbura (2023)<sup>25</sup>, as this island nation is located at the center of global and regional maritime trade, Sri Lanka has become a 'playground' for the competing interests of major super-powers, especially

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<sup>24</sup> Humphreys, R. M. (2023). *Why ports matter for the global economy*. Retrieved from World Bank.

<https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/transport/why-ports-matter-global-economy>

<sup>25</sup> Wakkumbura, M. (2023). The Geopolitical Rivalry of India and China in the Indian Ocean as a Crucial Determinant of the Future of Littoral States: Case Study of Sri Lanka. *Colombo Geographer*, 1(1)

regional powers like India and China. It is therefore, now time for Sri Lanka to look to the future and build durable strategic partnerships for long-term benefit.

### 3. Historical and Strategic Significance of the Trincomalee Port

Trincomalee is situated along Sri Lanka's eastern seaboard and is the world's fifth largest deep-water harbor. It is a naturally sheltered bay that facilitates safe naval anchorage. The port has considerable geopolitical and geoeconomic significance due to its strategic location in the Indian Ocean. The port has historic references suggesting that it was a maritime hub for over 2,300 years. Specifically, it is believed that the port was an important trading hub during the period of the Anuradhapura Kingdom in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century BC and subsequently, during the Polonnaruwa Kingdom in the 11<sup>th</sup> Century AD Sri Lanka. The port's strategic location has made it a vital maritime harbor for centuries and was known to ancient civilizations such as the Romans, Greeks, Chinese and Indians.

Even in more recent history, the geopolitical landscape of the Indian Sub-Continent has been marked with intense competition among the colonial powers that be – the Portuguese, Dutch (the Netherlands), French, British, and many other seafaring powers of the time. They all vied for control over this region. Control over Trincomalee Port facilitated trade between the Gulf and Southeast Asia. It gave vital access to trade routes between Europe, Africa and Asia. Therefore, the harbor was contested and fought fiercely for control between the 15th and 18th centuries. It changed hands among these European powers: the Portuguese in 1505 AD, the Dutch in 1602 AD and the British in 1796 AD. According

to records, the French and the Danish too fought battles with the aim of taking control of this harbor (Tantray et al, 2025)<sup>26</sup>. Trincomalee's strategic importance is thus emphasized, as Trincomalee became the primary naval base for colonial rulers in this part of the world. The much decorated Naval Officer of the time, Admiral Horatio Nelson's (Lord Nelson) recognized the Trincomalee Harbor as one of the most important harbors of the region, underscoring its strategic military and commercial significance.

After the fall of Singapore in 1942, Trincomalee became the principal base for the British Royal Navy's Eastern Fleet and a critical staging area for the Allied operations in the Indian Ocean. The harbor's ability to accommodate large ships, provide necessary ship repairs, and the supply of medical services and fresh drinking water made Trincomalee more than an asset to the local rulers. The harbor was considered an operational 'hinge' for the control of the Eastern region of the Indian Ocean. Consequently, the Trincomalee harbor even became the target of the Imperial Japanese Navy when they raided the Indian Ocean in 1942 (Twaddell, 2024)<sup>27</sup>. Which stresses the point that Trincomalee was a strategically important location in the War. It is also a reminder of the vulnerability of the Trincomalee Port at a time of strife between powers of the region. Contemporary naval records of the British Royal Navy stressed the advantages of Trincomalee vis-à-vis its size, the depth and sheltered anchorage as benefits for naval activity.

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<sup>26</sup> Tantray et al. (2025). Trincomalee Harbour in the Indo-Pacific: Strategic Significance and Contemporary Geopolitical Implications for India. *JOURNAL OF MARITIME RESEARCH*, 22(1), 137–145.

<sup>27</sup> Twaddell, W. (2024). *Operation C*. Retrieved from U S Naval Institute. [https://www.usni.org/magazines/naval-history-magazine/2024/april/operation-c?utm\\_](https://www.usni.org/magazines/naval-history-magazine/2024/april/operation-c?utm_)

With Sri Lanka's independence in 1948, the British eventually transferred the controls of the Trincomalee harbor to the new Ceylonese (Sri Lankan) Government in 1957. Accordingly, the Sri Lanka Navy took control of the harbor and established it as the Eastern Naval Command and dockyard. However, Trincomalee soon became a focal point of domestic politics which stifled its growth and development. During the Sri Lankan Civil Conflict (1983 - 2009), Trincomalee served as a key location of the Government for logistics and staging area for counter insurgency operations. Unfortunately, the port was affected by the security concerns of the time, which limited its expansion opportunities.

With normalcy returning after the Civil War ended in 2009, Trincomalee has become a part of the discussion of national maritime policy. The Oil Tank Farms and other developments since 2009 have been the focus of such discussions. The operational headquarters of the Sri Lanka Navy Eastern Command provides the harbor with the necessary security for its international operations. The Chinese have shown special interest in assisting the Sri Lanka Government in this regard. At present, scholars frame the harbor's role as a 'geo-political strong point', considering the current power dynamics in the Indian Ocean region, India's interest in the eastern sea board of Sri Lanka, and the rivalry among extra-regional powers such as the USA who consider Trincomalee as a 'geo-strategic prize' (Tantray et al, 2025)<sup>28</sup>. Accordingly, the Sri Lankan policy makers aim at developing the Trincomalee Port as a strong commercial hub with military capabilities to facilitate safe seaborne trade.

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<sup>28</sup> Tantray et al. (2025). Trincomalee Harbour in the Indo-Pacific: Strategic Significance and Contemporary Geopolitical Implications for India. *JOURNAL OF MARITIME RESEARCH*, 22(1), 137–145.

#### 4. A comparative Geoeconomic Profile of the Trincomalee Harbor

The Trincomalee harbor is famed as one of the largest and finest natural deep-water harbors in the world with much potential for economic activity in the region. This section will explore five key reasons as to why Trincomalee stands out from the other facilities available.

##### 4-1 Proximity to Key Sea Lanes and Regional Hubs

The Indian Ocean is a focal point in international maritime trade. Notably, it encompasses four out of the world's six major chokepoints: the Strait of Malacca, the Straits of Hormuz, the Strait of Mandeb, and the Mozambique Channel (Tantray et al, 2025)<sup>29</sup>. At the center of the region or as a main feeder gateway is Sri Lanka, which acts as the most important transshipment hub in the region. According to Awad & Todkar (2021)<sup>30</sup>, "No other country in the South Asian region can match the geographical location of Sri Lanka." Countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh and the Maldives have their geographical and strategic significance. But, from a naval point of view, Sri Lanka offers far more benefits, including the protection of Sri Lanka's quality services, coastlines and the existing maritime traffic."

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<sup>29</sup> Tantray et al. (2025). Trincomalee Harbour in the Indo-Pacific: Strategic Significance and Contemporary Geopolitical Implications for India. *JOURNAL OF MARITIME RESEARCH*, 22(1), 137–145.

<sup>30</sup> Awad, R. S. & Todkar, B. D. (2021) *The Geostrategic Position and Importance of Sri Lanka*. PalArch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt Egyptology, 18(08), 4089–4098. Retrieved from <https://archives.palarch.nl/index.php/jae/article/view/9641>

The Trincomalee harbor is located approximately 350 kilometers north of the primary East-West maritime route in the Indian Ocean. To the north of the Trincomalee Bay lies three distinct bays, including Kodiyar Bay to the south and Tambalagam Bay to the west (Awad & Todkar, 2021)<sup>31</sup>. In addition, Trincomalee faces the Bay of Bengal - ships moving between Southeast Asia, the Malaccan straits, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and India. These vessels frequently cross and enter the Bay of Bengal. Trincomalee is therefore well positioned to serve as a vital hub and relay (transshipment) point in the region.

Even though Trincomalee is not immediately on the Malacca - Suez sea route (which passes to the south of Sri Lanka), its eastern location and deep anchorage make it an attractive or supplementary node for vessels needing bunkering, storage or shelter. Trincomalee's proximity to regional markets like India in the Bay of Bengal, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Thailand to the East, gives it the ability to function in regional emergencies or as strategic supply routes. Thus, boosting its position as both being strategic and hugely commercial.

#### 4-2 Physical features

The area of jurisdiction of the port of Trincomalee covers 1,630 hectares of water (approximately 4,000 acres) with a 500 meter wide entrance channel, and 5,261 hectares of hinterland (approximately 13,000

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<sup>31</sup> Awad, R. S. & Todkar, B. D. (2021) *The Geostrategic Position and Importance of Sri Lanka*. PalArch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt Egyptology, 18(08), 4089–4098. Retrieved from <https://archives.palarch.nl/index.php/jae/article/view/9641>

acres). The water and hinterland area of the Trincomalee Port is ten times the size of what the Colombo Port can account for. Being one of the largest natural deep-water harbors with depths ranging from 20 to 40 meters, the harbor allows the largest of the vessels to anchor and operate without requiring much dredging.

Furthermore, the harbor is quite sheltered throughout the year from the northeast and southwest monsoonal storms. The many bays, rocky promontories and coves offer protective anchorage for vessels. Therefore, Trincomalee is able to remain operational during all seasons and weather. This is critical for the reliability of a port in shipping and bunkering.

In addition, today, nuclear armaments and submarine-based missile systems play a critical part in world affairs. Trincomalee's strategic relevance along with its ample depths facilitate the maneuvering of these nuclear submarines. According to Awad & Todkar (2021)<sup>32</sup>, Trincomalee is quite suitable for nuclear and nuclear powered submarines. The wide expanse of the port, ability for such submarines to hide from radar and sonar observations are key advantages.

#### 4-3 Current Port Infrastructure and Usage

Apart from playing a pivotal role in the economic landscape of the region due to its strategic location and deep-water infrastructure, Trincomalee has an abundance of hinterland suitable for industries and

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<sup>32</sup> Awad, R. S. & Todkar, B. D. (2021) *The Geostrategic Position and Importance of Sri Lanka*. PalArch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt Egyptology, 18(08), 4089–4098. Retrieved from <https://archives.palarch.nl/index.php/jae/article/view/9641>

land connectivity through the expressways with other ports in the island – Colombo, Hambantota, Galle and Kankesanthurai (KKS). It enables consolidation and transshipment synergies at a very advanced level.

Trincomalee has dedicated facilities for bulk cargo, break bulk cargo, liquid bulk (oil) with Lanka IOC and SLPA oil berths, dry bulk (cement, coal, gypsum) at terminals like Tokyo Cement, and general cargo. It also includes a grain terminal for Prima Flour, a Tea Facility operated by the TTA, and the historic Oil Storage Tank Farm located in the immediate vicinity. Trincomalee has also been positioned as a nexus for tourism and agriculture purposes. Further, the establishment of an oil farm project (Sri Lanka Ministry of Energy, 2025)<sup>33</sup> and a logistics and heavy industry park (Economynext, 2024)<sup>34</sup> are also a part of the future development plans of the Port. A three storied engineering workshop building commenced in 2023 and an effective pipe borne water system catering to the needs of the port and visiting vessels was also established.

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<sup>33</sup> Sri Lanka Ministry of Energy. (2025). *To Execute Port Development in line with Trincomalee Oil Tank Farm to*

*Boost Greater Foreign Exchange for the Country.* Retrieved from Sri Lanka Ministry of Energy. <https://energymin.gov.lk/index.php/2025/01/15/to-execute-port-development-in-line-with-trincomalee-oil-tank-farm-to-boost-greater-foreign-exchange-for-the-country/>

<sup>34</sup> Economynext. (2024). *Sri Lanka to establish Trincomalee logistic hub; aims up to \$1.5 bn investment.* Retrieved from Economynext. <https://economynext.com/sri-lanka-to-establish-trincomalee-logistic-hub-aims-up-to-1-5-bn-investment-177663/>

Furthermore, the Sri Lanka Navy dockyard, which is the largest naval base of the Sri Lanka Navy and a major shipyard is also within the premises. The harbor operates on a 24 hour basis and is night navigation enabled.

While the port is strategically located for international trade, the harbor spans across a vast area. It makes it extremely conducive for break-bulk cargo and transshipment activities. As the harbor can accommodate some of the largest vessels plying the seas, break-bulk cargo and cargo consolidation are massive opportunities for the taking. Such a strategy enables distribution and feeder services in the region. Thus, cargo that comes into Trincomalee can be sorted, consolidated and redistributed to local and regional ports and markets quite effectively (Bana, 2025)<sup>35</sup>.

#### 4-4 Land Availability for Logistics, Storage, and Energy Terminals

One of Trincomalee's strongest geo-economic assets is the extensive hinterland adjacent to the port, which is under the jurisdiction of the Sri Lanka Ports Authority. The 5,261 hectares of land can be utilized for logistics, industrial projects, energy terminals and storage facilities. Existing infrastructure for oil such as the World War II era Oil Tanks Farm and the Lanka IOC middle distillate facility anchors the energy related infrastructure. There is so much more potential for bunkering, energy storage, refining, bulk storage and possibly, petrochemicals, LNG and fuel oil terminals.

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<sup>35</sup> Bana, N. (2025). *Trincomalee Awaits Maritime Renaissance*. Retrieved from Ceylon Today. <https://ceylontoday.lk/2025/08/09/trincomalee-awaits-maritime-renaissance/>

Developing the road network from the hinterland to the rest of the country will enable logistical corridors to open up, making the port operations more efficient and profitable.

#### 4-5 Comparative Advantages over the Colombo and Hambantota Ports

When compared to other major ports in Sri Lanka such as Colombo on the West coast and Hambantota in the south, Trincomalee has several advantages and disadvantages to be considered.

The primary advantages Trincomalee has to offer its uses over other ports in the region are its natural depth and shelter. Trincomalee's natural water depth is 20 to 40 meters, and its sheltered bay provides safety for its uses. The maintenance costs are lower, especially as dredging is comparatively less in the upkeep of the port. Colombo has a depth of 18 to 20 meters but is constrained by riverine silt and tidal limitations requiring regular dredging. The Hambantota Port has a basin depth of around 17 meters only.

Another edge over other ports Trincomalee has is the extensive land reserves available and the room for expansion adjacent to the port, much of which is underutilized at present. The Colombo Port on the other hand is extremely congested and land is a serious constraint both within the port and in the hinterland of the city of Colombo. Hambantota has been built with larger plans for special economic zones, but its connectivity with the hinterland and the availability of a worker population are challenges it presently faces.

In addition, Trincomalee provides year-round reliability due to its protection from the monsoonal storms and winds. Thus, operations are less disrupted. Colombo and Hambantota however, face more challenges with the weather which can impede port activities from time to time.

Trincomalee is strategically positioned to serve both the Eastern and Northern markets with India's east coast and the Bay of Bengal routes for the taking. It gives the port the advantage of shorter transits and feeder times for certain destinations, compared to Colombo and Hambantota. Further, Trincomalee is sufficiently equipped to offer bunkering services and storage of energy in the serving of these routes.

Lastly, Trincomalee holds the potential for diversification of port functions and product offer. Its deep-water availability and the large area of land can support bulk, break bulk, energy terminals, ship repair facilities, bunkering, and specialized industrial clusters which are less feasible in Colombo where containers and transshipments dominate the repertoire of services. The Hambantota port on the other hand, has been struggling with commercial viability of its connections with the hinterland.

However, Trincomalee does face a few challenges when compared to Colombo and Hambantota. Firstly, Trincomalee has a lower throughput when it comes to container traffic and transshipment cargo. Colombo remains the most used hub for containerized shipping and the major transshipment node by far. Hambantota has invested heavily in similar areas, but has issues with capacity utilization and profitability. Secondly, road, rail and the feeder infrastructure to and from Trincomalee is comparatively less developed, in other words, they have been given less priority in national policy compared to Colombo and Hambantota. And thirdly, Trincomalee has been underinvested for many decades.

Development plans have been constrained and stalled due to changing domestic politics, inconsistent financing and poor coordination between Government authorities and the private sector investors.

## 5. Reasons for the Underdevelopment of the Trincomalee Harbor

### 5-1 Trincomalee prior to the Colonial Era

Even before colonial rule commenced in 1505 with the Portuguese taking control of the coastal areas of Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) and eventually exercising their rule over the whole country up to about 1658, which was followed by the Dutch (1658 - 1796) and then, the British (1796 - 1948), the Trincomalee harbor was a ‘safe haven’ for Indo-Aryan, Arabian and Chinese seafaring vessels due to the many uncommon features the harbor offered in their maritime routes. The vast expanse of land frontage, the sheltered nature of the bay and its deep waters gave these seafarers ample reason for confident anchorage. Especially, at times of monsoonal storms, the port was one of the safest in the world. It also made the port operational throughout the year. Close proximity of the port to the primary Indian Ocean sea lanes stand out as the uppermost reason for its popularity. Accordingly, economics and maritime safety had made Trincomalee a much sort after anchorage and trading point for the seafaring nations throughout history.

During the Anuradhapura Kingdom (437 BCE – 1017 CE), Trincomalee served as a maritime gateway connecting Sri Lanka to South India and Southeast Asia. According to historians, Roman and Greek traders were regular users of the harbor in the early times of the Current Era (CE). During the Chola

(South Indian) invasion and occupation of Sri Lanka (993 CE – 1070 CE), the harbor gained renewed prominence as a naval base for the control of the country and an easy access point to the maritime trade routes of the Indian Ocean. During the Polonnaruwa Kingdom (1070 CE – 1232 CE) and the Kotte Kingdom (1412 CE – 1597 CE), Trincomalee was a vital port in the trading of spices, gems, elephants and pearls from Sri Lanka and the merchants who came there were mostly Arabs, Indians and Chinese. During the Kandyan Kingdom (1469 CE – 1815 CE), the Trincomalee harbor was the base for the export of elephants and areca walnuts and for the import of goods from other Asian countries (Colonial Voyage, 2014)<sup>36</sup>.

Further, it is worth mentioning that the Trincomalee harbor was among the ports most visited by Chinese fleets during their Indian Ocean expeditions, especially during the Ming Dynasty (1405 CE – 1433 CE) under Admiral Zheng He. Thus, before the Europeans came into the picture, the Trincomalee harbor functioned as a hub for maritime trade and regional power projection. As the reader would now understand, Trincomalee is one of the most strategically located harbors in the Indian Ocean.

Trincomalee has religious and cultural significance vis-à-vis both South/Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka in particular. Important Buddhist temples and Hindu kovils in Trincomalee attract both Buddhist and Hindu devotees from these regions. History has it that the merchant brothers Thapassu and Bhalluka built the Girihandu Seya stupa in Thiriyaya Trincomalee enshrining the hair relics of the

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<sup>36</sup> Colonial Voyage. (2014). *Trincomalee 1 – The History of Trincomalee during Portuguese and Dutch rule: Introduction*. Retrieved from Colonial Voyage. <https://www.colonialvoyage.com/history-trincomalee-portuguese-dutch-rule-introduction/>

Buddha in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BCE, just 75 days after the Buddha attained Buddhahood, which is thought to be the first enshrinement of the Buddha's relics, which was when the Buddha was living. The Buddhist Velgam Vehera in Kinniya Trincomalee, built during 307 BCE - 267 BCE is also of monumental significance. The famous Hindu Koneswaram Temple dates back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE. These historical sites stand as symbols of coexistence between the Sinhalese (Buddhist) and Tamil (Hindus) of the region. Both communities worship at these temples regularly. Such religious and cultural activity in the area has made Trincomalee an important location of interest for the two main communities of Sri Lanka. Accordingly, such activity has made Trincomalee not only a commercial hub in the region, but also, a significant religious center.

### 5-2 Trincomalee during the Colonial Era

From the early 16th century, the Trincomalee harbor became a focal point of the European Colonial rivalry in the Indian Ocean. Ever since the first European explorer Lourenco de Almeida set foot in Galle in 1505 CE, the European naval powers became increasingly aware of and decisively interested in 'Ceylon' as a strategic location for seaborne trade.

Accordingly, the Portuguese arrived in Sri Lanka in 1505 CE. Their interests were in the ports of Colombo and Galle. Because, at the time of their arrival, the capital of 'Ceylon' had moved to Kotte (the Kingdom situated in the West of the country), and their trading interests too were mainly in the west coast, especially the much sort after 'Ceylon Cinnamon' in the global spices trade. However, the Portuguese recognized the Trincomalee harbor for its natural deep-water anchorage and strategic

proximity to the Bay of Bengal. Therefore, it meant that Trincomalee became a base for their military operations in the region. In 1622, the Portuguese destroyed the Koneswaram Temple and built a fort in its place to strategically stave-off other maritime powers such as the Dutch and the Danes from using the harbor for their use. The Portuguese, however, never developed the Trincomalee harbor as a major naval base. Their strategy was to defend Colombo and the Southwest coast. Thus, Trincomalee was more of a military 'stronghold' used purely for defense purposes.

The Dutch (Dutch East India Company) seized control of the Trincomalee harbor in 1658, expelling the Portuguese, which was necessary to monopolize the spices trade in South Asia. However, unlike the Portuguese, the Dutch saw greater potential in Trincomalee and considered this harbor as critical for both commercial and military purposes. In 1665, the Dutch fortified the location by building Fort Fredrick. They used the infrastructure of the Portuguese fort and expanded on it to build a strong coastal bastion in the eastern part of the country. The Dutch recognized the value of Trincomalee as a means to securing monopolistic control over the cinnamon trade and for providing secure anchorage for their navies in the Bay of Bengal. Trincomalee gave the Dutch a vantage position with East-West maritime trade, regional trade in South India, Bengal and Southeast Asia. The base also acted as a buffer against French and British naval incursions in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, when European conflicts became more prominent in the Indian Ocean region. However, as a result of limited resources - financial and manpower, the Dutch were unable to fully develop Trincomalee into a large-scale naval base. Instead, Trincomalee functioned as a secondary port to complement the more significant bases in Colombo and Galle.

By the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the importance of Trincomalee was known internationally. During the Anglo – French rivalry (1778 – 1783), the French under Admiral Pierre Andre de Suffren captured the Trincomalee harbor from the Dutch (1782). The French acknowledged the exceptional depth of anchorage and the location of the harbor as strategic in their efforts of power expansion in the Indian Ocean. Thus, the port was seen as a vital counterweight to the British Navy stationed in India. Admiral de Suffren used the port as a base for operations against the British, anchoring the French fleet and repair work on damaged ships. However, French control of the harbor was short-lived. The British captured Trincomalee in 1782, although they returned the use of the port to the Dutch by treaty in 1784. This was affirmation of the British of the importance of Trincomalee as an indispensable asset for any naval power.

The British took permanent control of the Trincomalee harbor in 1796. Unlike the Portuguese and the Dutch, the British fully grasped the harbor's potential and considered Trincomalee to be the main naval base in the Indian Ocean. Admiral Horatio Nelson described Trincomalee as the “finest harbor in the world.” Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the British developed Trincomalee into one of the most important Royal Naval bases in Asia. The harbor's natural advantage of deep anchorage, year-round protection from the monsoons and defensibility made it an ideal location to house large fleets of The Queen. Accordingly, the British expanded Fort Fredrick, built extensive dockyards, barracks, arsenal and facilities for logistics. The Trincomalee base became one of the ‘imperial naval triangles,’ which linked Singapore and Aden to ensure dominance in the region.

By the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the British had further modernized Trincomalee to become an absolute stronghold of the region. So much so that Trincomalee was known as the ‘Gibraltar of the East.’ The harbor’s strategic importance became evident during the Second World War. After the fall of Singapore in 1942, Trincomalee became the principal base for the British Eastern Fleet. The Trincomalee harbor was such a huge asset for the British Navy that it became a target of the enemy. The Japanese launched air raids on the harbor in 1942, damaging infrastructure and sinking ships in anchorage. Despite these events, Trincomalee continued to serve as one of the most secure strongholds in Asia for the Allied Forces till the end of the War.

### 5-3 Trincomalee post-independent Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka gained independence from British rule in February, 1948. However, it took a few years for the local assets of the British empire to be transferred to the newly elected Sri Lankan administration. The Trincomalee Naval Base was officially handed over to the Government of Sri Lanka in 1956. Once under the control of the local authorities, Trincomalee served as a base for the Sri Lanka Navy’s Eastern Command and also as the Navy’s primary dockyard. A Naval and Maritime Academy was established on the premises in 1967 to train officers in navigation, seamanship, engineering and many other disciplines of naval activity. The British built the oil storage facility which remains as a major asset of the port. Even though a number of other development projects were initiated with the aim of making Trincomalee as commercially viable as Colombo for instance, full scale execution of these programs staggered and

stalled from time to time. Four key reasons can be identified for these disruptions between the period of gaining independence and the Civil War that erupted in the country (1948-1983).

### 5-5 Foreign Policy and Geopolitical Constraints

After gaining independence, Sri Lanka adopted a non-aligned foreign policy, especially under Prime Minister S.W.R.D.Bandaranaike. Deploying the policy posed challenges for the new Government, particularly in the sustenance of good relations with the major powers who were divided and engaged in Cold War tactics. Sri Lanka, avoided allegiance either to the United States and its allies or the Soviet Bloc. Thus, Sri Lanka avoided hosting foreign militaries which could have otherwise compromised neutrality (De Silva, 1981)<sup>37</sup>.

The British and the Western Bloc had immense interest in the Trincomalee port. The 1947 Defense Agreement between Britain and Sri Lanka allowed the British to retain control over the key military bases of which, Trincomalee and Katunayake were the most important. However, growing nationalism in the country, led to the early termination of this agreement in 1956. And the decision, though symbolically significant for Sri Lanka as a sovereign state, it cut off British investments in the development of the port. Sri Lanka was left with limited resources - financial and technical capabilities, to sustain large scale operations in the area.

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<sup>37</sup> De Silva, K. M. (1981). *A History of Sri Lanka*. University of California Press.

From a geopolitical perspective, the Sri Lankan Government feared that permitting foreign powers such as Britain, the United States or India to re-establish presence would jeopardize the country's nonalignment principles.

## 5-6 Economic and Infrastructure priorities favored the West Coast

Following independence, Sri Lanka's economic policy continued to be developed around Colombo. The Island's economic infrastructure: administrative capital, financial centers, industrial zones and exports-oriented activities were all developed along the western and southwestern regions, particularly Colombo and Galle.

The Colombo Port had readily established facilities, modern handling equipment, proximity advantages with populated villages and towns with easy access, and a road network that connected almost every parts of the country. In comparison, Trincomalee was geographically isolated, 260 kilometers away from Colombo with poor road and railway connections, and that too was across much of the dry zone of the country (Abeyratne, 1999)<sup>38</sup>. Thus, developing Trincomalee into a major commercial or transshipment port would have required massive capital infusion, which the newly independent State could not have afford. Further, from the 1950's to the 1970's, Sri Lanka went through policy changes: import substitution, welfare expansion and public sector nationalization. This, limited the fiscal space for port modernization outside Colombo.

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<sup>38</sup> Abeyratne, S. (1999). *Economic Policy Reforms and the Development of Sri Lanka*. Retrieved from: World Bank.

Accordingly, development policies centered around the western coastal areas of the country where return on investment was higher and quicker compared to other places. Trincomalee remained less developed, serving domestic naval (security) and petroleum related services.

### 5-7 Administrative, Technical and Financial limitations

Even though Sri Lanka inherited advanced naval facilities from the British, including the British built Oil Tank Farm consisting of 101 oil storage tanks, the newly formed government lacked technical expertise, (naval) capacity and funds to fully utilize these assets (Pathfinder Foundation, 2017)<sup>39</sup>.

Sri Lankan Navy was established as a small coastal defense force in 1950. They did not possess a sizable fleet nor the operational requirement to justify large scale port utilization. Most naval activities were ‘patrol’ duties and coastal surveillance.

Moreover, the infrastructure projects proposed during the 1960’s through 1970’s, was to convert Trincomalee into an industrial or petrochemical hub. These ideas were shelved on repeated occasions due to the political instability of the region and shortages in funding. Further, the nationalization of foreign enterprises in the 1970’s discouraged prospective investors from investing in such large-scale

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<sup>39</sup> Pathfinder Foundation. (2017). *Trincomalee Consultations: Regional Cooperation for Economic Prosperity and*

*Maritime Security in the Bay of Bengal.*

[https://pathfinderfoundation.org/images/publications/outcome\\_documents/2017/trincomalee%20consultations\\_compressed.pdf](https://pathfinderfoundation.org/images/publications/outcome_documents/2017/trincomalee%20consultations_compressed.pdf)

infrastructure projects. Therefore, by the late 1970's, Trincomalee's huge potential as a naval, commercial and energy hub remained underdeveloped.

### 5-8 Emerging Internal Instability and pre-Civil-War Concerns

In the 1970's, Sri Lanka entered a period of rising domestic unrest. The 1971 JVP insurrection and ethno-communal riots in the 1980's diverted the Government's attention to internal security and took away focus from any long-term economic planning for the country. The Eastern Province became an area of increased tension and violence, it hindered plans for large scale development projects, and such planning was rendered unpractical and futile.

### 5-9 Trincomalee during the Civil War

During the Civil War in the country (1983 - 2009), the Trincomalee port remained as Sri Lanka's primary Eastern deep-water harbor and the headquarters of the Sri Lanka Navy. The port's natural advantages such as its deep and sheltered anchorage, year-round safe navigation from the elements, etc., made it impossible for the Government of Sri Lanka to ignore its suitability for naval operations (security), logistics, training and ship repair work.

Therefore, the Trincomalee harbor became a key target of the insurgents/militants. It became a politically sensitive location which naturally repelled any sensible planning for commercial activity. Constant attacks by the separatist - LTTE on naval and civilian shipping made the Government of Sri Lanka to convert the Trincomalee harbor to a military base for the security of the North and East coasts

of the country. Moreover, most of the adjacent land and facilities were assigned for military purposes such as naval installations, tank farms, barracks, training outfits and such like. Militarization displaced all prospects of civilian economic activity and discouraged any public/private investments in the development of the port.

### 5-10 Trincomalee post-Civil War

Trincomalee continues to be the primary naval base of the Sri Lanka Navy. Since the War coming to an end, the Sri Lankan Government and the Ports Authority have constantly proposed transforming Trincomalee into something more than a naval base - a multi-purpose port city and an industrial port with ship repair services, ship building, bunkering and heavy industry zones (Lanka News Web, 2022)<sup>40</sup>. Recent plans by the Ports Authority envisions converting the land available in the adjacent areas into industrial zones and inviting investors from sectors like oil, minerals, manufacturing and logistics. All such plans with the long-term aim of making Trincomalee the 'Eastern gateway' of Sri Lanka's economy - a regional services hub connecting the Bay of Bengal, the eastern parts of the country, and the neighboring littoral economies.

However, despite Trincomalee's potential and the many development proposals that have been tabled, there remains some obstacles in the deployment of such plans.

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<sup>40</sup> Lanka News Web. (2022). *Trincomalee Port to be developed as an industrial hub* . Retrieved from Lanka News Web. <https://lankanewsweb.net/archives/13214/trincomalee-port-to-be-developed-as-an-industrial-hub/>

*a. Lack of investment and impending risks of unrest*

As the Trincomalee area was a former war zone, many investors remain cautious about investing in this region. The region's stability, security and return on investment seems uncertain even after the war has ended in 2009. This therefore, reduces the appetite for invest in major port infrastructure development - container terminals and large-scale industrial businesses.

*b. Low population and poor hinterland economy compared to other areas of the country*

The estimated population of Colombo (urban agglomeration) in the year 2025 is approximately 647,557 people. The population of the broader Colombo District is estimated at over 2.4 million people. In contrast, the approximate population of Trincomalee (city) is 108,420 people and the Trincomalee district is estimated at only 442,465 people (World Population Review, 2025)<sup>41</sup>. Colombo, benefits from a larger population, denser hinterland, more industrial and commercial activity and better developed transport and other infrastructure. Comparisons such as this naturally makes Colombo and Galle more appealing, and reduces the incentives for operating in areas such as Trincomalee, when the potential for expansion remains high in the primary areas.

Containerized shipping, large port terminals and export/import hubs depend heavily on hinterland supply chains, dense populations and connectivity. Trincomalee's low population and the

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<sup>41</sup> World Population Review. (2025). *Colombo Population*. Retrieved from World population review.

small regional economy are of serious concern. It makes it harder to justify the capital infusion required for such large-scale projects.

### *c. Connectivity and infrastructure issues*

Even though the Trincomalee harbor is a huge asset for the country, the surrounding infrastructure such as rail roads, roads, hinterland logistics and the overall industrial backbone that is required remains unattractive for investors, when compared with what Colombo, Galle and Hambantota has to offer. The lack of good inland connectivity in particular reduces Trincomalee's push even as a transshipment or export/import hub (Balachandran, 2023)<sup>42</sup>.

Successive governments and the Ports Authority of Sri Lankan see high potential by developing the Trincomalee harbor. Trincomalee to become a multi-purpose port city and the eastern gateway of commerce of Sri Lanka. Such developments, if any, in Trincomalee will no doubt reduce the pressure on other ports in the country. And, as a country, Sri Lanka's offer in terms of capacity and speed of service to shipping lines can have a profound impact. But, it requires visionary leadership and the political will.

## 6. Trincomalee's strategic value and reviving its competitiveness

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<sup>42</sup> Balachandran, P. K. (2023). *Why Is Trincomalee Port Still Undeveloped?* Retrieved from The Diplomat. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/03/why-is-trincomalee-port-still-undeveloped/>

Despite Trincomalee's lackluster development in the post Civil-War era and the infrastructural challenges it faces comparatively to other ports in the country, it remains a 'sleeping giant' in the economy of Sri Lanka. Historically, Trincomalee has been unique and strategic for maritime activity and geographic control.

Therefore, from a broader Indo-Pacific context, where naval control and price competition among global players are at an all-time high, Trincomalee might well be the strategic option for many such players. It can make Trincomalee a hive of activity once more. Right along in modern history, the Trincomalee harbor has been more of strategic use for foreign users of the port, compared to the benefits the locals got out of it. The rising of China, sustained interests of India and the United States, and the increased interests of Japan and Australia in the Indo-Pacific region, have all created that competitiveness which is inviting of strategic presence in Trincomalee.

The Chinese have intensified their global presence over the past two decades mainly through the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI), and the Indian Ocean region is a key sector of that program. The strengthening of their presence is therefore a strategic necessity. Accordingly, China has and is financing key points on the route under the BRI program. It has financed and built deep-water ports across South Asia already, some of them being Gwadar (Pakistan), Chittagong (Bangladesh), and Hambantota (Sri Lanka). Although China's primary foothold in Sri Lanka is Hambantota, Trincomalee offers certain benefits which Hambantota cannot boast of. For instance, greater natural depth of the port, closer access to eastern Indian Ocean sea lanes, and the real possibility of supporting dual use (both

commercial and military purposes). Thus, for China, their presence in Trincomalee would definitely diversify their Indian Ocean network and reduce dependence on Hambantota.

The United States, through its Indo-Pacific strategy emphasizes on the freedom of navigation, which is a way of countering Chinese dominance in the region, and to sustain free access to the maritime routes in the region. Trincomalee has tremendous value for the U.S. too. It can be the contingency access point for their naval operations, position themselves strategically for providing logistical support - humanitarian assistance and disaster response for instance, maritime awareness and surveillance in the Bay of Bengal, and strengthen relations with smaller countries in the region to maintain balance of power in the region. Even though the U.S. may not seek exclusive control of a port in Sri Lanka, it aims to prevent China from dominating the region.

India on the other hand views Trincomalee as a threat more than an asset. Located barely 100 kilometers from India's southern coast, Trincomalee falls within what India would consider is its 'maritime sphere of influence'. Therefore, any external involvement in Trincomalee is seen as a potential threat to them. For instance, India experienced the impact of British control of Trincomalee during the colonial period. British access to Trincomalee during the Second World War influenced India's decisions in many ways. Such past experience combined with China's growing maritime presence, India becomes highly sensitive to any third-party involvement in Sri Lanka.

Trincomalee, certainly generates competition among the big powers, not through military conquest, but through economic and political concerns that eventually shape the strategic outcomes i.e., by way of attracting port infrastructure development projects, port modernization programs,

establishment of industrial zones, fuel/energy shortage and distribution, etc., which are largely commercial initiatives, but can also be viewed as politically or militarily motivated. Such secondary influencing/maneuvering by powerful states is not uncommon either. Therefore, it is always a tight-rope walk for a less powerful country like Sri Lanka. India would therefore be naturally inclined to investigate and influence anything that is significant happening next-door.

Trincomalee's less than potential growth itself can be the reason for large-scale foreign investments. It has suffered decades of war induced underdevelopment, competition from the Colombo port and investor reservation owing to regional political instability. These constraints make Trincomalee a sort of 'strategic vacuum,' where external powers may want to fill. A developed commercial port is likely to align stable governance and proper diversification, minimize room for unnecessary and undue intervention. In contrast, an underdeveloped port with high latent potential can invite external influences when shaping its future trajectory. Trincomalee's underutilization, therefore, is a strategic opportunity for the taking.

## 7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the future of the Trincomalee harbor is not shaped by economic rational only, it is influenced by political and security concerns as well. Even though the harbor has not yet evolved into a major commercial port, its strategic location and the natural advantages it has to offer shall ensure that it will remain deeply entrenched in the strategic maneuvering of India, China and the United States. In

such an environment, the tools of maritime geo-economics such as investments in infrastructure, long term leases, investments in energy processes and industrial zones become the primary tools of competition for interested parties to use. These tools allow the more powerful payers to exert influence without direct confrontation, enabling strategic access in the guise of commercial development.

Trincomalee is therefore very likely to re-emerge as a theater for the great power struggles, as it has previously, during the colonial era. Its underdeveloped nature does not diminish its value but magnifies it, re-emphasizing the potential it has for the future. As the Indo-Pacific region increasingly becomes decisive for the powers that be in the twenty-first century, Trincomalee's strategic position will ensure that Sri Lanka remains at the center of the maritime competition. Therefore, the Trincomalee harbor shall continue to be of tremendous potential for Sri Lanka. And, to an investor, a gold mine to profit from.