

India's Strategic Interests in Sri Lanka

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The regional powers and strategic framework provides a systematic method to evaluate how the relative strength and behaviour of regional powers influence small states. In this regard, scholars have acknowledged that 'leadership' is only one of the qualities that a regional power can display and that these countries can pursue different strategies in dealing with their smaller neighbours. This study applies the framework to India as a South Asian regional power and to Sri Lanka as a small state in the South Asian subcontinent. In this broader context, the central research problem of this study has focused its attention to analyse why India's major strategic concern shifted to Sri Lanka's long term peace and stability during the post-cold war period.

The research problem of the study has been examined by using the Concept of Leadership and Custodianship presented by Derrick Frazier and Robert Stewart-Ingersoll to build up a theoretical framework on regional powers' security interests and their role in the particular region. In this study, standard research tools including descriptive and analytical methods have been used to analyse primary and secondary sources.

Being a geographically proximate state of India and because of its unique geographic position in the Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka assumes a great strategic importance to India. Some recent studies are more helpful when it comes to making sense of India's strategic approach towards Sri Lanka. In a realistic manner, three major factors influencing India's strategic relations with Sri Lanka are security, economy and the shared ethnicity of Tamils living in southern India and in northern and eastern Sri Lanka. The end of terrorism in Sri Lanka has given rise to new opportunities for improved strategic relationships between India and Sri Lanka. But political consolidation and growing Chinese and Pakistani presence in Sri Lanka have restricted India's strategic leverages in Sri Lanka. The study indicates that India's impact on Sri Lanka is limited because of its failure to play leadership and custodianship roles. Apart from this, the declining of Sri Lanka's strategic importance to India reflects much stronger Indo-U.S. relations. During the post cold war period, India and the U.S. coordinated their respective strategic policies on Sri Lanka. In keeping with the current developments, India's strategic interest in Sri Lanka has been enlarged to protect and project India's security and economic interests by building strong bonds with Sri Lanka. Further, India's strategic strength dictates that in its own interest Sri Lanka should sustain its friendly relations with India. India also appears to have realised the need to build a more positive relationship with its island neighbour for the same reasons of mutual interests. In a nut shell, after the cold war, India's strategic interests in Sri Lanka have shifted from a geo-strategic power balance to pragmatic security considerations.