

Where clashes of geopolitics, politics and economic interests intersect

Discontent over saleA protest in Colombo in February against the proposed sale of stake in Hambantota port.AFPISHARA S. KODIKARA

Home to about six lakh people and investments worth billions of dollars, the district of Hambantota, along Sri Lanka's southeastern coast, is currently witness to at least three clashes.

At the geopolitical level, the competing strategic interests of China and India are no secret. From being almost invisible to becoming the most-watched district in Sri Lanka, Hambantota's image makeover foretells Sri Lanka's pivotal role in the Indian Ocean Region, more so after Colombo sold majority of its stake in the Hambantota port to China.

India in turn has offered to run the nearby Mattala airport, famous for its emptiness. While there is no final word yet, New Delhi is exploring options of using the airport facility to manage its air traffic or possibly run a flying school.

Also watching from India's side are countries such as the U.S. and Japan. They share India's concern over the heightened presence of China, which has pumped in billions of dollars into infrastructure projects in post-war Sri Lanka. China sees the port town as a valuable transshipment hub in 'One Belt One Road'.

In domestic politics, it is the constituency where the political futures of Sajith Premadasa and Namal Rajapaksa clash. Their fathers, both former Presidents — Ranasinghe Premadasa and Mahinda Rajapaksa — rose to power with a strong rural backing.

Living in uncertainty

The third clash, which is the least apparent but the most telling, is that between the people of Hambantota, the animals inhabiting the district and the development that is threatening to shake its ecosystem.

"Our lives have remained uncertain from the time of the tsunami in 2004," says G. Milani Harim, an aspiring politician who plans to contest in the local polls in 2018. "People are in perpetual fear, worrying when their land might be gazetted for development activity," she said, about the predominant fear of farmers and fisher-folk who constitute over 90% of the district's population.

Clearly, concern over land is on top of people's minds. With forest cover diminishing in the wake of development, locals point to an increase in incidence of human-elephant conflict — often leading to destruction of agricultural fields, damage to houses, and, at times, injuries or death to humans encountering the tusker. At least 25 people in the district died between 2010 to 2017 succumbing to wild elephant attacks, local newspaper *The Sunday Times* reported. As many as 57 elephants got killed in the same period.

However, Prithiviraj Fernando, Chairman of the NGO Centre of Conservation and Research, argued that there is scope for both conservation and development. Nearly 6,000 elephants in Sri Lanka are found in 62% of the country's expanse. "Of those, 70% live outside national parks and that is because elephants can coexist with humans," he said, countering popular anxiety. In his opinion, planned development where elephant paths are clearly demarcated with electric fencing can make a difference.

Development question

On the one side are farmers, fishermen and community leaders like Ms. Harim who remain sceptical of the huge projects surrounding them. On the other hand are local businessmen who are counting heavily on the mega development and the investment they hope it will bring.

“It does not matter if the investment comes from China, India or America, we want businesses in our district to benefit,” said K.A. Hemantha Padmalal, a former president of the Hambantota Chamber of Commerce, an organisation with representatives from the 4,000-strong local business community. India being “like a brother” could invest in the local agriculture and information technology sectors and boost them, Mr. Padmalal said. “India can also set up an automobile assembly facility, considering that car manufacturers in India transship their vehicles through the port,” he added.

Ms. Harim sees development differently. In her view, it should speak to the needs of an entire family. “Be it education, health, or access to jobs — all these should improve. For that, development should be holistic, not merely about infrastructure projects or businesses. At present, we can see the development, but not feel it.”

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