Beyond Economic Enclaves: The Indian Ocean as Shared Heritage

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Abstract

This article examines how Sri Lanka's transformation from successful maritime hub to indebted peripheral state reflects the contradictions of infrastructure-driven development that systematically undermines inclusive connectivity principles. The 2022-2023 economic crisis exemplifies how mega-projects like the Colombo Port City create 'economic enclaves' that exclude local communities while generating dependency relationships serving external interests. Drawing on archaeologist Sudarshan Seneviratne's scholarship and Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) leadership (2023), it presents heritage-centred connectivity as a viable alternative that preserves community autonomy while enabling beneficial regional exchange. Grounded in Sanjay Chaturvedi's (2023) 'Indianoceanness' concept, this approach transcends binary great power alignments through cooperative maritime regionalism anchored in shared cultural foundations, offering sustainable development pathways that honour historical patterns of oceanic prosperity.

Key words: Indianoceanness, Infrastructure, Indian Ocean Rim Association, Colombo Port City, Sri Lanka.

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Introduction

The ruins tell a story that contemporary approaches to development rarely hear. Across Sri Lanka's coastline, from the ghostly emptiness of Mattala Airport to the gleaming potential of the Colombo Port City, mega-infrastructure projects stand as monuments to a fundamental misunderstanding of what makes places thrive. These are not failures of engineering or finance, but symptoms of a deeper rupture—the systematic abandonment of principles that once made Sri Lanka a beacon of Indian Ocean connectivity. For over two millennia, it flourished precisely because it understood itself as what archaeologist Sudharshan Seneviratne (2023a, p. 11) calls a 'transoceanic portal'—a space where the monsoon winds carried not just goods and people, but ideas, technologies, and ways of being that enriched all who participated in its networks. The country's prosperity emerged from what Seneviratne (2023a, p. 1) terms 'nurtured reciprocity': patterns of exchange that preserved local autonomy while enabling mutual flourishing across vast oceanic distances.

Sri Lanka's devastating economic crisis of 2022-2023 represents the predictable endpoint of development approaches that inverted these time-tested principles. Where traditional Indian Ocean networks enhanced the country's role as an autonomous hub, contemporary infrastructure projects attempt its transformation into a dependent periphery serving external strategic and economic interests (Kelegama, 2025; Pal, 2021; Wignaraja et al., 2020). The fundamental misalignment between Sri Lanka's heritage of inclusive connectivity and today's exclusionary development explains not only how the crisis emerged despite massive investment, but why recovery requires returning to cooperative approaches that build upon, rather than replace, existing cultural foundations.

Against this backdrop of failed infrastructure-driven development, heritage-centred connectivity offers a fundamentally different understanding of how oceanic prosperity emerges and is sustained. This approach, as developed through Seneviratne's archaeological scholarship and diplomatic practice, emphasises building on existing cultural foundations and community capabilities rather than imposing external infrastructure, preserving local autonomy while enabling beneficial regional exchange through shared oceanic patrimony (Seneviratne 2023a; 2023b; 2023c; 2007; 2019). Rather than assuming that technical systems generate social cooperation, heritage-centred connectivity recognises that sustainable technical systems emerge from robust social foundations and patterns of exchange that enhance rather than subordinate community decision-making. Seneviratne's 2023 leadership of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)—the regional intergovernmental organisation that brings together 23 Indian Ocean countries to promote cooperation in maritime security, trade facilitation, and sustainable development—during Sri Lanka's 2023-2025 Chair ship provides concrete evidence for how such alternative approaches can be implemented in practice. His advocacy for regional cooperation based on shared heritage rather than external strategic frameworks demonstrates the practical viability of what Sanjay Chaturvedi (2023)

terms ‘Indianoceanness’—the distinctive patterns of cooperative maritime regionalism that have historically characterised the Indian Ocean space.

This commentary examines how Seneviratne’s integration of archaeological insights with contemporary diplomatic practice offers systematic alternatives to binary great power alignments while addressing challenges including climate change, economic inequality, and geopolitical fragmentation. It draws on his scholarly work and IORA leadership, supplemented by interviews with bureaucrats, civil society activists, and development practitioners, alongside policy document analysis of contemporary infrastructure projects. The argument advances understanding of alternative development paradigms by demonstrating how archaeological perspectives can inform contemporary policy frameworks, challenging infrastructure-centric approaches to regional integration, and providing empirical evidence for heritage-based economic cooperation and sustainable development pathways that honour rather than erase historical patterns of successful oceanic exchange.

The Infrastructure Trap: How Development Produced Crisis

The transformation of Sri Lanka from a historically successful maritime hub into an indebted peripheral state reveals how contemporary development paradigms can systematically undermine the very foundations they claim to strengthen. This paradox becomes particularly visible when examining how projects designed to establish Sri Lanka as a ‘massively important hub of the world’ have instead severed the country from both its own communities and the regional networks that historically sustained its prosperity (Wijeratne, 2015). The aspiration itself—to make Colombo ‘a global hub on par with Singapore, Dubai and Hong Kong’ as expressed by a senior civil servant—reveals how seductive comparisons can obscure fundamental differences in how connectivity actually functions across different historical and geographical contexts. The critical distinction lies not in the scale of ambition, but in the underlying logic of development. Where Sri Lanka’s historical maritime networks operated through what Seneviratne (2023a) describes as patterns that enhanced local autonomy while enabling beneficial exchange, contemporary infrastructure projects operate through principles that systematically invert these relationships. Rather than building upon existing social foundations and community capabilities, mega-projects create what can best be understood as economic enclaves: spaces that exclude local communities while generating dependency relationships that subordinate rather than enhance regional cooperation.

Consider the Colombo Port City, promoted as the crown jewel of Sri Lanka’s infrastructural transformation. Launched in 2014 by then-President Mahinda Rajapaksa and Chinese President Xi Jinping, the US$14 billion project involves the unprecedented reclamation of 269 hectares of land from the Indian Ocean, and is positioned as a transformative multi-currency Special Economic Zone spanning 6.3 million square metres, promising world-class amenities from luxury residential

developments to international educational facilities and financial centres that will supposedly accelerate economic recovery and establish Sri Lanka as a regional leader (Ceylon Today, 2023; Port City Colombo, n.d.). Despite its grand ambitions, the Port City paradoxically operates through systematic disconnection from Sri Lankan society. This disconnection manifested from the project's earliest phases, which involved displacing diverse low-income urban communities while generating significant environmental and land appropriation concerns (Apostolopoulou, 2021; Abeyasekera et al., 2019; Perera 2016; Ruwanpura et al. 2019; Ruwanpura, Rowe et al., 2020; Ruwanpura, Chan et al., 2020; Nagaraj, 2016; Radicati, 2020; Camisani, 2018). Deputy Managing Director Thulci Aluwihare's description of the Port City as an economically 'ring-fenced' space where 'capital required for developing Port City or for doing business in Port City must be raised outside Sri Lanka' reveals the deliberate insulation from local conditions that destroys the social foundations cooperative connectivity requires. The institutional architecture supporting such exclusionary development reveals how contemporary infrastructure approaches fundamentally restructure state authority to serve external interests.

The establishment of the Colombo Port City Economic Commission marks the institutionalisation of this disconnection. The Commission received extraordinary powers through the Port City Act No. 11 of May 2021, including authority over investment supervision, land leasing, and environmental standards, being appointed the sole governing body responsible for regulating and overseeing the development and administration of the project. This unique position leads them to function as, infrastructure brokers or elite actors who 'operate not at the periphery but at the nexus of state power and spatial production' (Kelegama, 2025). Their power is exercised through three interlocking mechanisms: the material transformation of physical territory through infrastructure development, the crafting of exceptional legal jurisdictions that transcend conventional state authority, and the engineering of specialised economic regulatory regimes. They function as a 'single-window facilitator' that 'handles licenses, registrations, and approvals for businesses operating within the zone, streamlining processes and attracting global investments through a centralised regulatory framework' while operating 'partially outside traditional state structures' (Kelegama, 2025).

This represents a sophisticated departure from democratic governance, as these presidentially-appointed commissioners 'exercise unprecedented authority over territorial governance' while crafting 'institutional architectures that transcend conventional governance frameworks while maintaining strategic connections to state power' (Kelegama, 2025). Unlike traditional development brokers who operate in marginal or liminal spaces (Jensen, 2018; Goodhand and Walton, 2022), these infrastructure brokers orchestrate systems where 'state power is strategically fragmented and reconfigured to accommodate global capital flows while maintaining the appearance of unified territorial control' (Kelegama, 2025). This concentration of decision-making power in unelected bodies appointed by the President, systematically excludes local communities from governance while creating regulatory frameworks that prioritise external geopolitical interests over community development. As a former Commissioner declared, 'We are really

working with, and for, the global market here.' These regulatory innovations represent more than administrative efficiency; they constitute fundamental departures from conventional territorial governance.

The Commission's creation of multi-currency zones and regulatory exemptions exemplifies what Ong (2006, p. 193) refers to as 'graduated sovereignty', or systems where states fragment their territories, offering different forms of citizenship and regulation within the same national territory. Such regulatory exemptions transform the Port City into a potential haven for money laundering and other financial crimes, effectively creating a parallel financial system operating outside normal Sri Lankan legal frameworks (CPA, 2021); exactly the kind of elite capture that heritage-centred connectivity approaches seek to prevent. This illustrates how infrastructure development fragments rather than integrates oceanic space. Where traditional maritime networks fostered what Seneviratne (2023a; 2023d) terms 'cosmopolitan' port cities, contemporary projects create 'jurisdictional bubbles' (Kelegama, 2025) designed to insulate international investors from local economic and social conditions.

This systematic privileging of technical systems over social infrastructure explains why infrastructure projects promising prosperity have instead produced crisis and dependency. The fundamental irony is that projects promoted as creating a 'world-class city' to facilitate Sri Lanka becoming 'like Singapore' as claimed by a former Commissioner, systematically fail to create genuine connectivity. The Hambantota Port located 'on the world's busiest shipping lane and the world's second busiest oil transit chokepoint' (Carrai 2019, p. 1068), remains severely underutilised years after completion. The Mattala Airport—once touted as enabling Sri Lanka to become a regional aviation hub—sits largely empty (Shepard, 2016). The Port City itself operates as an economic enclave, physically and legally separated from Sri Lankan society, with its ultimate usefulness to the country 'very doubtful, or maybe even impossible to achieve, if we look at other examples that promised greatness,' as claimed by a civil society activist. As Spencer (2014, p. 12) writes, such failed infrastructure projects across the island represent 'high-capital project[s] of little immediate utility to the people who live in [their] shadow', while presenting themselves as superficial 'gateway[s] to the world around, which turn[s] out to be too hazardous for anyone to use.' Radicati (2017) calls this 'failed hubness', as these ambitious projects remain disconnected from the very communities they purport to serve.

The broader strategic context of aspiring to be a world-class city or Indian Ocean hub compounds these problems by reducing oceanic space to what resembles strategic chessboards where small states risk becoming pawns rather than autonomous agents (Baruah, 2024). Contemporary geopolitical discourse increasingly subsumes the Indian Ocean within Indo-Pacific frameworks that approach the region as a 'strategic structure' designed to 'contain' China's rise through military alliances like AUKUS—the Australia-UK-US security pact (Singh and Marwah, 2023, in Chaturvedi, 2023, p. 207) that could potentially 'intensify tension in the region' (Chaturvedi, 2023, p. 206; Kurt et al., 2023). These approaches directly contradict the cooperative vision of regional development that

heritage-centred connectivity enables. Projects that promise to make Sri Lanka a 'massively important city in the region' as claimed by a Commissioner, instead reproduce what Ghertner (2015) describes as world-class city aspirations built around aesthetic principles rather than solid quantitative benchmarks, whilst systematically destroying the social foundations necessary for genuine connectivity.

The core problem with such infrastructure-driven development lies not solely in technical oversights, environmental impact assessment failures, or debt repayment challenges, but in the systematic neglect of the social relationships and institutional arrangements that heritage-centred connectivity identifies as essential for sustainable cooperation. Development strategies that equate connectivity with physical infrastructure consistently overlook the relational foundations—social, cultural, and institutional—that make such infrastructure meaningful and functional. This disconnect between infrastructural promises and the crises they often generate reveals a deeper structural failure. Projects framed as engines of national progress frequently marginalise the very communities they claim to serve. As one civil servant noted: 'The Port City is very much a Colombo-centric development, and it ignores regional disparities. Will people from Jaffna come visit it? No. And even in Colombo, the question is who does it cater for? Only the top 2 per cent will even dare to go inside!' A former Commissioner reinforced this exclusionary vision, admitting: 'We will ensure that people flying into Colombo can directly come to the Port City and leave without even having to deal with the business of Colombo.' Such remarks illustrate the degree to which contemporary infrastructure projects fail to foster inclusive connectivity, instead designing spaces that bypass both urban realities and wider regional integration. This systematic privileging of external capital over local participation exemplifies a broader pattern that extends beyond individual projects to encompass institutional arrangements that fragment democratic governance itself.

At the rhetorical level, ambitions to transform Colombo into a world-class Indian Ocean hub—comparable to Singapore or Dubai—promise national uplift. Yet in practice, these aspirations remain largely detached from serious consideration of how such transformation might benefit the broader Sri Lankan population. Development becomes an exercise in international spectacle rather than inclusive, equitable growth (Kelegama, forthcoming; 2023). This divergence is especially stark when compared to Seneviratne's understanding of connectivity, which emphasised cultural processes embedded in community institutions. Contemporary infrastructure-led approaches, by contrast, privilege external capital and technocratic expertise over local knowledge and capability. The result is a set of dependency relations that fragment rather than integrate oceanic space, undermining the very autonomy and mutual benefit that heritage-centred connectivity seeks to preserve. It is this systemic displacement of community-centred processes by capital-intensive models that explains why massive infrastructure investment has often led not to prosperity, but to crisis and disempowerment.

Heritage-centred Connectivity as an Alternative

Against this landscape of disconnection, Seneviratne's (2023a; 2023d; 2007; 2019) archaeological insights, and diplomatic practice, reveal alternative pathways rooted in deeper understandings of how oceanic connectivity actually functions. His scholarship reveals that the Indian Ocean's historical prosperity emerged not from centralised control or economic extraction, but from distributed networks that celebrated diversity while building shared capacity through patterns of exchange that facilitated beneficial interaction without requiring communities to surrender their cultural foundations or economic independence. This understanding of historical connectivity demonstrates that sustainable regional cooperation emerges not from centralised control or economic extraction, but from distributed networks that celebrate diversity while building shared capacity. In addition, Seneviratne (2023a, p. 10) emphasised how 'most IOR (Indian Ocean Region) countries have been related to each other for over 4000 years through trade, religion, language, culture and political connectivity. Almost all IOR countries also had painful experiences under colonialism, which is a shared history and sentiment.' This understanding recognises oceanic space as cultural commons, where diverse communities developed sophisticated systems of exchange that preserved local autonomy while enabling beneficial interaction (Hofmeyr, 2022); fundamentally different from contemporary approaches that create hierarchical relationships serving external strategic priorities.

The practical application of this understanding appeared in Seneviratne's vision for IORA as a platform for regional cooperation that could preserve community autonomy while facilitating beneficial exchange. He believed that 'the IORA countries form an interconnected transcontinental crescent in a unique fashion. Its physical entities extend from East Africa across South Asia to Southeast Asia, forming an unbroken cultural zone. Transoceanic connectivity prevailed across this region from the pre-historic period' (Seneviratne, 2023a, p. 10-11) As a result, during his IORA leadership, Sri Lanka presented the theme 'Strengthening Regional Architecture: Reinforcing Indian Ocean identity', which emphasised regional cooperation based on shared heritage rather than external strategic frameworks that subordinate regional autonomy to great power competition. This vision directly challenged approaches that frame oceanic space as a series of competitive zones designed to serve external strategic and economic interests. Scholars such as Rumley and Doyle (2020) argue that dominant Indo-Pacific discourses tend to simplify complex maritime histories and interactions by recasting them into arenas of great-power rivalry, thereby obscuring local agency and cultural interdependence. Similarly, Gaens, Sinkkonen, and Ruokamo (2023) highlight how competing connectivity strategies in the Indo-Pacific often reduce the concept of connectivity to infrastructure and logistics corridors, privileging geopolitical influence over relational, community-based forms of cooperation.

This approach demonstrated practical alternatives to binary great power alignments, and dependency relationships that infrastructure developments create through external capital imposition and elite capture. Where infrastructure projects

such as the Port City operate through concentration of power in unelected bodies while systematically excluding local communities (Kelegama, 2025), Seneviratne advocated for inclusive approaches that preserve community autonomy while enabling beneficial exchange. His emphasis on 'recognising, reviving, and protecting traditional food preservation systems, pre-modern craft practices, ayurveda medicinal information and practice, and pre-modern nautical crafts' represented practical frameworks for what he termed an 'Indigenous Heritage Economy', or a systematic alternative to infrastructure-driven development that built on, rather than replaced, existing cultural foundations and community capabilities (Seneviratne, 2023a, p.12). His vision for an Indian Ocean Academy/University in Sri Lanka demonstrated how heritage-centred connectivity could address contemporary challenges while preserving community autonomy through institutional arrangements that build on rather than replace existing capabilities. He argued that such institutions should provide 'Cosmopolitan Education' that would be 'grooming the Indian Ocean Rim student for global citizenship' while challenging colonial knowledge systems that prioritize external expertise over local capabilities (Seneviratne, 2023c, p.4). This represented practical frameworks for reversing the systematic privileging of external expertise that infrastructure development institutionalises while creating dependency relationships.

Most significantly, Seneviratne's conception of the blue economy operates on fundamentally different principles than infrastructure-driven extraction. While blue economy is broadly defined as the sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods, and job creation while preserving the health of marine ecosystems (World Bank, 2021), Ong (2020) critiques dominant marine development models as 'blue territorialisation'—the expansion of sovereignty through ocean zoning and infrastructure aimed at external interests. In contrast, Seneviratne (2023a, p.16) envisioned blue economy development as promoting smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth within the Indian Ocean region, anchored in community capacity-building and sustainable resource management, rather than the imposition of external capital that fosters dependency. His vision emphasised that blue economy development should include 'appropriate programmes for the sustainable harnessing of ocean resources; research and development; developing relevant sectors of oceanography; stock assessment of marine resources; introducing marine aquaculture, deep sea/long line fishing and biotechnology; and human resource development'—demonstrating how contemporary challenges could be addressed through frameworks that build on rather than replace existing traditional knowledge systems.

This contrast between heritage-centred and infrastructure-driven approaches becomes especially evident in the divergent understandings of partnership they promote—each reflecting fundamentally different visions of how oceanic cooperation should operate. External powers often present countries like Sri Lanka with binary geopolitical choices that undermine local autonomy. During his official visit to Colombo in October 2020, then-U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo urged Sri Lanka to align with American democratic values and the broader vision of a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific', explicitly framing China as a 'predator' and positioning the

United States as a 'friend and partner' to the region (Chandrasena, 2020). Around the same time, China's top diplomat Yang Jiechi, also visiting in an official capacity, encouraged Sri Lanka to deepen its strategic involvement in the Belt and Road Initiative, highlighting expanded infrastructure and maritime connectivity as central to China-Sri Lanka relations (Xavier, 2021). In contrast to these externally driven models, heritage-centred approaches advocate for autonomous agenda-setting and the preservation of community-level decision-making. As Seneviratne (2019) asserted: 'The region itself does not require third party peace merchants from outside the region or their subalterns in the region to educate us on our shared legacy and the value of mutual respect for each other.' The systematic failure of these binary frameworks to address Sri Lanka's development needs reveals the urgent requirement for alternative approaches that transcend great power competition while preserving community autonomy. It is precisely this challenge—how to construct regional cooperation that neither subordinates local interests to external strategic imperatives nor fragments oceanic space into competing zones—that Sanjay Chaturvedi's concept of 'Indianoceanness' directly addresses.

Toward 'Indianoceanness': A New Cartography of Cooperation

Sanjay Chaturvedi's (2023) concept of 'Indianoceanness' provides the theoretical framework for reversing Sri Lanka's crisis through return to heritage-centred connectivity that preserves community autonomy while facilitating beneficial regional interaction. Chaturvedi defines Indian oceanness as pursuit of 'a cooperative, inclusive and innovative "maritime regionalism" anchored in a 'distinct identity' that enables sustainable ocean development through 'cooperation across multiple sectors and scales' (2023, p. 208). This vision offers a systematic alternative to infrastructure-driven development that fragments oceanic space by recognising the Indian Ocean's historical patterns of inclusive connection that build on rather than replace existing cultural foundations. The framework emphasises the Indian Ocean's distinctive character as a maritime space where 'cooperation across multiple sectors and scales' can 'facilitate a new maritime regionalism' based on 'an open, rule-based, inclusive, peaceful and socially just maritime order for the Indian Ocean and the wider Indo-Pacific space' where 'there are no winners and losers per se' (Chaturvedi, 2023, p. 205). This approach directly contrasts with Indo-Pacific strategic discourse by emphasising heritage-centred inclusive connectivity over strategic partnerships, environmental harmony based on monsoon systems over military competition, and people-to-people exchange over state-centric arrangements that reduce oceanic space to strategic territory. As Acharya (2024) notes, Indo-Pacific represents a concept built by strategists that may increase, rather than decrease, regional tensions by fragmenting oceanic space into competing zones of influence serving external rather than regional interests.

Seneviratne's practical work through IORA demonstrates how Chaturvedi's theoretical framework of 'Indianoceanness' can be implemented to address contemporary challenges while preserving community autonomy. This approach

builds on a historical understanding of the Indian Ocean as an interconnected space where 'commercial, cultural, and political networks transcended the boundaries of territorial states' through monsoon-driven cycles that created rhythms of cooperation fundamentally different from contemporary infrastructure approaches. Vink (2007, p. 52, as cited in Sivasundaram, 2017) characterises this oceanic space by its 'porousness, permeability, connectedness, flexibility, and the openness of spatial and temporal boundaries and borders'—precisely the kind of regional cooperation that contemporary infrastructure development systematically destroys through exclusive arrangements and dependency relationships. Where Chaturvedi (2023, p. 206) theorises the need for 'unity in diversity' that enables mapping 'commonalities and convergences in apparently diverse national positions', Seneviratne's emphasis on shared heritage transcending 'borders and boundaries of sovereignty' offers practical pathways for implementation. This vision is further supported by Bose's (2006) 'Hundred Horizons' framework, which emphasises 'organic unity' and 'common historic destiny' among Indian Ocean peoples, challenging frameworks that reduce oceanic space to strategic competition and economic extraction.

Ray's (2020) UNESCO World Heritage framework provides additional practical support for this approach, arguing that heritage creates platforms for 'building bridges and collaborative networks' across Indian Ocean littoral countries through 'transnational heritage' and 'cultural routes across the Ocean.' This heritage-centred methodology emphasises collaborative research and cultural connectivity over infrastructure competition, offering a concrete model for regional cooperation that preserves community autonomy while facilitating beneficial exchange. Rather than fragmenting oceanic space into competing zones serving external interests, this approach builds on existing cultural foundations and community capabilities to create shared frameworks for cooperation.

Seneviratne's (2023a, p. 12) advocacy for 'repatriation of stolen Artifact and objects of Memory' demonstrates the practical implications of Indianoceanness, representing a systematic challenge to extractive systems that concentrate decision-making power in external institutions while depleting local communities. He observes that 'Artifacts looted during the Colonial Period and the current global market (collection and display by individuals and overseas museums) continue at a greater intensity. Supporting member states with digital information and expertise on the repatriation of such objects is critically vital' (Seneviratne, 2023a, p. 12). This approach to cultural repatriation embodies broader principles of reversing extraction relationships and restoring community control over resources and governance. For Sri Lanka specifically, this model offers a pathway to recover from crises produced by infrastructure approaches that systematically subordinated local interests to external priorities. Rather than perpetuating dependency relationships, cultural repatriation creates frameworks for cooperation that strengthen rather than undermine local autonomy. Ray's (2020) UNESCO World Heritage framework complements this vision by demonstrating how heritage creates platforms for 'building bridges and collaborative networks" across Indian Ocean littoral countries through 'transnational heritage' and 'cultural routes across the Ocean.' This

heritage-centred methodology prioritises collaborative research and cultural connectivity over infrastructure competition, building on existing cultural foundations and community capabilities rather than fragmenting oceanic space into competing zones serving external interests. Together, these approaches offer concrete models for regional cooperation that preserve community autonomy while facilitating beneficial exchange through shared frameworks rooted in historical and cultural connections.

Small states increasingly confront the false binary of great power alignment that transforms oceanic space into competitive terrain serving external strategic imperatives. Asanga Abeyagoonasekera (as cited in Xavier, 2021) challenges this paradigm, asserting that 'A relatively small island like Sri Lanka should not be pressured to choose between great powers,' advocating instead for engagement 'with middle powers like Japan, Australia, and the EU' while 'adhering to the values we have treasured in our foreign policy such as our commitment to the Law of the Sea, the Indian Ocean zone for peace, a rules-based order, and democracy.' This articulation resonates with both Chaturvedi's conceptual architecture of Indianoceanness and Seneviratne's praxis-oriented heritage methodology, which locate authentic alternatives within shared oceanic patrimony rather than imposed strategic configurations. The historical precedent proves instructive: pre-colonial Indian Ocean networks achieved remarkable durability not through hegemonic control or extractive mechanisms, but by cultivating exchange modalities that sustained local autonomy through collaborative frameworks enabling productive engagement across cultural and political differences. Such historical configurations offer profound implications for contemporary diplomatic challenges demanding unprecedented multilateral coordination without compromising participant agency. The emergent emphasis on frameworks that communities 'shape, agree to, and propose' embodies this principle of heritage-based cooperation over externally imposed arrangements, creating viable pathways for meaningful regional engagement that transcends the limitations of great power competition while preserving the cultural foundations essential to sustainable cooperation.

Conclusion

The systematic transformation of Sri Lanka from a historically autonomous maritime hub into an indebted peripheral state illustrates the profound contradictions inherent in contemporary development paradigms. The country's economic crisis of 2022-2023 represents not an aberrant failure but the predictable culmination of approaches that fundamentally inverted the principles of inclusive connectivity that sustained oceanic prosperity for millennia. The contrast between heritage-centred and infrastructure-driven connectivity reveals itself most starkly in their divergent approaches to sovereignty and community participation. Infrastructure projects like the Colombo Port City, despite promising regional integration, systematically exclude local communities through 'jurisdictional bubbles' that insulate international capital from Sri Lankan social and economic conditions. The creation of the Colombo Port City Economic Commission, with its

extraordinary powers exercised 'partially outside traditional state structures', exemplifies the emergence of 'infrastructure brokers' who fragment state authority to accommodate global capital flows while maintaining superficial territorial control. This represents a sophisticated departure from democratic governance that directly contradicts the inclusive decision-making processes that heritage-centred connectivity requires.

This fragmentation of democratic governance through infrastructure development stands in direct opposition to the inclusive frameworks that Chaturvedi's (2023) 'Indianoceanness' advocates. Where infrastructure projects concentrate decision-making power in unelected commissions serving external capital, Chaturvedi's theoretical framework envisions cooperative maritime regionalism anchored in shared cultural foundations that preserve rather than undermine local autonomy. Seneviratne's practical implementation of this vision through IORA demonstrates the viability of such alternatives, positioning heritage-centred connectivity as a systematic challenge to binary great power alignments that reduce oceanic space to strategic territory. His emphasis on 'shared culture and heritage transcending borders and boundaries of sovereignty' reveals how regional cooperation can emerge from rather than override local capabilities and priorities, offering concrete pathways beyond the dependency relationships that infrastructure development systematically creates (Seneviratne, 2023, p. 11).

The choice between continuing infrastructure-driven development and returning to heritage-centred connectivity is ultimately epistemological, reflecting fundamentally different understandings of how prosperity emerges and is sustained. Infrastructure approaches assume that technical systems generate social cooperation, while heritage-centred connectivity recognises that sustainable technical systems emerge from robust social foundations. The systematic failure of infrastructure projects to deliver promised connectivity despite massive investment validates the archaeological insight that oceanic prosperity requires what Seneviratne (2023) described as patterns of exchange that enhance rather than subordinate local autonomy. Sri Lanka's path forward requires abandoning the seductive but destructive aspiration to become 'like Singapore or Dubai' through infrastructure replication, recognising instead that sustainable regional integration emerges from building on rather than replacing existing cultural foundations and community capabilities. In an era of intensifying climate emergency and great power competition, heritage-centred connectivity offers pathways toward regional cooperation that honour the historical wisdom embedded in successful patterns of Indian Ocean exchange. Sri Lanka's recovery—and the broader project of sustainable oceanic development—depends on returning to approaches that understand prosperity as emerging from social cooperation rather than technical systems, community participation rather than external expertise, and inclusive connectivity rather than exclusionary enclaves serving strategic imperatives external to the communities they purport to benefit.

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