



African Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences

Publisher's Home Page: <https://www.hsspress.com/>



Research Paper

Open Access

India-Sri Lanka Maritime Relations in the Post-War Period: Governance, Geopolitics, and the Blue Economy (2009-2024)

Anwith G. Kumar^{1*} 

¹Department of Postgraduate Studies and Research in Political Science, Mangalore University, Mangalagangothri, Konaje, India.
E-mail: anwithgkumar@gmail.com

Article Info

Volume 6, Issue 2, August 2026

Received : 29 May 2026

Accepted : 03 August 2026

Published : 25 August 2026

doi: [10.67192/AFJHSS.6.2.2026.35-40](https://doi.org/10.67192/AFJHSS.6.2.2026.35-40)

Abstract

This article examines the maritime relationship between India and Sri Lanka during the period 2009 to 2024, a phase that began soon after the end of the Sri Lankan civil war. The ocean space between the two countries has become a meeting point of livelihood concerns, economic ambition, and strategic rivalry. Drawing on published government reports, scholarly writing, and policy documents, the article looks at four connected questions: how the fisheries dispute in the Palk Strait has affected coastal communities, how port development and the entry of outside powers, especially China, have reshaped the strategic picture, how far existing governance frameworks have managed these tensions, and what a Blue Economy approach can offer going forward. The study follows a qualitative, secondary-data design rather than fieldwork. It finds that cooperation between the two countries has grown in some areas, such as security dialogue and disaster response, but that the fisheries question remains largely unresolved and that geopolitical competition has added a further layer of difficulty. The article ends by suggesting that a more coordinated and people-centred approach to ocean governance is needed if the relationship is to move beyond recurring friction.

Keywords: India-Sri Lanka relations, Palk strait, Fisheries conflict, Blue economy, Maritime governance, Indian Ocean geopolitics

© 2026 Anwith G. Kumar. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made.

1. Introduction

India and Sri Lanka share a long maritime history shaped by geographical proximity, cultural exchanges, trade, and people-to-people interactions. The Palk Strait and the Gulf of Mannar have historically served as important maritime spaces connecting the two countries through economic, social, and cultural networks (Appadorai and Rajan, 1985). Following the end of the Sri Lankan civil war in 2009, bilateral relations entered a new phase characterized by increasing attention to maritime issues, including fisheries management, maritime security, port development, and regional cooperation (Gurnam, 2012; Ashraf, 2018).

* Corresponding author: Anwith G. Kumar, Department of Postgraduate Studies and Research in Political Science, Mangalore University, Mangalagangothri, Konaje, India. E-mail: anwithgkumar@gmail.com

The growing strategic importance of the Indian Ocean has further elevated the maritime dimension of India-Sri Lanka relations. Sri Lanka's location along major international sea lanes has made it a significant actor in regional maritime affairs. Consequently, the development of infrastructure projects such as Colombo Port and Hambantota Port has attracted considerable international interest. The increasing involvement of China in these projects has generated strategic concerns in India regarding regional influence, maritime security, and the balance of power in the Indian Ocean region (Pattanaik, 2012; Mallemapati, 2021).

At the same time, the fisheries dispute in the Palk Strait remains one of the most persistent challenges in bilateral relations. Fishing communities on both sides depend heavily on marine resources for their livelihoods. However, issues such as cross-border fishing, the use of mechanized trawlers, and disputes over fishing rights have frequently resulted in tensions between the two countries (Suryanarayan, 2001; Manoharan, 2013). Furthermore, unsustainable fishing practices, particularly bottom trawling, have contributed to environmental degradation and declining fish stocks, thereby intensifying competition over marine resources (Vasan, 2010a).

To address these challenges, India and Sri Lanka have established several bilateral and regional mechanisms aimed at promoting maritime security, fisheries management, and policy coordination. Although these mechanisms have contributed to dialogue and cooperation, their effectiveness in resolving long-standing disputes remains limited (Raju, 2007; Vohra and Srivatsan, 2008). Simultaneously, the emergence of the Blue Economy concept has provided a new framework for integrating economic development, environmental sustainability, and maritime governance. The Blue Economy emphasizes the sustainable utilization of marine resources while ensuring social inclusion and environmental protection, making it particularly relevant to India-Sri Lanka maritime cooperation (Hebbikar, 2026).

Against this background, this study examines India-Sri Lanka maritime relations during the post-war period from 2009 to 2024. It focuses on four interrelated dimensions: the fisheries dispute and its impact on coastal livelihoods, the strategic significance of port development and external involvement, the effectiveness of maritime governance mechanisms, and the potential of the Blue Economy framework for fostering sustainable and inclusive cooperation. By bringing these dimensions together, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the opportunities and challenges shaping contemporary India-Sri Lanka maritime relations.

2. Literature Review

A reasonably large body of writing exists on India-Sri Lanka relations in general, though work focused specifically on the maritime and post-war dimension is more limited and somewhat scattered across disciplines such as international relations, strategic studies, and maritime law.

2.1. Historical and Political Background

Gurnam (2012) traces the broader arc of India-Sri Lanka relations since independence, showing how political trust between the two governments has moved through cycles of closeness and distance, often shaped by domestic politics in both countries. Appadorai and Rajan (1985), writing from an earlier period, place Sri Lanka within India's wider South Asian foreign policy, arguing that India's neighbourhood approach has long balanced strategic caution with the wish to be seen as a benign regional power. Ashraf (2018) and Khobragade (2023) bring this account closer to the present, both noting that the end of the civil war in 2009 marked a turning point after which economic and maritime issues began to receive more attention than the earlier ethnic and security concerns that had dominated the relationship.

2.2. The Palk Strait Fisheries Dispute

The fisheries question has attracted the most sustained academic attention. Suryanarayan (2001) was among the earlier writers to document the dispute in detail, linking it to the unresolved status of Kachchativu island and to the broader history of maritime boundary-making between the two countries in the 1970s. Manoharan (2013) examines the issue from a policy standpoint, arguing that the problem is less about legal ambiguity, since the International Maritime Boundary Line is fairly well defined, and more about the economic dependence of Tamil Nadu fishermen on mechanized trawling in waters that are now, formally, Sri Lankan. Vasan (2010a) adds an ecological dimension, pointing out that bottom trawling by Indian vessels has contributed to the depletion of fish stocks on the Sri Lankan side, which deepens resentment among Sri

Lankan fishing communities even as it does little to solve the livelihood pressures faced by their Indian counterparts.

2.3. Maritime Cooperation and Governance

A separate strand of literature looks at the cooperative side of the relationship. Vohra and Srivatsan (2008) bring together essays on maritime cooperation that highlight joint efforts in areas such as anti-piracy patrolling and disaster response, suggesting that security cooperation has generally been easier to sustain than fisheries cooperation, since it does not directly touch on livelihoods or sovereignty claims. Raju (2007) situates this cooperation within a wider partnership framework, noting that institutional mechanisms such as Joint Working Groups have existed for some years but have struggled to produce binding outcomes on the fisheries question specifically.

2.4. Geopolitics and External Powers

The geopolitical literature has grown considerably since 2009, largely because of the increased visibility of Chinese investment in Sri Lankan ports. Pattanaik (2012) was an early voice arguing that India needed to rethink its Sri Lanka policy in light of changing regional dynamics, including Colombo's growing openness to external partners. Mallempati (2021) takes this further, suggesting that India's traditional assumption of natural primacy in Sri Lanka can no longer be taken for granted and that a reoriented policy approach is needed. Hebbikar (2026) offers the most recent assessment, arguing that convergence and cooperation remain possible but depend on India recognising Sri Lanka's interest in balancing multiple partners rather than choosing sides.

2.5. Gaps in the Existing Literature

Taken together, this literature is rich but somewhat compartmentalized. Works on the fisheries dispute rarely engage closely with the geopolitical literature on port development, and writing on Blue Economy governance, while growing internationally, has not been applied systematically to the India–Sri Lanka case in a way that connects livelihood concerns with strategic competition. This article tries to address that gap by reading these three areas, fisheries, port geopolitics, and governance, alongside each other within a single analytical frame.

3. Objectives of the Study

- To Examine the Fisheries Dispute in the Palk Strait and its Impact on Coastal Livelihoods in India and Sri Lanka.
- To assess the strategic and economic significance of port development in Sri Lanka and its implications for India, particularly in the context of Chinese involvement.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of bilateral and international mechanisms in addressing maritime security, fisheries, and resource-sharing issues.
- To explore the potential of the Blue Economy framework for promoting sustainable and inclusive India–Sri Lanka maritime cooperation.

4. Methodology

This study is based entirely on secondary data and adopts a qualitative descriptive-analytical approach. No primary data were collected through interviews, surveys, or fieldwork. The analysis draws on three main categories of sources: academic books on India–Sri Lanka relations, maritime cooperation, and South Asian foreign policy; policy reports and institutional publications from organizations such as the National Maritime Foundation and the Indian Council of World Affairs; and journal articles focusing on fisheries disputes, port development, maritime security, and regional geopolitics.

Sources were selected according to their relevance to the study objectives and organized thematically. The discussion examines fisheries disputes, port development and strategic competition, governance mechanisms, and the Blue Economy framework. Where differing interpretations existed, particularly regarding Chinese

involvement in Sri Lankan ports, multiple perspectives were considered. As the study relies solely on secondary data, it cannot fully capture the lived experiences of affected communities, which is acknowledged as a limitation.

5. Analysis and Discussion

5.1. *The Palk Strait Fisheries Dispute and Coastal Livelihoods*

The fisheries dispute remains the most visible and the most human point of friction in India–Sri Lanka maritime relations. Indian fishermen, mostly from Tamil Nadu, regularly cross the International Maritime Boundary Line into Sri Lankan waters, a practice that leads to arrests, the seizure of boats, and, on occasion, violent confrontation at sea. Although the boundary itself is legally settled, in practice, it does little to stop the crossings, because the underlying problem is economic rather than legal. Fish stocks on the Indian side of the Strait have been depleted by decades of mechanised trawling, pushing fishermen further east into Sri Lankan waters in search of a livelihood.

This pattern, documented across the literature reviewed above, shows the limits of treating the dispute as a purely territorial matter. Sri Lankan fishermen experience the presence of Indian trawlers as both an economic threat, since trawling depletes the same fish stocks, they depend on, and an ecological one, given the damage that bottom trawling does to the seabed and to juvenile fish populations. The result is a cycle in which short-term enforcement measures, arrests and boat seizures, address the symptom but not the underlying scarcity that drives Indian fishermen across the boundary in the first place.

Diplomatic responses have so far relied heavily on periodic Joint Working Group meetings, which allow both governments to discuss arrests and release detained fishermen, but which have not produced a lasting framework for transitioning Indian fishermen away from bottom trawling. Proposals to shift towards deep-sea fishing, an alternative that would reduce dependence on the contested coastal waters, have been raised repeatedly but have moved slowly, held back by the cost of new vessels and by resistance from fishing communities who are reluctant to change a way of life built around trawling. The dispute, in short, sits at the intersection of livelihood, ecology, and diplomacy, and addressing one dimension without the others is unlikely to produce a durable solution.

5.2. *Port Development and the Geopolitics of Infrastructure*

If the fisheries dispute represents the livelihood dimension of the relationship, port development represents its geopolitical dimension. The development of Hambantota Port, financed substantially through Chinese loans, and the more recent Chinese-backed terminal at Colombo Port, have become the clearest markers of China's expanding economic footprint in Sri Lanka. From New Delhi's perspective, this raises the concern that commercially framed infrastructure could, over time, acquire a dual-use character with implications for India's own maritime security in waters it has long regarded as within its natural sphere of influence.

Sri Lanka's own position is better understood as a deliberate balancing strategy rather than a tilt towards any single power. Colombo has sought investment from India, China, Japan, and others, treating each relationship on its economic merits while trying to avoid overdependence on any one partner. This is, in many respects, a rational response for a small state located along major global shipping lanes, but it places Sri Lanka in a position where it must constantly manage the expectations and sensitivities of larger powers. India has responded by stepping up its own engagement, through investment commitments, energy cooperation, and connectivity projects, in an effort to remain a relevant economic partner alongside China rather than being displaced by it.

The result is a pattern that might be described as competitive coexistence. Cooperation and rivalry are not separate phases but run in parallel. India and China both invest in Sri Lankan infrastructure, sometimes in the same sectors, while Sri Lanka attempts to extract development benefit from both relationships without becoming exclusively tied to either. Whether this balancing approach remains sustainable for Sri Lanka over the longer term is one of the more open questions raised in the literature, particularly given the debt burdens associated with some of the larger port projects.

5.3. Maritime Governance and Policy Responses

Governance mechanisms between the two countries have developed unevenly across different issue areas. Maritime security cooperation, including coordinated naval exercises, intelligence sharing, and joint responses to piracy and smuggling, has generally progressed with fewer obstacles than fisheries governance. This is consistent with the broader pattern visible in the literature: cooperation tends to be easier where it does not directly touch on livelihoods or politically sensitive domestic constituencies.

On fisheries specifically, the institutional architecture, principally the Joint Working Group structure, has provided a regular channel for dialogue but has not been matched by binding commitments or enforcement capacity. International legal instruments, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, supply the broader normative framework within which bilateral discussions take place, but the Convention's provisions on boundary delimitation and resource management do not, by themselves, resolve disputes that are driven by domestic economic pressure rather than legal ambiguity. Enforcement at the practical level, patrolling, arrests, and the return of seized vessels, has tended to substitute for the harder political work of restructuring fishing practices on the Indian side.

Port-related governance follows a different logic altogether, shaped less by bilateral mechanisms and more by commercial negotiation and investment agreements, often conducted with limited public transparency. This creates a governance gap of its own: decisions with significant strategic consequence are sometimes made through commercial channels that operate outside the more visible, dialogue-based mechanisms used for fisheries and security matters. Bringing these different tracks of governance, security, fisheries, and infrastructure investment, into a more coherent and transparent framework remains an unfinished task.

5.4. The Blue Economy as an Integrating Framework

The Blue Economy concept offers, at least in principle, a way of holding these different concerns together. Rather than treating fisheries, port development, and environmental protection as separate policy silos, the Blue Economy approach asks how ocean resources can be used productively while remaining sustainable and while distributing benefits more fairly among those who depend on them, most directly, coastal fishing communities.

In practice, the India–Sri Lanka relationship has only partially absorbed this framing. Both governments have spoken the language of sustainable ocean governance in various bilateral and regional forums, and there has been some movement on disaster management cooperation and marine conservation dialogue. Yet the more difficult applications of the Blue Economy idea, restructuring fishing practices to reduce ecological damage, ensuring that port development includes meaningful benefit-sharing with affected coastal populations, and building joint environmental monitoring capacity, remain underdeveloped. The gap between the rhetorical adoption of Blue Economy language and its practical implementation is, in many ways, a smaller version of the same governance gap described above: declarations of intent exist, but the institutional follow-through needed to convert these into lasting change has been slow.

A more fully realised Blue Economy approach would need to bring fishing communities, not just government ministries, into the design of solutions, since proposals such as a shift to deep-sea fishing are unlikely to succeed without the support of the communities expected to make that shift. It would also require greater transparency in port investment decisions, so that infrastructure development is assessed not only for its commercial and strategic value but also for its social and environmental footprint. Read this way, the Blue Economy is less a finished policy and more an unfinished invitation, one that both governments have accepted in principle but have not yet followed through on in full.

6. Conclusion

India–Sri Lanka maritime relations since the end of the civil war reflect a relationship pulled in several directions at once. The Palk Strait fisheries dispute continues to cause hardship for coastal communities on both sides, sustained less by legal ambiguity than by the economic pressures driving Indian fishermen across an already-defined boundary. Port development, particularly the Chinese-financed projects at Hambantota and Colombo, has added a geopolitical layer to the relationship, with India responding through its own

investment and connectivity initiatives in a pattern of competitive coexistence rather than open confrontation. Governance mechanisms have made the most progress in security cooperation, the area least entangled with domestic livelihood politics, while fisheries governance and port-related decision-making remain comparatively underdeveloped and, in the case of port investment, less transparent.

The Blue Economy framework offers a plausible route for bringing these strands together, but its potential has not yet been matched by implementation. The four objectives guiding this study, the fisheries dispute and its livelihood impact, the strategic significance of port development, the effectiveness of existing governance mechanisms, and the scope for Blue Economy integration, point collectively to a single conclusion: that the relationship needs a more coordinated and inclusive approach to ocean governance, one that treats fishing communities as participants in policy design rather than only as a problem to be managed.

Because this study relies entirely on secondary sources, it is necessarily limited in capturing the lived experience of fishing communities and the finer detail of ongoing port negotiations, much of which is not fully documented in publicly available material. Future research drawing on field interviews with fishermen on both sides of the Strait, alongside closer analysis of port investment contracts where these become available, would usefully extend the analysis offered here. Even with these limitations, the secondary literature reviewed in this article makes clear that the choices made in the coming years, on fisheries livelihoods, on port governance, and on the practical application of Blue Economy principles, will shape whether India–Sri Lanka maritime relations move towards a more stable and mutually beneficial footing or continue to be defined by recurring friction.

References

- Appadorai, A. and Rajan, M.S. (1985). *India's Foreign Policy and Relations*. South Asian Publishers Private Ltd.
- Ashraf, M. (2018). *India-Sri Lanka Relations*. Ankit Publications.
- Gurnam, C. (2012). *Dynamics of India Sri Lanka Relationship Since Independence*. Swastik Publications.
- Hebbikar, P.M. (Ed.). (2026). *India-Sri Lanka Relations: Convergence, Cooperation, and Partnership*. Vivekananda International Foundation.
- Khobragade, V. (2023). *India's Sri Lanka Policy*. Manakin Press.
- Mallempati, S. (Ed.). (2021). *India-Sri Lanka Relations: Is it Time for Reorientation of Policy?*. Indian Council of World Affairs, KW Publishers.
- Manoharan, N. (2013). *India-Sri Lanka Fishermen Issue: Seeking Solutions*. National Maritime Foundation.
- Pattanaik, S.S. (2012). *Sri Lanka: Challenges and Opportunities for India*. In R. Dahiya and A.K. Behuria (Eds.), *India's Neighbourhood: Challenges in the Next Two Decades*, 191-215. Institute for Defence Studies & Analyses.
- Raju, A.S. (Ed.). (2007). *India-Sri Lanka Partnership in the 21st Century*. Kalpaz Publications.
- Suryanarayan, V. (2001). *The Kachchativu Dispute*. In P. Sahadevan (Ed.), *Conflict and Peacemaking in South Asia*, 347-350, Lancer's Books.
- Vasan, R.S. (2010a). *India Sri Lanka Maritime Issues: Challenges and Responses*. In V. Suryanarayan and S. Nambiar (Eds.), *Ethnic Reconciliation and Nation Building in Sri Lanka: Indian Perspectives*, 74-87, T.R. Publications.
- Vohra, R. and Srivatsan, V. (Eds.). (2008). *India-Sri Lanka Maritime Cooperation: Opportunities and Challenges*. National Maritime Foundation & Anamaya Publishers.

Cite this article as: Anwith G. Kumar (2026). *India-Sri Lanka Maritime Relations in the Post-War Period: Governance, Geopolitics, and the Blue Economy (2009-2024)*. *African Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 6(2), 35-40. <https://doi.org/10.67192/AFJHSS.6.2.2026.35-40>.