

Sri Lanka navigating major power rivalry: How domestic drivers collide with the international system

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ABSTRACT: In an era of major-power competition, the alliance politics of small states are attracting more attention. This article examines the case of Sri Lanka, a small South Asian state seen as balancing against India's interests or bandwagoning with China. Through the evaluation of international relations theories and use of data sources from Sri Lanka, this article argues that the country was not balancing against India, bandwagoning with China, or even hedging. Instead, the article will engage with new scholarship on small-state alliance strategies and suggest that the episode was driven primarily by domestic-level factors. When a smaller state faces pressure at the system level, the choices it makes are not necessarily between bandwagoning, balancing or hedging, but between the pursuit of domestic-level interests and preferences; and "bandwagoning as a last resort."

Keywords: balancing, bandwagoning, China, hedging, India, international relations, ship visits, small states, South Asia, Sri Lanka, USA

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Introduction

In an era of reemergent major-power strategic competition, the alliance politics of small states are attracting more attention, especially with respect to these states' dealings with China (Plagemann, 2021; The White House, 2017, 2021). The majority of actors in the international system are small states (Maass, 2017a, pp. 34, 152); but international relations (IR) theory has focused its attention on major powers. To the extent that IR theory does study the actions of small states, this tends to occur through a lens that privileges major powers such as the US, China, or India (Cheng-Chwee, 2016).

This article seeks to address this situation by studying a particular episode from the interaction between Sri Lanka, a small state in South Asia, and major powers. South Asian geopolitics has historically been viewed through the prism of India and its conflicts with Pakistan and China. Far less attention has been paid to understanding the thinking of the region's smaller South Asian (SSA) countries: Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka. Whereas metrics such as population are often evoked when considering state size, "smallness" is a concept that scholars are increasingly examining in qualitative and relational terms especially for state perceptions of vulnerability. Even a country with a large population such as Bangladesh can be viewed as a smaller state when compared with India's historically dominant standing as its neighbour. Although traditional IR concepts have been useful in understanding India's conflicts with Pakistan and China, new scholarship on small states enables a deeper understanding of the behaviour of the region's smaller states.

The case being examined received media attention and was interpreted as an example of a smaller country in South Asia balancing against India's interests or bandwagoning with China. Through the evaluation of existing IR theoretical work and the use of data sources from Sri Lanka, this article argues that this SSA state was not balancing against India, bandwagoning with China, or even hedging. Instead, the article engages with scholarship on small states to consider additional options for interpreting this country's policy decisions, such as domestic-level drivers. It concludes by identifying key factors detected in this country that could be useful in illuminating the behaviour of other SSA states and smaller countries in other regions. Significantly more work needs to be done to develop robust theorization on small states; but this article draws upon existing small states scholarship to identify some limits of mainstream theoretical explanations of these states' interactions with major powers and thus opens up additional possibilities for explanation. A deeper study of the empirical data through case studies involving other countries will benefit both policymakers and scholars in an era in which major powers are paying increasing attention to the actions of smaller countries.

The article begins by examining common ways of understanding the geopolitics of South Asia from well-known IR theoretical perspectives. This discussion will highlight limitations of these approaches for explaining the behaviour of some SSA countries. It then presents an analytic framework that draws on emerging scholarship on small states, building mainly on neoclassical realist theory. It then focuses on a high-profile case involving Sri Lanka that is often cited to illustrate how smaller states balance against India (and bandwagon with China). Engaging primary and secondary data sources from the country, the article seeks to systematically evaluate the case using this framework to provide insight into its actions. The conclusion draws implications for the study of small states more broadly and considers how their economic, diplomatic and defence policy decisions will become increasingly relevant to scholars and policymakers in an era of strategic competition.

Existing theories and a new framework: Explaining smaller countries' behaviours

Structural realism

Structural realism dominates the academic study of international politics and has strongly influenced U.S. foreign policy toward Asia. Geostrategic competition between the Soviet Union and the United States during the Cold War, and between China and the United States during the current era, has provided powerful evidence in support of theoretical framework. Structural realism exerts a strong influence—even if implicit—on the study of South Asian security affairs (Nabarun, 2018, pp. 2, 6). In this region, conflicts between nuclear-powered rivals—India and Pakistan, and increasingly India and China—have dominated analytic attention. Given the intensification in India's threat perceptions of China as a dangerous rival, and the generalized anxiety across Asia about China's rise over the last decade and fears of American retrenchment, structural realism comes across as a suitable theory to help critical observers explain the current strategic situation in the region.

This focus on major powers may be useful in interpreting the build-up of offensive capabilities in China over the past two decades; however, it can be a limitation for explaining the majority of actors in the international system: smaller states. Focusing on large countries, John Mearsheimer mentions only in passing that he would expect smaller countries to balance against China. Mearsheimer (2007, p. 84; 2010) believes that various countries, including India, "as well as smaller powers like Singapore," will eventually join a balancing coalition against China. Walt (1987, pp. 5, 147) also argues that most states balance; however, he adds

the following caveat to explain aberrations among smaller states: “In general, the weaker the state, the more likely it is to bandwagon rather than balance” (Walt, 1987, p. 29). Paul (2019, p. 51) observes that, for “many realists, small states are in general expected to balance powerful actors by joining countervailing coalitions or bandwagon with the most powerful one.”

Equidistance and hedging

In his review of IR literature, Paul (2019, p. 51) acknowledges that whether the only options available to smaller states are to “balance, bandwagon, or remain neutral in a structural conflict involving two rising powers is an important issue unanswered in much of IR literature.” With reference to South Asia, he finds that smaller states are trying to maximize returns from both China and India due to their limited competition at present in an era of globalization. Paul contributes a third option to the literature of system-focused realist approaches. He sees the condition of limited China-India competition as shaping an environment in which the small states of South Asia pursue a position of equidistance between India and China (Paul, 2019, pp. 51, 58).

However, these countries have historically held stronger threat perceptions of India than China while they fear the repercussions of aligning with a country other than India. Their experiences of interacting over decades with the United States – another extra-regional country of concern to India during the Cold War – as well as Pakistan, have informed these countries’ contemporary approaches to dealing with China. An analysis finding equidistance is therefore not a good empirical fit for these countries (*also* Chernoff, 2014, p. 60).

Hedging is another option for analyzing state behaviour to seek more variation along systemic lines beyond bandwagoning and balancing. IR experts and diplomats especially focused on East Asia and U.S.-China competition have found this concept useful to engage with (Haacke, 2019; Kausikan, 2017). Lim and Mukherjee (2019, pp. 494, 514) build on the hedging literature in Southeast and Northeast Asia and analyze data from the South Asian countries of Sri Lanka and Maldives. They offer a “theory of hedging in the absence of a direct security threat.” Their assumption is that “Our model does not assume India itself as posing a traditional security threat to other South Asian states (except Pakistan), such as via a territorial dispute.”

The empirical evidence in South Asia, however, does not support this premise. The smaller South Asian countries have held deep threat perceptions of India that persist to the present day, rather than “the absence of a direct security threat.” High-profile examples exist in recent history: India’s entry of survey and maritime force ships into the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) disputed with Bangladesh in 2008; India’s unauthorized entry into Sri Lanka’s airspace in 1987; India’s support to insurgents in Bangladesh’s Chittagong Hill Tracts (Hazarika, 1989; Mahmoud Ali, 2010, pp. 133-6, 181-3, 213); and India’s provision of arms and training to Sri Lankan militants in 1983 (Chadda, 2005, p. 202). Again, this analysis is not a good empirical fit for these countries.

Neoclassical Realism: Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell

In their seminal book on neoclassical realism, Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell (2016, pp. 182-183) address two perceived gaps in structural realism. First, they systematically incorporate domestic factors into their analysis. Second, they create space in their theory for

the analysis of middle and small powers. This contrasts with the focus on major powers in structural realism and traditional balance of power theory (e.g. Paul, 2005, p. 51).

As a result, Ripsman et al. (2016) suggests another framework for understanding the behaviour of small states. They argue for the importance of domestic considerations and actors in determining foreign policy: a level of analysis that has been ignored or disregarded in popular accounts of realism. According to their account, the international system is at the heart of their independent variables (Ripsman et al., 2016, pp. 8-9). From there, they distinguish four broad classes of domestic-level intervening variables: leaders' images and perceptions, strategic culture, state-society relations, and domestic political institutions (Ripsman et al., 2016, pp. 33, 34, 59). By considering the influence of these intervening variables on perceptions of the international system, decision-making, and policy implementation or resource mobilization, the authors believe that they can better explain dependent variables such as decision-making, foreign policy responses, and grand strategic adjustment.

Because of its focus on domestic-level intervening variables, this paper argues that the version of neoclassical realism articulated by Ripsman et al. (2016) is potentially more useful than previous realist theories in accounting for the behaviour of the smaller states. One limitation that should be noted, however, is that their framework still prioritizes the external structure. The authors write of the focus of their theory at the international system level:

We acknowledge areas of overlap and even complementarity between [foreign policy analysis] and neoclassical realism ... Nevertheless, there are major areas of disagreement between [foreign policy analysis] and neoclassical realism. *Neoclassical realism clearly privileges the international system over domestic (or unit-level) variables* (Ripsman et al., 2016, p. 172. Emphasis added).

Thus, the neoclassical realist theory of Ripsman et al. (2016) still follows structural realism in prioritizing the international system in shaping state behaviour. Due to their theory's commitment to this premise, it potentially overlooks some of the most important domestic drivers of small-state behaviour that exist *despite the conditions of the external system*. This will be examined in this article.

Scholarship on small states

Theoretical literature on small states helps explain the behaviour and foreign policy orientations of the smaller states in South Asia. Receiving greater attention in recent years, this subfield tries to explain the behaviour of countries that are neither major powers nor "middle powers," such as Australia and South Korea (e.g. Thorhallsson, 2018). This article also supports a small state-based framework for consideration as a more nuanced explanation of drivers for SSA behaviours.

The entry point for the study of small states is often definitional: what is a small state? Observers have focused on observable, quantifiable factors such as population, land area, gross domestic product (GDP), and military spending. Countries that have a large population – such as Bangladesh, with the eighth largest population in the world – are sometimes prematurely excluded from discussions of small states, and the field is left to the very smallest countries, such as the UN's Small Island Developing States. However, "smallness" is also related to perceptions of position in the international hierarchy as well as recurring behaviours exhibited by these states (Hey, 2003a, pp. 2-5).

Wivel, Bailes, and Archer (2014, p. 8) present a relational definition of a “small state” that emphasizes the asymmetric nature of interactions between states that operate with a dominant country in their neighborhood. They thus propose “a move away from the quantifiable power possession definition of small states to one that is qualitative and relational.” Rejecting “the search for universal characteristics of small states and their behaviour,” they consider the concept of the small state as a useful “focusing device.” Wivel et al. (2014, p. 9) therefore propose a useful definition of a small state as “the weaker part in an asymmetric power relationship, which is unable to change the nature or functioning of the relationship on its own.” This definition is capable of taking into account objective size measures while also considering the existential characteristics and concerns of small states.

A small states-focused analytical framework

To address previously mentioned theoretical and empirical gaps, an analytical framework that builds on the contributions of small states theorists Wivel et al. (2014), Maass (2017a), and Hey (2003a, 2003b), as well as Ripsman et al. (2016)’s neoclassical realist theory, is proposed (see [Table 1](#)).

Table 1: Framework for small state behaviour.

Framework for small state behaviour				
	Sequence	Elements	Description	Explanation
Preceding Circumstances	Condition 1	External context	Defensive end of spectrum	Dominant country in region (realism); Asymmetric relationship (small states insights)
	Condition 2	Domestic context	Sovereign decisions taken for national interests	Habits, Interests, Institutions
Steps in Episode	Step 1	Small state action	Sovereign decision taken by small state	Small states insights: Economic interests; Neoclassical realism (domestic-level focus)
	Step 2	Counter-action by asymmetric power	System-level pressure by dominant country in region	Small states insights; Neoclassical realism (system-level focus)
	Step 3	Small state response	Bandwagoning as a last resort	Small states insights; Neoclassical realism (system-level focus)

Condition 1 considers the external security environment for small states. While this condition is well aligned with realist theories, the subfield of small state studies offers a unique perspective that captures the circumstances facing small states as the weaker actor(s) in an asymmetric power relationship. Resulting actions can be interpreted across a simple balancing-bandwagoning spectrum along which small states operate (Wivel, 2017, pp. 15-16; 2021, pp. 92, 495, 498, 500-501).

At one end of the spectrum, small states have historically pursued defensive behaviour using two strategies: *shelter-seeking* and *hiding* (Wivel, 2021, pp. 492, 501). Under shelter-seeking, a small state seeks protection from and by a stronger country (Wivel, 2021, pp. 495,

497). Under hiding – which includes “opting out of international affairs by pursuing military neutrality and economic and political autonomy” (Wivel, 2021, p. 501) – small states recognize their limited capabilities. As a result, they employ ‘*niche*’ strategies at the tactical or strategic level that emphasize providing unique services such as serving as transportation and logistical nodes (Wivel, 2021, pp. 488-489). Another approach taken by small states is a ‘*leash-slipping*’ strategy defined as “aimed at building military capabilities in order to maximize the ability to conduct independent foreign and security policies” (Wivel, 2021, p. 499). At the other end of the spectrum, small states can pursue more offensive strategies of “alliance independence” (Wivel, 2017, p. 15) for their long-term security. Of the more offensive strategies, the first is *trending*. This occurs when a small state abandons a declining power. A small state can also engage in *status-seeking*. In this stage, a small state aims to graduate to a new league, namely that of middle powers (Wivel, 2017, pp. 15-16).

Another option available to countries is *hedging*. Wivel (2021, p. 499) offers a definition of hedging to the small states context:

By hedging their choices for security shelter, small states seek to increase their security independence by increasing capabilities and strengthening diplomatic, economic and even military ties with other states, but stop short of participating in forums or alliances balancing the shelter state.

This definition’s value lies in providing clarity on the limits of hedging behaviour for small states using a traceable baseline. It also fits a contemporary peacetime context where developing smaller states possess neither capability nor will to confront the dominant country in their region, but seek to pursue economic development goals with all possible stakeholders.

Condition 2 considers the domestic-level circumstances such as habits, interests, and institutions that are independent of Condition 1. This condition is critical because it allows small states to be willing to take high-profile decisions that appear to go against the dominant regional country, despite the weight of their external security environment. This condition is contrasted by Ripsman et al. (2016)’s *a priori* commitment to system-level causality.

Step 1 highlights the action taken by the small state and will consider key explanatory variables such as strategic culture or economic interests. This article draws on Ripsman et al (2016)’s identification of various domestic-level intervening variables and treats them collectively as strategic culture, to be explored further below. Regarding economic interest, all countries have this driver, but Hey (2003b, pp. 193-194) observes this factor particularly in small states. Many are focused on meeting national development goals and graduation from low- or lower-middle income status.

Step 2 identifies the counter-action by the dominant regional country on the small state. This step returns to causality at the system level, as maintained by Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell’s neoclassical realist theory and structural realism.

Step 3 examines the small state’s response to the dominant country’s counter-action: “bandwagoning as a last resort,” as described by Maass (2017b). This concept appears to adapt the concept of weak states’ pursuit of risk strategies “only as a last resort” (Labs, 1992, p. 394). Maass (2017b, pp. 4, 8, 23) observes “small state manoeuvring in a stressed balance of power environment,” and finds that states may choose to bandwagon as a last resort in response to this condition. This theoretical contribution provides unique insights by considering the

dimension of time and identifying when a small state chooses this option: at the end of an episode.

After this step, the framework resets to Condition 1 and the new status quo.

In the following section, this framework is systematically applied using a case in South Asia: Sri Lanka. The analysis suggests that this SSA country, as is indicative of small state behaviour, was pursuing a *defensive strategy* (Wivel, 2021, pp. 492, 495, 498, 500-501) due to being the weaker actor in an *asymmetric power relationship* (Wivel et al., 2014, p. 9). This means that it:

- Acknowledges India's dominance in the region (neither equidistant nor hedging);
- Avoids seeking to increase India's threat perceptions (not balancing against India);
- Pursues national development goals that may involve interaction with some of India's competitors, like China (not bandwagoning with China).

However, when it experiences threat perceptions from India at a sufficient threshold, as a small state it *bandwagons as a last resort*. This analysis highlights the utility of small state theoretical lenses, in addition to system-level contributions by Ripsman et al. (2016)'s neoclassical realist theory.

A smaller South Asia case and framework analysis

Before delving into the application of the framework to the case, this section reviews the geographic idea of smaller South Asia (SSA) through the lens of applicable small state theory. While Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and Maldives have all experienced various highs and lows in their ties with neighbouring India over the years, each exists in a condition as the weaker actor in asymmetric power relationships with India. When examining a range of quantifiable traits of "small" states such as GDP and military spending, all five countries are significantly smaller than India. Four of the five SSA countries share commonly understood traits of "small" countries. Although the fifth country, Bangladesh is clearly not small if measured by population, it is small by other metrics such as GDP and military spending and remains on the UN's list of Least Developed Countries. Furthermore, small states is a subject that has been examined by scholars in Bangladesh when considering qualitative factors of its context of vulnerability (Kabir, 2005).

Case selection and theoretical justification

This article examines a high-profile episode in South Asia over the past decade in which an SSA country's decision was interpreted as being counter to the security interests of India – the dominant regional power with rising economic, diplomatic, and military capabilities – and in favour of China's interests. This article avoids a frequentist approach to the topic with the assumption of cases weighted equally in a large sample for cross-case analysis. Instead, relying on qualitative research principles, this article examines a substantively important case for noteworthy outcomes due to the explanatory insights that it can yield using robust evidence available (Goertz & Mahoney, 2012, pp. 178, 184-5). Therefore, the episode was selected for in-depth, within-case examination.

The case examines the visits by a Chinese submarine to the Port of Colombo and the controversy that emerged in its wake. To cover multiple areas of activity, the case spans the

diplomatic-military realms (Sri Lanka's diplomatic clearance to another navy's sub-surface platform for access to Colombo port).

Regarding theory, this article does not dispute the wide array of historical and future alignment choices of small states, including balancing and bandwagoning. In fact, since independence, SSA countries have held threat perceptions from India, as well as from rivalries between extraregional powers, such as the United States and Soviet Union during the Cold War. Academics from Sri Lanka have written about these topics and their country's choices (e.g. Gunasekara, 2015; Gamage, 2017; Jayawardena, 1992). These threat perceptions continue to inform SSA countries' alignment decisions to the present day, especially as India increases its national military capabilities.

In referencing structuralist approaches earlier, this article does not expect such realist work to function as routine theories of foreign policy, given their focus on the system level (Waltz, 1996, p. 54). However, these theories do have direct implications for major policy actions that states pursue in the international arena (Elman, 2016, pp. 10, 17; Ripsman, et al., 2016, pp. 18-19). If leading IR theories cannot explain the most high-profile decisions taken by SSA states in recent memory with major-power security implications for the region, then they warrant deeper examination. After all, these types of explanatory theory are intended to be useful given their problem-solving orientation (Kurki & Wight, 2007, p. 26; Goertz & Mahoney, 2012, p. 185).

The article argues that popular theoretical explanations do not sufficiently account for the available empirical evidence and presents a supplementary framework for explanation. An accurate understanding of small states is critical, not only for academics developing IR theories, but also for policymakers in developing effective options in an era of strategic competition.

Data sources for the Sri Lanka case

The examination of the case at hand will rely on data sources from Sri Lanka as much as possible, and less so on more commonly cited and available Indian sources. This article resorts to in-country sources to better understand the drivers of SSA behaviours. This includes the author's discussions with various experts and officials from 2014-2016 and in 2021, media articles, and scholarship from Sri Lanka. An essential aspect of qualitative research is the availability of data and expertise to permit as robust a study as possible (Goertz and Mahoney, 2012, pp. 184, 187-188). Due to the large amount of media attention on the case, plenty of material is available for examination.

The submarine visits by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy to Colombo Port in 2014 are often cited as a vivid example of Sri Lanka tilting toward China, and against India. This section will systematically apply the above framework to this case to provide empirical and theoretical insight into the domestic drivers and traits associated with small states that would explain why Sri Lanka would authorize a visit that appeared hostile to the interests of India, a rising economic and military power and Sri Lanka's immediate neighbour.

Condition 1: India is dominant and rising in capability (External context).

Before onset of the episode, Sri Lanka faced the condition of being a small state in an asymmetric power relationship with the dominant country in the region (India) and having historical threat perceptions of India. In recent history, Colombo experienced the presence of

the Indian Peace Keeping Force after the 1987 Indo-Sri Lanka Accord. Moreover, the associated Exchange of Letters between the two countries' leaders demonstrated Colombo's acceptance of New Delhi's unfavourable terms for Sri Lanka's use of its ports and broadcasting stations and for the presence of foreign military personnel (South Asia Terrorism Portal, 2001).

Condition 2: Sri Lanka's post-war efforts to be a maritime hub (Domestic context).

After the end of a 26-year civil war in 2009, the government of the small island state directed greater attention to Colombo and other local ports to prioritize shipping as a vehicle to advance national development goals (Sri Lanka Ports Authority, 2023). This includes the goal of positioning Sri Lanka as a hub in the Indian Ocean for the purpose of contributing to the national economy (Sri Lanka Ministry of Ports and Shipping, 2022, p. 133). Colombo Port normally ranks as the 25th busiest container port in the world by Lloyd's List (2021).

Step 1: Sri Lanka approves China's request for diplomatic clearance (Small state action).

To kickstart the episode, China requested a port visit for one of the PLA Navy's submarines. Located in the centre of the Indian Ocean along the main east-west sea lanes, Sri Lanka often serves as a stopping point for ships. This includes military vessels seeking to provide rest for crews and refuel to make the next half of their journey: either westward to the Middle East and East Africa, or eastward to the Pacific Ocean. These naval forces have come from a variety of countries. In the preceding years, China started to be included in this grouping due to the PLA Navy's participation in counterpiracy operations in the western Indian Ocean, off the Horn of Africa.

Sri Lankan officials approved the visit request. Usually, naval ship visits to Colombo Port do not make headlines beyond local media, but that changed in 2014 after the first-ever visits by a PLA Navy diesel-electric submarine and its tender ship in September and October 2014. The primary explanatory factors behind Sri Lanka's action to approve China's request for submarine port visits can be located at the *domestic level*: strategic culture and economic interests.

The first is called "strategic culture" in this article, but comprises four sets of domestic-level variables as discussed earlier in Ripsman et al. (2016)'s neoclassical realism: leaders' images and perceptions, strategic culture, state-society relations, and domestic institutional arrangements. In the case of small states, these variables will be subsumed into one overarching category called "strategic culture" in this article for two reasons. First, from the standpoint of their own theory, Ripsman et al. (2016, pp. 58-59) show how strategic culture is the only one of their sub-unit variables to inform all three unit-level variables they outline: a leader's perceptions of the external environment, the state's decision-making process, and its policy implementation capability. Indeed, they state that strategic culture "shapes all aspects of state responses" and explore it broadly to encompass "inter-related beliefs, norms, and assumptions" that shape what are considered to be "acceptable and unacceptable strategic choices" (Ripsman et al., 2016, pp. 33, 67).

Second, from the perspective of small states more broadly, there is often an interplay of the sub-unit variables they identify and define due to size and proximity. In the case of Sri Lanka, this can be seen from the intimate range of decision-makers in close contact with each other: leader images and state-society relations, including civil-military relations (Ripsman et al., 2016, pp. 61, 70, 73). Various Sri Lankan officials in government and the military are able

to speak directly with the president by mobile telephone. This type of wide access is not a characteristic of major powers and highlights the manifestation of strategic culture in a small state. This interplay can also be seen in both formal institutions and informal practices and norms of operation: domestic institutions, and strategic culture (Ripsman et al., 2016, pp. 66-67, 75, 77). For example, from my discussions with Sri Lankan officials, there was no evidence of a mechanism for a group of Sri Lankan officials from different agencies to debate whether or not to provide clearance, given the first-ever nature of a Chinese submarine visit.

Sri Lanka's strategic culture should be broadly examined for causality in this episode, with particular attention to Sri Lanka's external outlook and orientation toward visitors and the perceived benefits of this orientation (Ripsman, et al., 2016, pp. 66-70). The country prioritizes openness to visitors due to the importance of international trade to its economy. This outlook is rooted in Sri Lanka's role as a key node in Indian Ocean trade routes dating back to classical Greece and Rome (De Silva, 2005, p. 2). In the contemporary era, the government has made port development a pillar of the country's post-war diplomacy and economic plan through rehabilitation of infrastructure damaged during the long civil war as well as the construction of new ports and terminals. To attract investment in the port sector, officials repeatedly emphasize the "strategic location of Sri Lanka" as a "hub" in the Indian Ocean, "situated in the sea-lanes" (Kariyawasam, 2017). In fact, Colombo Port generally ranks as the busiest port in South Asia because of the volume of container traffic the port sees due to its location near the main east-west sea lanes (Lloyd's List, 2021, p. 20). The port also services military vessels whose crews seek rest while their ships refuel. Admiral Jayantha Perera, Sri Lanka's naval commander during the PLA Navy submarine visits to Colombo, described Colombo's disposition in a newspaper interview:

[T]here shouldn't have been any dispute over Oct. 2014 visit. Perera recalled him having to visit New Delhi in the wake of the Chinese visit to reassure India of Sri Lanka's intentions. Sri Lanka, as a non-aligned country, should welcome foreign warships and submarines from major powers, Admiral Perera said, pointing out that an Indian aircraft carrier was here over a year ago. Admiral Perera said that Iranian warships and a submarine visited Colombo in late 2013 (Ferdinando, 2017).

The top five countries responsible for military port calls to Sri Lanka from 2009 to 2017 were: India (82), Japan (67), China (31), Russia (26), and Pakistan (24) (Colombage, 2017, p. 7). Put into context, India's port calls were nearly three times as numerous as China's; and Japan's were more than twice China's. While Indian officials, media and analysts widely viewed the decision to allow the episode as a hostile act (Parashar, 2014; Singh 2015), providing clearance for the PLA submarine to rest and refuel in Colombo was in accordance with Sri Lanka's practice of permitting visits by arriving and returning foreign vessels. Moreover, because this was the first-ever Chinese submarine port visit, it appears from my discussions with officials that there was no established protocol for Sri Lanka to communicate bilaterally with India about this. As a result, the decision about providing ship clearance remained a firmly domestic interagency matter. After going through foreign ministry review, the decision was made by the Ministry of Defence, Navy, and the Harbour Master at Colombo Port.

An interview with Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe underscores this policy of allowing ship visits, including by submarines. He entered office with President Maithripala Sirisena in January 2015, a few months after the controversial submarine visits were permitted

by the preceding Rajapaksa administration that they replaced in office. Wickremesinghe told the *Straits Times*:

We have put out the criterion for visits by naval ships. Under that, ships, including submarines from all countries, can visit Sri Lanka. As far as we are concerned, if it is a friendly visit, we will inform the neighbouring countries, and we will spread out the (frequency of the) visits (Velloor, 2015).

Even after the controversy of the submarine visits under the Rajapaksa administration, Wickremesinghe reverted to the country's strategic-culture disposition to welcoming all countries' naval platforms for port visits, including submarines.

A second, reinforcing *domestic-level* factor is economic interest. All countries certainly have this driver, but this applies especially so to small, developing economies (Hey, 2003b, pp. 193-194). The site of the visit was Colombo Port. The ports sector in Sri Lanka is more broadly seen as critical in contributing to the national economy (Sri Lanka Ministry of Ports and Shipping, 2022, p. 133). of this developing, lower middle-income country. Port visits by both commercial and military ships contribute to the economy in service of these objectives. The economic benefits of port visits by military vessels were described in a press release by the U.S. Embassy when the aircraft carrier USS *Nimitz* visited in October 2017 (US Embassy in Sri Lanka, 2017):

It is estimated that the carrier strike group will add approximately 1.54 billion rupees (US\$10 million) to the Sri Lankan economy as the ships purchase supplies and thousands of U.S. sailors come ashore and support local businesses.

The press release demonstrates the U.S. Embassy's recognition of Sri Lanka's culture of welcoming transiting ships and leveraging the country's central location in the Indian Ocean. To suggest the value to come from the United States, the press release indicates the potential infusion of funds into the local economy from the transiting ship. While a Chinese submarine clearly does not bring the same level of potential profitability as a U.S. aircraft carrier, the decision to provide diplomatic clearance to a visiting submarine – even China's – is indicative of a larger strategic culture that is open to visitors and leverages the island state's location along the sea lanes.

Applying counterfactual analysis to this case: if Sri Lanka had not permitted Chinese submarines to visit, this stance would have been inconsistent with its previous practice (Chernoff, 2014, p. 40). While this was a first-ever port visit by a Chinese submarine, Sri Lanka showed a similar willingness in the 1980s to permit another major power's high-profile naval asset – the United States' USS *Kitty Hawk* aircraft carrier – to visit Colombo Port. As would be the case in 2014, India expressed its alarm over the visit by the U.S. warship (De Silva, 2017). This episode shows that, consistent with its history as a stopping point on trade routes for centuries, Sri Lanka's preference over the past few decades has been to accept transiting naval platforms of various types.

From an IR theoretical standpoint, this case is not consistent with the notion that Sri Lanka was either balancing or bandwagoning; this small state was not seeing its decision as lying at the system level, but rather rooted in past practice, domestic habits and interests. The episode also cannot be explained by Sri Lanka being equidistant from India and China. The amount of close defence and security cooperation between Sri Lanka and India at the time of

the episode undermines the case for the equidistance and hedging argument on the grounds of empirical fit. The neoclassical realist perspective discussed earlier emphasizes the role of strategic culture as a domestic-level intervening variable, which is clearly at play in this case (Ripsman, et al., 2016, p. 67). However, one limitation of this theory is the prioritization of the causality of external stimuli. Despite the dominance of India, Sri Lanka permitted the first submarine visit by China. And even after the controversy over the September visit, it permitted the submarine's return visit in October 2014 as already planned for the purpose of rest and refuelling before a long journey ahead. To explain this SSA state's decision-making, an understanding of the dynamic interplay of domestic- and systemic-level variables is needed without a premature assignment of causality to one dimension.

To this end, an analysis of the spectrum of small state alliance choices provides an additional framework for understanding Sri Lanka's thinking. As a defensive strategy, a small state pursues the path of "opting out" of the major-power competition or rivalry (such as between India and China) (Wivel, 2021, p. 501). By allowing ship visits from all countries, Sri Lanka shows a desire to not choose between one country or another in its practice of providing rest and refuel for transiting ships. This opting out also applies to the type of naval platforms, where Sri Lanka has previously accepted submarines and aircraft carriers even when deemed controversial by India. It is important to note, however, that this behaviour is not hedging as defined earlier (Wivel, 2021, p. 499). Based on available data about the stakeholders involved in the decision to permit submarine clearance, there is no evidence of an intentional decision to hedge. Instead, the evidence supports the conclusion that Sri Lanka's behaviour as a small state is based in strategic culture and reinforced by economic development goals at the domestic level. This behaviour differs from its strategic interactions with its dominant neighbour in their asymmetric relationship.

Second, Sri Lanka's actions in allowing the Chinese ship visits is typical of small states in another way: by relying on their 'niche' assets (Wivel, 2021, pp. 498-499). In other words, as a small state, Sri Lanka can be expected to strive to make unique contributions such as the "provision of transportation or logistics" (Wivel, 2021, p. 499). In this episode, Sri Lanka continued a practice of seeking to benefit from its central location along the Indian Ocean sea lanes by allowing transiting commercial and military vessels to use its ports. In fact, despite the controversy after the first PLA Navy submarine visit in September 2014, and surprise over its return visit, reporting existed in news media beforehand about the fact that the submarine was planning to make a return trip to Sri Lanka; and it did as planned (Sunday Times Sri Lanka, 2014). Discussion by a Sri Lankan government official about the logistics involved in naval port visits illustrates small states' focus on serving as a source of transportation services (*ibid.*).

Step 2: Indian official and media criticism (Counteraction by asymmetric power).

Indian officials were upset by the episode and demanded Sri Lankan officials visit New Delhi in October 2014 and explain the situation (Balachandran, 2021; Haidar, 2019). An Indian security official stated: "The turning point in the relationship was the submarines. There was real anger" (Chalmers & Miglani, 2015).

Meanwhile, reactions in Indian and international media were high-profile and very negative. Sri Lanka's action was given a realist interpretation by many journalists and analysts for the implications at the international system-level. With this episode, China's military reach was deemed to be undeniably expanding into the Indian Ocean, not only with surface ships but also with submarines (LaGrone, 2014). In the context of deepening ties between Sri Lanka and

China, the events raised alarm bells about Sri Lanka falling into China's strategic orbit (Samaranayake, 2011; Parashar, 2014). Many observers even referred to the ship visits as being from "Chinese nuclear submarines" (Hindustan Times, 2017) to imply the presence of nuclear weapons, despite the fact that Sri Lankan officials declared that the submarine was fuelled through diesel-electric power.

Particularly in India, many observers interpreted the naval visits as a case of Sri Lanka balancing against India's interests, and even bandwagoning with China (Singh, 2015). Some even alleged that the historic port visit by a Chinese submarine in the Indian Ocean constituted a violation of the 1987 Exchange of Letters between Sri Lankan president J.R. Jayewardene and Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi, which stated:

Trincomalee or any other ports in Sri Lanka will not be made available for military use by any country in a manner prejudicial to India's interests (South Asia Terrorism Portal, 2001).

This provision dates back to Indian fears in the 1980s about U.S. interest in Trincomalee harbour in northern Sri Lanka and has informed Colombo's threat perceptions of India in recent memory. Years later, the submarines episode continues to be cited by high-profile media outlets and academics as an example of Sri Lanka challenging India's dominance in the region (Brewster, 2015; Abi-Habib, 2018).

Step 3: Sri Lanka halts subsequent approvals for China's submarine port visit requests (Small state response).

Finally, there is an often-ignored postscript to the fallout from this episode due to the absence of a high-profile datapoint: Sri Lanka has been unwilling to accept a Chinese submarine port visit since. This includes visits under the subsequent administration of the Rajapaksa family, which returned to power in late 2019. Although there is always a possibility that a submarine visit can go undetected, it is unlikely in this case for a few reasons. First, there have been no reports of a PLA submarine port visit to Sri Lanka since the episode. This topic receives significant scrutiny from various stakeholders such as India's security establishment, journalists, and mariners. Moreover, international experts on social media who track China's ship visits using satellite imagery have not detected a PLA submarine visit to Colombo. Second, a *Reuters* story reported that Sri Lanka rejected China's request for a submarine port visit in May 2017 (Aneez & Sirilal, 2017). Third, examples exist of PLA submarines deploying elsewhere in the Indian Ocean, as seen by port visits to Karachi, Pakistan, in May 2015 and May 2016 (India Today, 2015; NDTV, 2016). In the absence of counter-evidence, we can reasonably assume that Sri Lanka has not permitted a Chinese submarine port visit since 2014.

Using the small states framework, Step 2 involved counteraction by the dominant country (India), which demanded Sri Lankan officials explain the situation in addition to high-profile media and expert commentary. Step 3 highlights the small state's response: Sri Lanka's actions are consistent with Maass (2017b)'s analysis of small states' willingness to "bandwagon as a last resort," after facing a stressed security environment. The definition of small states as engaged in an "asymmetric power relationship" (Wivel et al., 2014, p. 9) also helps explain Sri Lanka's role as the weaker actor in its relationship with India. Not far from Sri Lankan leaders' minds is the historical threat from India. This includes overt and covert operations such as the intrusion into Sri Lanka's airspace by the Indian Air Force, as well as insurgency training operations acknowledged by senior Indian officials (Joseph, 2000).

IR theories focused on the international system partially explain the aftermath of this case; however, they do not explain the drivers of Sri Lanka's behaviour to commence the episode. The change in Sri Lanka's stance toward welcoming Chinese submarine port visits represents a departure from the country's initial preference, which was driven by domestic-level factors. Moreover, its decision to bandwagon as a last resort was not pursued as an alternative option to balance against India, and was not driven by a choice between bandwagoning (with China) or balancing (against India). In other words, this small state's choices were between pursuing its preference of openness to visitors (strategic culture as *domestic-level variable*) – a disposition that supports wider development goals (economic interest as *domestic-level variable*) – and bandwagoning as a last resort with India (at the *system level*).

Conclusion

Summary of findings

This article has focused on a high-profile case involving a smaller South Asian state and two major powers. Whereas observers would expect Sri Lanka to bandwagon with India due to that country's rising economic and military capabilities or remain equidistant and hedge between India and China, the episode was controversial because it was interpreted as a case of a smaller country balancing against India or bandwagoning with China. Drawing on the emerging literature on small states and empirical data, this article does not find that the case supports this interpretation.

Observers of South Asian international relations often apply system-based frameworks to explain actions by small states. Indeed, these countries have multiple options available to them at the system level, such as balancing and hedging. However, the SSA country examined in this article has its own domestic-level drivers, while needing to manage threat perceptions of India at the system level at the same time. As a result, this article proposes an additional framework for systematically examining small states' thinking. An analysis of the visits by a Chinese submarine to Colombo Port reveals drivers that are often seen in small states, such as their unique strategic culture (e.g. habits and preferences as a small state) and the pursuit of national development goals in the service of economic interest. Regarding the latter driver, the case indicates the role of national development goals (including via existing or future national assets) in the behaviour of an SSA country in the contemporary peacetime context. When Sri Lanka faced pressure at the system level, the smaller state chose to "bandwagon as a last resort" due to its position as the weaker actor in an asymmetric power relationship. *The choice it made, however, was not between bandwagoning and balancing, but between the pursuit of domestic-level interests and preferences and bandwagoning as a last resort.*

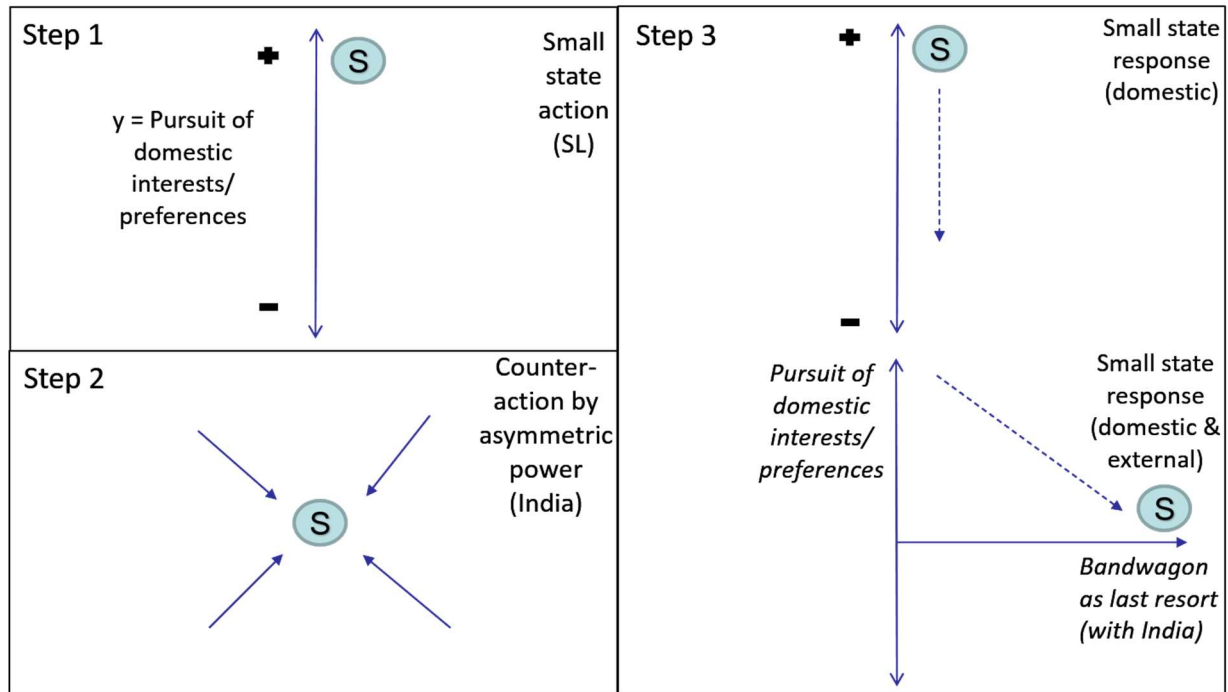
Figure 1 visualizes the steps in small state behaviour (outlined in the framework in Table 1) and analyzes the Sri Lanka case data.

- Step 1 represents Sri Lanka's actions after the onset of the episode. They are rooted in the pursuit of small-state, domestic-level interests, habits, and preferences (y axis). Sri Lanka (in the smaller state S icon) is located at the top of the y axis for this step, which shows its high pursuit of these domestic factors (represented by a plus sign, in contrast to the minus sign).

- Step 2 highlights the external, counter-action by India as the dominant regional power on the smaller state S (Sri Lanka).

• Step 3 illustrates the SSA case’s move away from the initial high degree of domestic-level interests and preferences (downward, from the top of the y axis) and movement toward bandwagoning as a last resort (on the x axis). At the end of the episode, Sri Lanka (in the S icon) is bandwagoning as a last resort with India.

Figure 1: Framework for small state behaviour: the Sri Lanka case.



As discussed earlier, the case considered in this article has often been explained through international system-level concepts (i.e., balancing, bandwagoning, and hedging). However, this alternative framework—informed by small states theoretical literature and empirical data—provides a counterexample in which an SSA country initially chose to pursue domestic-level interests and preferences, but when faced with pressure from India, chose to bandwagon as a last resort due to its asymmetric power relationship. These two options for the SSA case are shown in italicized text in Step 3. As previewed by the title of this paper, the analysis recommends considering the role played by domestic-level factors and using a small states lens when interpreting the international-level outcomes seen in the Sri Lanka case.

After applying this framework systematically to the Sri Lanka case, it is clear that Colombo was neither actively balancing against India nor bandwagoning with China. In other words, it was not exhibiting the more offensive behaviours on the spectrum of small-state alliance choices. Informed by recent history, the SSA country pursued defensive strategies rather than antagonize the dominant country, India. Sri Lanka was not even hedging according to Wivel’s definition. By sitting at the defensive end of the spectrum, the SSA country had already determined that its greatest threat perceptions are from India and was not “hedging their choices for security shelter” (Wivel, 2021, p. 499). In essence, the high-profile case examined does not support the conclusion that Sri Lanka was hedging between major powers because it has already “chosen”: India. The available data does not support the traditional explanation that Sri Lanka made calculated, intentional decisions to hedge and signal ambiguity externally when its domestic-level interests and preferences were of greater priority.

Implications

Further case studies are needed to assess the broader applicability of this alternative theoretical framework to SSA countries. In the meantime, what might this Sri Lanka case study suggest for our understanding of SSA countries and small states more broadly in an era of major-power competition?

First, this does not mean that smaller countries in South Asia will reject balancing as an option against India in the future if their threat perceptions are elevated. In fact, SSA states at certain points in their histories – such as during the Cold War – have balanced against India at the system level. Hedging is also another relevant strategy that is worth acknowledging as a possibility in the future. While this course of action was not detected in the case examined in this article, this path also represents an option available to SSA countries. A way forward for scholarly research could be to test the propositions developed in this paper against hedging propositions in other case studies, thereby yielding additional insights about SSA behaviour.

Second, India's concerns about the implications of SSA behaviour are not necessarily dismissed. Even if not driven by a strategy of balancing or hedging, SSA actions could still inadvertently facilitate a stronger foothold in South Asia for China.

A third implication is that the United States and India may have more room for influence than previously thought. To date, interpretations of the case have prioritized the system level, suggesting to policymakers that Sri Lanka was leaning toward China. However, the focus on balancing behaviour in a system-centric explanation belies the domestic-level variables that could be at work in small-state decision-making. In security studies, concepts that seek to look “under the hood” are sometimes derided as “unit-level” or “ad hoc.” Yet, policymakers have limited resources and time to address strategic competition challenges globally and need to know when they may be *overvaluing* the weight of China's influence in an SSA state due to system-level explanations. The risk is that policymakers will prematurely cede strategic space to China rather than make targeted investments in the SSA countries.

In the case examined, Sri Lanka did not possess the capability or political will required to effectively balance a country as large and increasingly powerful as India. Its posture was defensive in orientation. The finding that an SSA country pursued bandwagoning primarily “as a last resort” highlights the importance of the system level, but also the potential limitations in some high-profile cases of a theoretical framework that focuses on the system level at the expense of other factors. The choice confronting small states is not necessarily between bandwagoning and balancing, but between the pursuit of or compromise of domestic-level imperatives (strategic culture or economic development, in the case examined). Through access to this enlarged framework, policymakers from small states will better understand their expanded range of options beyond primarily balancing, bandwagoning, and hedging.

This article does not dismiss the critical role of the external system. Indeed, the framework it proposes acknowledges when and why the external system should be recognized as a causal variable. This article does conclude, however, that engaging with elements of multiple approaches, such as Ripsman et al. (2016) and their adapted neoclassical realist theory and the subfield of small states, and studying empirical data and key factors from within the SSA countries can lead to more informed policy approaches in South Asia and beyond.

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