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MEDIA SERVICES PHOTOFILE (WASANTHA AMARASINGHE)

# THE CHINA BOGEY

Despite noises to the contrary, Sri Lanka's relations with *both* India and China must remain on track, writes **Jayantha Dhanapala**.

Sri Lanka entered into a Maritime Agreement with China on 25 July 1963, to promote Sri Lankan and Chinese vessels operating from their respective ports to engage in foreign trade, cargo and passenger services. Despite the patently commercial character of the agreement, Indian sources alleged that it was a sinister deal to hand Trincomalee over to China. The cry was taken up by the opposition UNP during the election campaign of 1965; but after winning the election, it didn't change the agreement!

Trincomalee's oil-tank farm is now with the Indian Oil Corporation. There is thus a sense of déjà vu over fresh attempts to disrupt Indo-Sri Lanka relations by raising the China bogey.

Hard on the heels of the military defeat of the terrorist LTTE and India's tacit endorsement of this comes the hoary, old story of growing Chinese influence in this country. The Hambantota Port development and Norochcholai coal projects, and a wild story of Chinese aid to build a military structure in

Kachativu, are offered as evidence – apart from Chinese military supplies.

The Western bias over 'losing' China after the 1949 Revolution warned us of a 'Red Peril'. Today, we are being warned of a 'Rising China' modernising its nuclear and defence programmes, establishing close links with sources of energy around the world and establishing a sinister 'string of pearls' around the Indian Ocean.

President Mahinda Rajapaksa has stated unambiguously that Sri Lankan soil will never be used for anti-Indian purposes. A high-level Sri Lankan delegation has told Delhi that no military structures are being planned for Kachativu, let alone being built by the Chinese.

However, the China bogey will continue to be peddled as part of a larger conspiracy to create a new Cold War in Asia between a 'democratic' India and an 'autocratic' China. That this bogey is being raised by Tamil Nadu politicians and the expatriate LTTE propaganda machine poses a threat to the stability of Indo-Lanka relations.

Sri Lanka's unalterable geopolitical location in South Asia undoubtedly dominated its international relations during its ancient and medieval history. Thereafter, during the period of Western colonial rule from 1505 to 1948, Europe was perforce the main inter-

national partner although social, cultural and some trade relations with India continued.

It was only with the regaining of independence in 1948 that Sri Lanka was able to adopt a global approach. The national interest drove the island-nation into closer alliances with the Non-aligned Movement, the Group of 77 and SAARC, while remaining a member of the UN and the Commonwealth.

Throughout the centuries – based on its strategic location at the centre of the Indian Ocean – political, cultural and economic contacts with China existed, but the perception of China remained that of a huge, powerful and distant Asian power.

Buddhism was an important link that led to contacts as early as in the third century BC, with the Chinese monk Fa-hsien being among the most important pilgrims in 401 AC. Attempts by China to take the Sacred Tooth Relic from Sri Lanka failed but did not cause rancour.

Not being on the Silk Route, Sri Lanka was however involved in trade with China through what is now described as 'the silk road of the sea'. Neither the 1411 abduction of King Vira Alakesvara by the famous Chinese Admiral Zheng He, nor the stoning of our Embassy in Beijing by the Red Guards in the 1967 Cultural Revolution (over the



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