

ANALYZING AIR CONNECTIVITY, AIR DIPLOMACY, AND NATIONAL SECURITY IN SRI LANKA-INDIA RELATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Indo-Sri Lanka relationships date back to time immemorial for both nations, rooted in mutual recognition and respect. Driven by cultural, religious, and geographical similarities, the diplomacy between these nations surpasses comparisons with other countries. Regardless of the political figures in power, both countries have maintained constant ties in various dimensions, be it humanitarian, commercial, economic, military, cultural, or political. With changing priorities in the current context, countries opt for sustainable links, benefiting both the present and future generations. In a globalized world with both traditional and non-traditional threats abundant, regional cooperation is a shield against intervention and a proactive investment for mutual benefits leading to a secure nation with a sustainable foreign policy roadmap. In this context, air connectivity plays a pivotal role in enhanced cooperation and this is evident by the foremost decision made by both the countries. In light of the deepening interconnections between nations and the growing importance of air connectivity and diplomacy, there is a critical need to comprehensively analyze the relationship between improved air connectivity, air diplomacy, and national security in the context of Sri Lanka-India relations, which will serve as the research problem. The study aims to address several objectives. Namely, how does improved air connectivity, coupled with air diplomacy, between Sri Lanka and India influence diplomatic ties, economic collaborations, and regional stability and what is their significance? What are the long-term implications for their cooperation and national security? How does it affect their decision-making processes and collaborative efforts in the Defence and security sectors? Lastly, the study aims to understand the challenges faced by Sri Lanka and India in enhancing air diplomacy and connectivity for mutual benefit and will explore potential solutions to foster stronger coherence and interdependence in the region.

Keywords- Air connectivity, Air Diplomacy, India and Sri Lanka, National Security

I. INTRODUCTION

In a globalized world, countries are motivated to act based on survival, cooperation, as well as competition. At the outset, countries have the main concern to ensure non-interference and sovereignty, which are cardinal principles encapsulated in the United Nations Charter. With the progression in the world order, be it in the economy, politics, or culture, a country cannot remain isolated. Such isolation can make a country vulnerable, leading to a chaotic situation. Even though there are arguments, such as self-sustenance, and practicality in the modern world this is questionable. This is well evidenced by the shift from socialism to capitalism. Countries opt to engage in trade and commerce with other countries for their survival as well as interdependence. Various international agreements in the form of bilateral or multilateral exist. Irrespective of it, regional cooperation has become both challenging and a blessing. Now, “diplomacy” becomes the tool of connectivity. The necessity of regional cooperation will therefore be showcased using Sri Lanka and India as a case study.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Regionalism and Security

In the analysis presented by Bailes and Cottey, the terms ‘region’ and ‘security’ are extensively employed yet remain ambiguous and subject to debate. In the realm of global politics, the concept of ‘region’ is primarily associated with continents such as Africa, the Americas, Asia, Oceania, and Europe. Additionally, subcontinents like South Asia and areas surrounding seas such as the Baltic and the Caspian seas are occasionally categorised as regions. The distinction between regions and sub-regions further complicates the terminology; sub-regions are perceived as geographically distinct sub-areas of continents. However, these terms are often used interchangeably, leading to a blurred differentiation between them. Notably, geographical boundaries alone do not define regions in the context of world politics. Regions are essentially political and imaginative constructs, akin to nations, shaped by the local countries’ self-perception, connections, and how external entities perceive and interact with them. Historical, and cultural factors, as well as a variety of subjective perceptions and preferences, drive the recognition or intentional creation of regional and sub-regional systems, interstate groupings, and organisations. This process is influenced as much by subjective factors as by any objective logic, as exemplified by the historical use of terms like ‘Near East’ and ‘Far East’ during a period dominated by Eurocentric imperialist perspectives. In accordance with the insights provided by Bailes and Cottey, the researcher aligns with the notion that the terms ‘region’ and ‘security’ are enveloped in ambiguity and intricacy. This inherent complexity significantly

influences international relations, compelling nations to seek clarity through bilateral agreements.

The researcher further contends that this inclination towards bilateral arrangements can be attributed to the disputes arising from attempts to precisely define regional boundaries. These complexities in demarcating regions often lead to controversies and discrepancies, prompting countries to opt for bilateral engagements. Such strategic decisions serve as pragmatic solutions, allowing nations to establish agreements based on mutual understanding and clear parameters. By resorting to bilateral frameworks, countries can effectively face the challenges posed by the vague and contested nature of regional terminology, fostering more precise and manageable diplomatic relations. In an era marked by geopolitical complications and cross-border threats, the role of bilateral frameworks in enhancing national security cannot be ignored. These agreements not only facilitate stable diplomatic relations but also serve as foundational pillars in safeguarding a country's sovereignty and integrity.

B. Air Diplomacy and Connectivity

As per (Cooke, 2021), developed nations are swiftly advancing into the future, embracing cutting-edge innovations and modern technology, bolstered by substantial power and influence that permeates both private and public sectors. These advancements manifest in improved infrastructure, enhanced air capabilities, and integration of technology into diplomacy, fostering global connectivity. In contrast, developing countries, such as Sri Lanka, heavily rely on diplomatic efforts to assert their presence on the world stage. However, they often face challenges due to inadequate infrastructure and financial constraints. To overcome these hurdles, such nations must seek collaborative opportunities that can generate positive outcomes. The implementation of a comprehensive Air Diplomacy policy holds the key to unlocking a multitude of opportunities. This approach promises significant benefits for the Sri Lanka Air Force (SLAF), positioning it as a vital implementing agency. Exploring this uncharted territory not only enhances diplomatic engagement but also fortifies the state's arsenal of foreign policy tools, paving the way for a more robust international presence. The researcher fully agrees with the author, thus highlighting the potential of air diplomacy and connectivity. This underscores the urgent and proactive need for innovative approaches like air diplomacy to bridge the gap between developing and developed nations. Such collaborations, as articulated by the author, stand as powerful catalysts for diplomatic progress and international collaboration. Through these concerted efforts, nations like Sri Lanka can pave their path in the global arena, fostering partnerships and elevating their diplomatic standing on the world stage. In light of the said perspective, India and Sri Lanka's bridging serves as an ideal example.

C. Historical Overview of Indo-Sri Lanka Relationships

When perusing the bilateral air connectivity between India and Sri Lanka, as presented by (Kathuria et al, 2018), it is obvious that this collaboration has significantly evolved since the inception of their first air services agreement (ASA) in 1948. The commitment of both nations to progressively liberalize air services has therefore played a pivotal role in shaping their diplomatic relationship. The researcher, in line with the perspectives of learned authors, deeply understands the imperativeness of such agreements, recognizing them as cardinal frameworks that not only enhance economic interactions but also serve as potent tools of diplomacy facilitating regional coherence and stability. This understanding showcases the interplay between economic cooperation and diplomatic strategies by air as a tool, emphasizing the multifaceted significance of bilateral agreements. Through a series of amendments in the 1990s, crucial revisions in 2003, and a major liberalization effort in 2011, the impact on air services has been profound. These reforms led to a notable increase of 16 flights per week and an addition of 2,442 seats per week between the two countries. This substantial growth not only underscores the importance of bilateral agreements but also highlights the potential benefits of such collaborations in showcasing the gravity of diplomacy. The positive outcomes resulting from the air services liberalization between India and Sri Lanka serve as a compelling case study, indicating that other South Asian nations can adopt a similar incremental approach to liberalization. This approach, when accompanied by supportive reforms, not only fosters healthy competition but also eases logistical challenges, encourages trade, and ultimately strengthens diplomatic ties between nations, further affirming the researcher's understanding of the relationship between agreements and diplomacy in the context of relations between those countries.

III. METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative approach, by relying on secondary sources to explore the complex interplay between improved air connectivity, air diplomacy, and national security in the context of Sri Lanka-India relations. To accomplish such, qualitative methodology is chosen to delve deeply into the multifaceted aspects of diplomatic ties, economic collaborations, and regional stability. Primary data collection will not be utilized due to the classified nature of diplomatic relations and national security concerns that might fall into consideration. Instead, an analysis of academic articles, government publications, policy papers, and reputable international relations journals will form the basis of this study. Additionally, historical documents, official statements, and reports from international organisations will be scrutinised to reach findings.

IV. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

A. Impact of Improved Air Connectivity and Air Diplomacy on Diplomatic Ties

Before looking into what Air connectivity is and how it leads to diplomacy facilitating interdependence and collaboration, it is crucial to look into what air connectivity is exclusively. According to (Malaysian Aviation Commission, 2018), Air connectivity is an indicator of the performance of airline networks and airports. It provides a link between civil aviation tourism and trade. Globally, an estimated 54% of tourists travel by air both the direct and indirect connectivity are based on point-to-point passengers while the hub connectivity is based on the transiting passengers. Explaining, Direct connectivity refers to the direct connections offered by the origin airports (airport X) to the destination airports (airport Y) without stops and Indirect connectivity refers to the indirect connections offered by the origin airports (airport X) to the destination airports (airport Y) via one or more intermediate airports (including hub airports). Finally, Hub connectivity refers to connections offered through hub airports between origin and destination airports. Regardless of the form and type, it is evidenced that such connectivity is cardinal to the prosperity and fostering of the economy and commerce of any country. As mentioned clearly in the introduction no country lives in isolation and mutual interdependence has become an option less situations. This position is well evidenced by the air connectivity of Sri Lanka and India.

As stated (Joshi, 2023), “Air connectivity between Sri Lanka and India started decades ago when the first air service agreement between the two countries was signed in 1968. This allowed Indian airlines to operate flights from any point in India to any point in Sri Lanka”. India has always relied on various strategic policies including the “Neighborhood First Policy” as well as the “Act East Policy”. In addition, the recent discussion between Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi and Sri Lankan president Ranil Wickremesinghe mentioned about “resumption of flights between Jaffna and Chennai, the two sides will expand flights to Colombo and explore connectivity between Chennai and Trincomalee, Batticaloa and other destinations in Sri Lanka” as reported by Hindustan Times. The said air expansion in addition to land connectivity and energy connectivity, which were agreed upon, highlights how Sri Lanka and India are inextricably interlinked and continue to be in the Indian Ocean region. Moving on to the aspect of the military, when it comes to air diplomacy, how an Air Force conducts air diplomacy is a practice deeply rooted in history, and this is evident in various forms such as public, humanitarian, military, commercial, traditional, preventive, coercive, and deterrence diplomacy. Thus, by all these methods, the Air Force’s contribution serves as a facilitator of

regional cooperation. Utilizing air power possesses multifaceted advantages. As stipulated by, (Air Power and Diplomacy - haf.gr), the benefits are that it offers a viable method to achieve the desired outcome without involving any ground troops, thereby avoiding military casualties and causing any adverse public opinions, both domestically and internationally, associated with the presence and combat engagement of ground forces in foreign countries. Furthermore, its adaptability allows for a gradual escalation in crisis management, encompassing deterrence, force projection, or limited intervention, depending on the situation. This approach also minimizes the expenses associated with deploying ground forces, saving significant costs related to military resources and equipment. In addition, averting the deployment of ground forces prevents the complications that arise from such engagements. A perfect example of this is evident in the cases of Afghanistan and Iraq. Additionally, it can serve as a credible component of coercive diplomacy. To a certain extent, it demonstrates a scalable capability, as seen in instances like Kosovo, where allied air power was applied with graduated pressure to achieve strategic goals.

One of the key milestones which showcased diplomacy is, as stated by (Sibal, 2023) recently, India handed over the Indian Navy Dornier aircraft to Sri Lanka Air Force, the aircraft, a Dornier manufactured in India, signifies a significant achievement in the partnership between the two countries. This event marks the second Dornier aircraft provided to the Sri Lanka Air Force (SLAF) through a grant from the Indian Government. It takes the place of the original Indian Navy Dornier, which served for a year and was returned to India for scheduled maintenance after being ceremonially handed over to President Ranil Wickremesinghe exactly one year ago, on August 15, 2022. The introduction of the advanced Indian Navy Dornier Maritime Reconnaissance aircraft represents a substantial enhancement in Sri Lanka's surveillance capabilities. This new addition to the SLAF's current fleet is expected to significantly bolster the nation's security efforts, acting as a force multiplier. The aforementioned air connectivity and air diplomacy pave the way for regional coherence and interdependence. This can be explained through several headings.

1) Cultural

The enhanced travel from India to Sri Lanka increases people-to-people connections, which would lead to cultural, social and religious exchange, as exposure will be abundant. People in India will visit their families and friends in Sri Lanka and vice versa will strengthen family roots and deep-seated connections.

2) Crisis Management and Humanitarian Assistance

India acts as a first responder in crises such as natural disasters and humanitarian emergencies. In addition to the vibrant Maritime connectivity between the nations, air assistance is also rendered at times of crisis. This is evident in the case of the X-Press Pearl incident.

3) Economic Collaborations

Before mentioning the enhancement agreements to air connectivity, it is vital to look into the enormous support rendered by India to Sri Lanka during the economic crisis. As reported by (Pathi & and Mallawarachi, 2023), India offered vital financial and humanitarian aid exceeding \$4 billion to its struggling neighbour. This support, including provisions like food, medicine, and fuel, aimed to bring much-needed stability to the nation grappling with a substantial total debt of over \$83 billion, out of which \$41.5 billion was owed to foreign entities. Furthermore, India played a crucial role as the first creditor to express support for Sri Lanka's debt restructuring initiatives. This endorsement facilitated backing from the IMF, leading to the approval of a \$3 billion bailout package in March. When it comes to air connectivity, it is crucial to display the interests of Sri Lanka's Aviation Ministry, as reported by (Joshi, 2023) the Ministry has "invited Alliance Air to fly to more destinations in the country and increase the frequency of its existing services. The island nation's aviation minister Nimal Siripala de Silva has asked the airline to consider flying to Colombo's secondary airport Ratmalana, as a continuation of the same service to Jaffna." Therefore, it is understandable that with such further expansion, it will provide more room for business ventures, and talks between business leaders and investors. Consequentially, such increased trade would lead to economic and other benefits for both countries, including job creation, revenue generation, and a diversified market for products.

4) Defence and Security Sectors

Improved air connectivity facilitates strategic partnerships in areas such as Defence, security, and counterterrorism in matters such as supervision and surveillance. In addition to last year's donation of a Dornier 228 Maritime Patrol Aircraft to the Sri Lankan Air Force, this year another Indian Navy Dornier aircraft was officially handed over to the Sri Lanka Air Force (SLAF), which was mentioned afore. Such donations, (Presidential Secretariat,2023) "encompass a spectrum of activities such as monitoring and safeguarding Sri Lanka's airspace and exclusive economic zone through maritime and coastal surveillance operations, executing search and rescue missions, and monitoring and controlling maritime pollution.", which are part and parcel of security of the country. In addition, both Indian and Sri Lankan forces engage in joint exercises and training which human capital investment is.

In addition, engagement among high-level officials and military personnel amounts to strategic discussions and collaborative efforts, leading to enhanced security cooperation. These partnerships will also result in research and development shaped by decisions.

B. Challenges Faced by Sri Lanka and India

The rationale behind such investment is to ensure coherence, sustainability and security of the country as well as the nation. Both the countries just like other countries have the constant burden of protecting borders. However, this task has become arduous with the change in the threat landscape including the soft power threats, which are intangible in nature. Another challenge, which needs mutual assistance and joint efforts, is to counter terrorist and extremist activities, which are cross-border crimes as the name suggests involving various jurisdictions and multiple perpetrators. Another challenge is the need for regulatory alignment, where it is pivotal to harmonize aviation regulations, including safety, customs, immigration, and air traffic management, for smooth operations. Another crucial matter is infrastructure development and maintenance. Another mutual challenge is the Environmental Impact. The reason is that with the increase in air connectivity, carbon emissions become higher as well. Thus, since these challenges are mutual it is crucial to address them jointly and strengthen individual initiatives as well.

C. Regional Cooperation and National Security

Air connectivity and air diplomacy lead to better networking which facilitates cooperation and security including militaristic as well as other domains such as economy and rights of people. Elaborating, enhanced technology, and equipment are proactive measures against an enemy and contingencies. For example, in case of an air strike or maritime disaster having the required power or additional support is essential to defend own rights and ensure human life respectively. With enhanced air connectivity, tourism occurs and job creation also takes place. Employment opportunities pave the right to livelihood, which is a right of people, which is human security. In addition, direct investments and other economic enhancements supplement economic security. In addition, political decisions by the leaders strengthen international relations and shape the country's foreign decision-making roadmap.

Yet, it is crucial to accept the matter since the world is globalized and countries opt for regional and extra-regional linkages. There are controversies, conspiracy theories, feelings of intimidation, insecurity as well and disinformation taking place when countries engage with one another. A primary benefactor or an investor can view the relationship with similar power as a challenge as well

as a threat. Due to these power competitions and geopolitical dynamics, there is an undeniable need to balance the power struggle. Sri Lanka as a country with a non-aligned foreign policy has the task of the hurdle of balancing interests.

V. CONCLUSION

The air connectivity and diplomatic collaboration between Sri Lanka and India depicts a significant advancement in fostering bilateral relations, economic partnerships, and regional stability leading to security. Enhanced air connectivity, by expanded flight services, not only facilitates smoother travel but also serves as a symbol of strengthened ties of culture, religion and economy. This enhanced connectivity encourages cultural exchange and economic growth, strengthening trade, commerce, tourism, and investment. Further, it acts as a stabilizing force regionally, fostering dialogue and cooperation in areas such as security, counter-terrorism, and disaster management which are matters of mutual interests. From a national security perspective, continuous air connectivity enables swift movement of key personnel, intelligence sharing, and coordinated responses to potential threats, allowing to respond promptly. This collaborative effort strengthens the security apparatus, making it more responsive to emerging challenges. Although challenges exist, joint efforts, flexibility, and mutual commitment are key to overcoming these hurdles, paving the way for lasting peace, security, and prosperity for both nations and region as a whole.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the developments in air connectivity and diplomatic ties between Sri Lanka and India, nations must invest in sustaining and expanding these joint efforts further. Strengthening air connectivity by increasing the number of destinations and flight frequencies should be complemented with robust mechanism which aimed at enhancing cultural exchange, trade facilitation, and investment promotion, by fostering deeper economic integration. It is also vital, prioritizing joint regional stability initiatives, such as collaborative approaches to security, counter-terrorism, and disaster management, is crucial in bolstering resilience against emerging threats. Addressing challenges related to infrastructure and regulations requires sustained efforts and cooperation. In addition to these efforts, both nations need to counter disinformation campaigns, promoting accurate and reliable information to ensure public understanding and trust. Moreover, given the complexities of power struggles in the region, both countries must maintain a balanced approach. Sri Lanka, in particular, should uphold a non-aligned policy, safeguarding its sovereignty and independence while actively engaging in diplomatic relations.

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United Nations Charter

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