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Docking Geopolitics of the Indian Ocean Region by Chinese Spy Ship 'Yuan Wang 5'

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Image Source: Knau.org/npr-news



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In what may be termed as a strategic move by China, the advanced satellite-tracking Chinese spy ship 'Yuan Wang 5' was docked at the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka for a week, from August 16 to August 22. The ship was supposed to arrive at the port on August 11, but it was postponed due to the denial of permission from the Sri Lankan government.

China is claiming that Yuan Wang 5 (Figure 1) is a 'Marine Scientific Research' vessel on a mission to conduct hydrological studies and metal prospecting. However, as claimed by the media, the vessel has a dual-purpose; it can detect and track satellites and intercontinental ballistic missiles. This became a security concern for India, who expressed her concern, and this led to the postponement of the docking of the ship. Despite Indian reservations, diplomatic arm twisting by China forced Sri Lanka to grant favourable processing and permitted the ship to dock at Hambantota port.

Figure-1: Chinese Vessel 'Yuan Wang – 5'



Source: Times Now ¹

The press release issued by the Sri Lankan Ministry of Foreign Affairs with respect to Yuan Wang 5, states that "On 12 August 2022, the Embassy of the People's Republic of China (PRC) informed the Ministry via Diplomatic Note that the Vessel Yuan Wang 5 was scheduled to arrive in the port of Hambantota on 16 August 2022 and applied for clearance for replenishment purposes for the new dates 16 to 22 August 2022. Having considered all material in place, on 13 August 2022

the clearance to the Embassy of the People's Republic of China was conveyed for the deferred arrival of the vessel from 16-22 August 2022.”²

The PRC Embassy in Colombo notified the Sri Lankan Ministry of Foreign Affairs through a diplomatic note on June 28, 2022, about the schedule of the port visit of Chinese Scientific Research Ship Yuan Wang 5 from August 11–17, 2022.³ The purpose of the docking was claimed to be ‘necessary assistance and replenishment.’

The government of Sri Lanka was requested to give the required support and consideration even if there was not going to be any staff rotation during the call. The Sri Lankan Ministry, as per prescribed guidelines on the ‘diplomatic clearance for such requests’, processed and circulated the said request among relevant stakeholders in the government for approval. The request was forwarded to the following agencies for the relevant approvals:

- a) The Ministry of Defence, (for security clearance)
- b) The Sri Lanka Navy,
- c) The Telecommunications Regulatory Commission of Sri Lanka (TRCSL), (for communication safety clearance).⁴

TRCSL was tasked to analyse and comment on the pros and cons of the use of radio frequencies and communication equipment by the ship. The concern was with respect to interference and protection of the radio frequencies in use and avoiding any radio communication conflicts. It issued a ‘No Objection Letter’ on July 7, for the use of frequencies and communication equipment pursuant to a non-interference and non-protection basis. The Ministry of Defence also gave their necessary security clearance for the visit of the vessel for ‘replenishment purposes’ during the specified period, subject to the fulfilment of the vital conditions. The following conditions were highlighted by the Ministry of Defence:

- a) The Automatic Identification System (AIS) to be kept on within the EEZ of Sri Lanka, and
- b) No scientific research is to be conducted in Sri Lankan waters.⁵

By diplomatic note dated August 5, 2022, the Government of Sri Lanka asked the Chinese Embassy to reschedule the vessel's visit to the port of Hambantota until additional deliberations on the issue could be acquired. Since then, as claimed by the media-note, the Sri Lankan government has held extensive high-level consultations with all parties involved through diplomatic channels.

The goal is to resolve the matter in a spirit of friendship, mutual trust, and constructive dialogue while taking into account the interests of all parties involved and in accordance with the principle of sovereign equality of states.

The Inverstor, a Sri Lankan business web platform reported that “Sri Lanka has been dragged into the centre of a tussle between China and India. The matter got even more complicated with Sri Lanka officially asking China to defer this naval visit in the face of severe opposition from India. The matter however got resolved at least temporarily after several days of negotiations the Sri Lanka government had with the relevant stakeholders -- China, India, and the US. However, all the signs are that Sri Lanka will continue to suffer similar diplomatic headaches unless the country finds a way out of the geopolitics of the region.”⁶

India's concern

The current hyped Indo-Pacific geopolitics has forced India to show strategic concern regarding this development in Sri Lanka. India, like every country, is worried about its security and economic interests. Interestingly, two Chinese submarines disjunctedly docked at a Chinese-built terminal in the Port of Colombo in 2014, but the level of protest to the government of Sri Lanka was too low due to prevailing peace. However, in the wake of rising tensions between India and China, managing and balancing the diplomatic relations with these two countries has become tough for Sri Lanka. China's entrance into Sri Lanka during the last two decades, including investments in ports, airports, and the port city, has led to India's worry that some of these facilities could be used against India's security interests. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar reacted to this development and said, "What happens in our neighbourhood, any developments which have a bearing on our security obviously are of an interest to us."⁷

In view of the present developments in the Indian Ocean Region and for the maintenance of peace and tranquillity, expanding the strategic and military outreach in the Indo-Pacific by India merits consideration. India needs to fortify all sensitive assets against cyber-attacks. Additionally, we must create the wherewithal to counter the threats from such vessels with soft as well as hard kills.

NOTES

¹ “‘Obviously of interest to India’: Jaishankar on Chinese spy vessel Yuan Wang 5 docking in Sri Lanka,” *Times Now*, August 17, 2022, <https://www.timesnownews.com/india/obviously-of-interest-to-india-jaishankar-on-chinese-spy-vessel-yuan-wang-5-docking-in-sri-lanka-article-93621254>, Accessed on August 18, 2022.

² Media Release, “The Ministry of Foreign Affairs wishes to refer to the Chinese vessel YUAN WANG 5”, *News.lk*, August 14, 2022, <https://www.news.lk/news/political-current-affairs/item/34343-the-ministry-of-foreign-affairs-wishes-to-refer-to-the-chinese-vessel-yuan-wang-5>, Accessed on August 16, 2022.

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

⁶ “We need strong diplomacy to stay out of geo-politics of the region,” *The Investor*, August 14, 2022, <https://theinvestor.lk/biztalk/1240>, Accessed on August 16, 2022.

⁷ “‘Obviously of interest to India’: Jaishankar on Chinese spy vessel Yuan Wang 5 docking in Sri Lanka,” *Times Now*, August 17, 2022, <https://www.timesnownews.com/india/obviously-of-interest-to-india-jaishankar-on-chinese-spy-vessel-yuan-wang-5-docking-in-sri-lanka-article-93621254>, Accessed on August 18, 2022.