

Maritime Agreements through the lens of International Diplomacy: The Fate of India-Sri Lanka Relations

Ritika V Kapoor
GLA Fellow 2022-23
School of Liberal Arts
Alliance University
vritikagla22@arts.alliance.edu.in

Abstract

India and Sri Lanka share a profound cultural and historical connectedness. With ‘Tamilness’ as a shared identity, the fisher folk of the two nations are more like siblings at sea. However, this relationship witnessed a degradation following the demarcation of the Palk Bay region in 1974. India and Sri Lanka entered into an International Maritime Boundary Line Agreement owing to an overlap of their respective territorial waters. While this was made to seem like a genuine act of concern for India’s maritime sovereignty, the process involved complexities ranging from manipulation of the delineation principle, ceding of the Katchatheevu Island to Sri Lanka, to non-ratification of the Agreement leading to questions on its constitutionality. While this agreement, in fact, awarded India with a larger share of international waters vis-à-vis Sri Lanka’s (1.02:1), along with protecting the interests of its fisher-folk, the island was ceded to the Sri Lankans despite historical records proving India’s sovereignty over that space. Seemingly, this wasn’t enough for the Indian citizenry to condone, that another agreement was signed with the nautical neighbour in 1976. This very settlement drew much flak from the countrymen, particularly the Tamil Nadu fishing community, who were now abridged of their fishing rights in the region. Consequently, livelihood concerns of the fishing communities find significant mention in the dissertation on two key facets: (i) the Indian fisher-folk having faced a curtailment of their fishing rights attributable to the 1976 Agreement; and (ii) the Sri Lankan fisher-folk fearing a dearth of

marine resources on their side of the Palk Bay with incessant poaching by mechanised Indian trawlers. Extensive use of unsustainable fishing techniques, with bottom trawling emerging as the widely used method due to its high catch and rummaging feature, has waned the marine health of the Palk Bay region.

This paper delves into a critical analysis of the aforementioned issues through employment of extensive academic literature. Exploration of such secondary data has been validated by author's unstructured interviews with maritime and foreign policy experts including senior Indian Navy and Indian Coast Guard officers, former Chief of the Sri Lankan Navy, authorities at the Sri Lanka High Commission in New Delhi, researchers at public policy think-tanks, former defence attachés as well as journalists at the national dailies. Decisively, deep-rooted ties must stand unhindered particularly in the ways of disputes expressly caused by an island of merely 285 acres in size. Overall conflict resolution and subsequent welfare advancement calls for conjoint enactment of policies intended at mutually consistent motivations. The ulterior aim of this study is to construct policies that would deliver verdicts that are fair and just to the disputing parties, tension de-escalating in tenor and conscious and protective of the ecology. Though this research cannot claim to have attained this goal optimally, its academic enrichment is indeed scholastically empowering, and aims to transcend boundaries in more than one way through its wide expanse across multiple academic disciplines.

Keywords: *India, Sri Lanka, International Relations, Maritime Boundary, Katchatheevu*

Introduction

India and Sri Lanka, boasting a rich history of cultural and linguistic linkages, have been on an unwavering path of robust relations. Both nations possess favourable maritime geographies, enjoying strategic positions in the Indian Ocean - the world's busiest trade route, carrying around half of the world's container shipment, a third of the bulk cargo traffic and more than 80 per cent of the world's seaborne trade in oil (Ministry of External Affairs, 2018). Physically separated by a narrow strip of water body, known as the Palk Strait, between Tamil Nadu in India and Mannar in Sri Lanka, the two are one of the closest maritime neighbours in the region.

Of the total coastline of 7,516.6 kms, India shares a maritime border of over 400 kms with Sri Lanka. This border spreads entirely along the Indian Ocean with the Bay of Bengal in the north, and Palk Bay and the Gulf of Mannar at the centre. The geographical proximity of India and Sri Lanka has given rise to their overlapping claims to maritime zones and has resulted in the prospect of maritime border issues. However, the 'official answer' to this is not entirely affirmative. Both Indian and Sri Lankan governments maintain that "*maritime boundary between the two countries was settled way back in the 1970s*" (Ministry of Foreign Relations – Sri Lanka, 2008). This, they mention, was done and supported by way of four different agreements:

1. The 1974 Agreement on the Boundary in Historic Waters
2. The March 1976 Agreement on the Maritime Boundary in the Gulf of Mannar and the Bay of Bengal
3. The July 1976 Agreement between Sri Lanka, India and Maldives concerning the determination of tri-junction point between the three countries.

4. The November 1976 Supplementary Agreement on the extension of the Maritime Boundary established in March 1976 (point 2) till the tri-junction point established in July 1976 (point 3)

While these agreements support the claims made by the two governments, this paper presents some of the author's disagreements with them, particularly ones which directly impact the fisher communities of India and Sri Lanka.

The bone of contention in the Indo-Lanka maritime dispute is that of an island called Katchatheevu. Accounting for an area of 285.2 acres, the island serves as a prawn rich fishing ground, lying nearly 10.5 miles south of the Delft (Neduntheevu) Island in Sri Lanka and about 12.5 miles from the nearest point on the Indian coast off Rameshwaram (see Figure 1) (Lok Sabha Debates, 1974). The island was harmoniously used by the two fishing communities until 1974, before the two countries came together to establish the International Maritime Boundary Line (IMBL), as a delineation in the Palk Bay region.

Insert Figure 1 here

Interestingly, the area covered by the IMBL, spanning 85.375 nautical miles, had enjoyed the presence and indulgence of the fisher communities of the two countries, who had maintained peace and accord in the region. However, the 1974 agreement which gave effect to the IMBL, laid down certain restrictions to the communities, by limiting their rights to just 'their sides of the boundary', thereby debarring them from venturing into "others'" waters. The agreement, however,

permitted the Indian fishing fleet to access the island for pilgrimage purposes, without the need of any travel documents or visas (Ministry of External Affairs, 1976). One of the other significant contentions of this agreement emerged in the transfer of the Katchatheevu Island to the Sri Lankan side. This, in itself, has been a much apprehensive matter between the two fishing communities, and will be explored extensively in the following sections.

The issue relating to Katchatheevu has been discussed and debated upon at various fora, by academicians and politicians alike, with the latter possessing an understanding that the matter is a 'done and dusted' one. In the author's personal interactions with both the serving as well as retired Indian and Sri Lankan government officials, the issue does not deserve much heed, unless driven by investigative journalism. However, the lack of government transparency in the form of appropriate documentation and historical records on this subject has contributed to the difficulties faced by research scholars in ascribing rationale to events of such stature. It is believed that all documents relating to Katchatheevu and the ownership claims of the Raja of Ramnad had been taken away to New Delhi, which today lie behind the stone walls of official secrecy (Suryanarayan, 2005). However, with such important official documents yet to be made available in the public domain, books such as Prof V Suryanarayan's 'Conflict Over Fisheries in the Palk Bay Region' (published in 2005) and Mr W T Jayasinghe's 'Kachchativu and the Maritime Boundary of Sri Lanka' (published in 2003), along with other ministerial statements and remarks, served as valuable resources, providing the author with a holistic perspective on the subject matter.

In light of the aforementioned concerns, this paper attempts to instill interest and educate readers about the prevailing issues of inter-state diplomacy which are often driven by historical

events. Subsequently, it will discuss the various complexities which form part of the bureaucratic inaccuracies in the process of international relations.

Disagreements With The Agreements

This section seeks to analyse several issues with the IMBL agreements. While these long standing concerns have usually formed part of almost every bilateral discussion, these have largely remained inconclusive. Following are some of the major contentions highlighted by the Indian fishing communities and other stakeholders. Interestingly, some of these issues have also been affirmed by the officials of the two governments. Therefore, the contemporary importance of these agreements and the need to have discussions on the right causes of concern, is ever greater especially when India's foreign policy has witnessed a steady improvement in recent years. The current administration must assess the gravity of the issues which have long affected the welfare and livelihood of its fishing communities. Some of the disagreements with the 1974 and 1976 agreements have been elucidated below.

(A) Ignorance To Historical Evidence

Any territory which is part of India is included in the First Schedule of the Constitution, which carries the list of states and union territories, forming part of India. Questions on the process of ceding of Katchatheevu to Sri Lanka and its sovereignty, have been exacerbating the tensions between the traditional Sri Lankan fishers and the Indian trawlers from Tamil Nadu for a long time (Suryanarayan, 2016). However, there has never been a mention of the island of Katchatheevu therein, which would have underscored India's territorial claim on it. On the contrary, the Tamil Nadu Gazetteers of 1972 published by the Government of Tamil Nadu as '*Tamil Nadu Gazetteers*

- *Ramanathapuram*', include a mention of Katchatheevu with a survey number of 1250, as having been administered as part of Ramnad (present day Ramanathapuram), under the rule of Raja of Ramnad (Tamil Nadu Gazetteers, 1972). Such rebuttal between the Tamil Nadu state records, and that of the Central Government allows Katchatheevu to come out as a baffling concern.

The historical evidence abounds that Katchatheevu had formed part of the Zamindari of the Raja of Ramnad and had later become part of the Madras Presidency after the delimitation of Gulf of Mannar and Palk Strait in 1921, during the British rule between the then governments of Madras and Ceylon (Ruff, 2017). The Memoirs of Jan Schreuder, the Governor of Ceylon for the period 1757-1762 too established the control of the Raja of Ramnad over the island (Shunmugasundaram, 2013).

The dispute over the claim of Katchatheevu began when the two countries were still under the British colonial rule. In 1918, the Government of Madras put forth a proposal to the Centre on the extension of India's territorial waters from 3 nautical miles (within the reach of a cannon shot) to 12 nautical miles, for the purpose of safeguarding its fisheries, while also suggesting to declare the Gulf of Mannar and Palk Strait as *mare clausum* (closed waters), and the need to delimit the waters between India and Ceylon (de Silva, 2008). While these proposals were not considered forthwith, the proposition of delimitation was accepted in 1920. A conference between the Madras Presidency and the Government of Ceylon was held in 1921 in Colombo, resulting in a 'Fisheries Line' (based on jurisdiction for fishing purposes, independent of territoriality), which was accordingly fixed three miles west of Katchatheevu (de Silva, 2008). While this did not directly

give the island's jurisdiction to Sri Lanka, the Ceylon Government in later years assumed as much (Banerji, 2007).

Post-independence Parliament debates revolved largely around India's rights over Katchatheevu. Nonetheless, the heads of governments never allowed it to become a source of discord in India - Sri Lanka relations. In 1974, the two governments entered into a maritime boundary agreement, and the Katchatheevu Island was "ceded" to Sri Lanka. The second agreement came about in 1976, which delimited the boundary in the Gulf of Mannar and Bay of Bengal.

Based on these historical corroborations, which seem to manifest India's claim on the island, the Tamil Nadu Government has, on various accounts, advocated to the Centre - which had allegedly relinquished the island to the Sri Lankan Government as part of the 1974 Agreement - for remedial measures by filing numerous petitions. However, it is important to understand that retrieving the island from Sri Lanka, which forms a major part of the reparations asked for by the Tamil fisher folk, would be a futile effort. Even if the Indian courts were to find that Katchatheevu forms part of the territory of Tamil Nadu and that it was, indeed, unconstitutionally ceded to Sri Lanka, this ruling would hold no ground and would have zero binding effect on Sri Lanka, which today has de facto control on the island. As a sovereign State, Sri Lanka remains immune to the jurisdiction of the Indian courts.

Conclusively, an episode of sheer ignorance to historical evidence had occurred during the course of the signing of the 1974 Agreement, giving rise to huge unrest among the Indian Tamil fisher folk, which, to an extent, continues to exist even today.

(B) Non - Ratification of The Agreements

Both 1974 and 1976 agreements contain a crucial clause which states that, ‘they shall be subject to ratification’. However, these agreements were merely signed and given effect without following the due process of law, which includes legislation or an amendment to the Constitution passed by the Parliament of India, to thereafter validate the agreements.

According to Article 14(1)(b) of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties (VCLT), 1969, ratification of a treaty is necessary when negotiating states have agreed that it is required. While neither India nor Sri Lanka is a signatory to VCLT, one should discern the ambiguity in the language used in the agreements where, despite the 1974 and 1976 agreements stating the need for ratification, there exists no gazette document explicating the same. It would have been a different thing altogether had the agreements not stated the requirement of ratification and solely indicated the signing to be equivalent to the final exchange of instruments. But, after having so mentioned and thereafter failing to abide by the due process of law, the occurrence of such contentions is but natural.

Interestingly, former Prime Minister of India, Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee, had, as the then leader of the *Bharatiya Jan Sangh*, called out against the 1974 Agreement, referring to it as

unconstitutional (Muruganandham, 2018). It was also said that the 1976 Agreement passed almost unnoticed, since all forms of dissent and criticisms in the press were suppressed by the draconian laws promulgated during the emergency (Banerji, 2007).

Such instances also question the division of power between the executive and the legislature, especially in matters relating to ratification of agreements signed with other nations. However, asking the Government to make amends after 46 years of entering into an agreement would again only be inefficacious on the grounds of sovereignty of the state of Sri Lanka.

(C) Provision Of Fishing Rights

Article 6 of the 1974 Agreement states that, ‘*the vessels of India and Sri Lanka will enjoy, in each other’s waters, such rights as they have traditionally enjoyed therein*’, and leaves enough room for individual interpretation to occur.

The terms “*such rights as they have traditionally enjoyed*”, do not explicitly mention fishing rights. However, the then Indian Minister of External Affairs (EAM), Shri Swaran Singh’s statement in Parliament, following the signing of this agreement, noted that, “*although Sri Lanka’s claim to sovereignty over Katchatheevu has been recognised, the traditional fishing rights of fishermen and pilgrims to visit the island remain **unaffected***” (Fernando, 2014).

Moreover, much to the Indian Government’s surprise, the Indian fisherfolk would nonetheless pay costs on their movements in and beyond Katchatheevu. They would get arrested

by the Sri Lanka Navy (SLN) on venturing into “Sri Lankan waters”, while also having their vessels confiscated. Such contradiction eventually led to the souring of the Indo - Lanka ties.

A sudden spike in the incidents involving the apprehension of the Indian fishermen by the SLN was witnessed during this period. As a response, this vagueness was expounded in letters exchanged between the then India Foreign Secretary, Shri Kewal Singh, and his Sri Lankan counterpart, Mr W. T. Jayasinghe, in 1976. Interestingly, the two also happened to be the signatories to the 1976 Agreement on the maritime boundary in the Gulf of Mannar and the Bay of Bengal.

In Paragraph 1 of the letter exchanged between the two, Singh had stated to Jayasinghe that, “*the fishing vessels and fishermen of India shall not engage in fishing in the historic waters (in Palk Bay), the territorial sea and the exclusive economic zone of Sri Lanka, nor shall the fishing vessels and fishermen of Sri Lanka engage in fishing in the historic waters, territorial sea and the exclusive economic zone of India, without the express permission of Sri Lanka or India, as the case may be*” (Commonwealth Legal Information Institute, 1976). While this letter concerned the waters of Wadge Bank, whether these provisions were applicable to Katchatheevu or not, are questions whose answers have never been clearly stated by either Governments (Suryanarayan, 2005).

Although this exchange of letters cleared the air on the matter of fishing rights of Indian and Sri Lankan fishing communities, it certainly displayed some level of bureaucratic inconsistency among the Government of India officials. The 1976 letter seemed to have questioned

the assurance provided by the Indian EAM on the unchanged status of fishing rights to the Indian fisherfolk. Subsequently, the dispute between the two communities continued to expand in the following years, along with distrust between the citizenry and national leaders.

(D) Personal Relationship governing International Relations

Dr V. Suryanarayan, who retired as the Founding Director and Senior Professor of the Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of Madras, in his book, 'Fisheries Conflict in the Bay of Bengal', mentions how the 1974 agreement, in particular, was an "*illustration of personal relationship*" (between Smt Gandhi and Mrs Bandaranaike) which "*transformed itself into a bilateral agreement*", and failed to reflect realities on ground (Suryanarayan, 2016). In the words of Dr Partha Ghosh, "*Katchatheevu was the most typical case of a personal equation playing the role of diplomacy*" (Ghosh, 2003).

As previously discussed, this course of events exhibits a bureaucratic dilemma between the head of the Government and the subordinates. Although the 1974 Agreement was annotated to have preserved the traditional fishing rights, the 1976 Exchange of Letters turned the situation completely, by abridging the movement of the fishing communities to the "other side" of the Palk Bay waters.

Considering the interpersonal relations between heads of state / government paving way for enhancement of foreign relations, the 1974 Agreement was brought to life in the name of "good friendship" shared between the two leaders. While the Indian Government was alleged to have

ignored the concerns of Tamil Nadu, the agreement with Sri Lanka was considered a ‘master stroke of statesmanship’ (Coelho, 1976), having removed irritants in India’s bilateral relations through gestures of goodwill (Suryanarayan, 2005). At one of the occasions, the Sri Lankan Prime Minister was seen to have lauded Smt Gandhi by mentioning ‘with highest regard and affection’, that “(Indira) *was extremely understanding, appreciating and accommodating to Sri Lanka’s point of view*” and that “*she always displayed an attitude of great sportsmanship and never tried to adopt a big sister attitude*” (Suryanarayan, 2005).

Political leaderships, such as the one discussed above, play an integral role in setting the geopolitical grounds. This can also be attributed to the process of delimitation of the IMBL between India and Sri Lanka. The method adopted in this case, as part of the 1974 Agreement, involved a ‘selective, i.e. a modified application of the principle of equidistance’ (US Department of State, 1975) (see point 4 in Figure 1). While not reflecting on the realities on ground, including the interests and the rights of the fishing communities, the equidistance principle was employed only after being modified.

Dr. Nirmala Chandrahasan, a Sri Lankan scholar, had concluded that, “*this delimitation was based on the agreement rather than on the equidistance principle, as the primary reason was to settle the dispute over the Katchatheevu island, which the parties had agreed to hand over to Sri Lanka. Hence, the boundary line was drawn so as to pass just one mile west of the island; in order the island would fall within the maritime boundaries of Sri Lanka*” (Suryanarayan, 2016) (see point 4 in Figure 2). In this very regard, the then Foreign Secretary of Sri Lanka, Mr W. T. Jayasinghe observed, in his book, ‘Kachchativu and the Maritime Boundary of Sri Lanka’, that the

agreement was concluded in a “*spirit of compromise*”. The Indian EAM, however, referred to this agreement as a “*victory of mature statesmanship, in the cause of friendship and cooperation*” (Lok Sabha Debates, 1974).

Insert Figure 2 here

Now this brings an important theory into the discussion. The study of interpersonal relations within the arena of international politics primarily includes the concept of trust. Interpersonal relationships shared between state leaders are often characterised by the leaders’ public remarks and statements about one another and/or by analysing closed-door or even public interactions between the two (or more, representing the given states). Several studies have been undertaken on this theory which is currently at a nascent yet a constantly developing stage. In the case of Indo-Lanka IMBL agreements, the concept of trust between Gandhi and Bandaranaike seemed to have directly paved the way for India’s acceptance of the ‘modified’ boundary line. While this certainly brings multiple questions into the forefront, these have been answered in one of the upcoming works of the author, which has been crucially referred from the interesting works of Wheeler (2018), Wheeler and Holmes (2019), Kydd (2000) and Ruzicka and Keating (2015).

Impact On The Indo-Lanka Fisher Folk Status

Sri Lanka was, until 2009, involved in a nearly three-decade long armed conflict between the Sri Lankan forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Whereas India had supported the right of the Government of Sri Lanka to act against the terrorist forces (Ministry of

External Affairs, 2017), the Indian Tamil fisher folk, nonetheless ventured far beyond the “mutually agreed upon” IMBL. It would be unfair to say that the Indian fishing community was oblivious of its movements to the “Sri Lankan waters”. They began to poach into the other side of the delimited maritime boundary after having consumed all the resources on their own side. Such ‘illegal’ movements were contested by the Sri Lankan fisher folk for the principal reason of their counterparts employing bottom trawlers for such fishing activities, thereby leaving little to be caught by the Sri Lankans (Kapoor, 2018). Being a source of peril, especially to a rich fishing ground like the Palk Bay, bottom trawling is considered a highly unsustainable fishing technique which involves dragging heavy weighted nets along the sea-floor, thereby rummaging the seabed by ripping up coral, oyster beds, sponges, etc. (Mckie, 2014).

The Sri Lankans outrightly revolted against the non-adherence of the maritime boundary agreements by the Indians. This hostility was largely caused by the use of bottom trawlers by the Indians against the artisanal forms of fishing by the Sri Lankans. During the Civil War between 1983 and 2009, the Sri Lankans were prohibited from all sorts of fishing activities for security reasons (Manoharan and Deshpande, 2018). This allowed the Indian fisher folk to enter the Sri Lankan side of Palk Bay and Palk Strait - which, till then, was unscathed and unexplored - and they extracted as many resources as they could. However, in view of the bilateral maritime agreements of 1974 and 1976, the Indian fishing communities stand in contravention to Article V (2) of the 1976 Agreement, which states that “*each party shall have sovereign rights and exclusive jurisdiction over the continental shelf and the Exclusive Economic Zone as well as their resources, whether living or non-living, falling on its side of the aforesaid boundary.*”

It was reported that these acts of violation by Indian trawlers had severely affected the livelihoods of the Sri Lankan fisher folk, besides depriving them of financial profits and foreign exchange earnings from the possible export of prawns, tuna and cuttlefish to markets in the West and Japan (Mayilvaganan, 2014).

This state of events exacerbated the tensions as soon as the Sri Lankan fisher folk, fresh out of war, entered the waters and saw the humongous Indian fishing fleet equipped with large mechanised vessels. The two nations thereafter witnessed, what most policy analysts refer to as, “the low point of the Indo-Lanka relations”. The situation deteriorated to a point where the respective navies were being mandated to curb the ‘cross-border’ movements of fisher folk. The issue turned hostile in the years that followed, and around 600 Indian fishermen, all hailing from the state of Tamil Nadu, were arrested by the SLN in 2013 (Srinivasan, 2013). The issue subsequently picked up gravity, with the Indian fishing fleet seen to be frequently and recklessly venturing into Katchatheevu waters, indisputably failing to abide by the agreements. Such actions were viewed as a display of angst among the Tamil Nadu fishing communities against the IMBL agreements.

While the issue of bottom trawling has continued to be one of the prime concerns between the two countries, it is notable to highlight that the practice is not solely employed by the Indian fishing fleet. The Sri Lankan fisher folk have, on various instances, been identified to have practiced bottom trawling in the waters of the Arabian Sea. The arrests of the fishing communities venturing into the alleged international waters have continued over the years, both at the hands of Indian and Sri Lankan authorities. Associated protests demanding the release of such fisherfolk

have also been a common sight. It is, therefore, imperative that the governments consider a holistic resolution of the long-standing concerns, for these did not only affect the communities of the 1970s-1990s but have continued to impact the livelihood of the fisherfolk to this present day.

Covid-19 And The State Of International Affairs

The COVID-19 pandemic brought with itself a fair share of concerns to the space of international affairs. This section deals with how the pandemic impacted the status of foreign relations with an inevitable dependence on virtual interactions amid restrictions on international travel and movement. This subject is imperative to study in light of the author's argument on interpersonal relationships forming a significant part of the international political discourse today. The focus on face-to-face interactions took a backseat amid a forced reliance on virtual diplomacy. Leaders interacted through virtual modes and were no longer in a space of social bonding which an in-person interaction naturally allows. Did it then impact the status of international relations, in particular?

Virtual meetings presented an enormous technical and logistical challenge, greatly complicated by the need for simultaneous interpretation in several languages (Council on Foreign Relations, 2020). That said, body language, facial expressions and other such non-verbal communications became a major hindrance during online interactions. This is concerning in view of the scientific data which establishes that up to 90% of communication among people is non-verbal (Thompson, 2011). In the arena of international relations, it may be harder to cooperate when meetings are conducted online for the lack of any personal off-the-record interactions. Such

meetings also do not allow the possibilities of catching up with counterparts down the hallways or over a cup of tea for any informal negotiations. Such candid ways of bonding – which pave the way for fruitful camaraderie – are not found in the case of online deliberations.

That said, digital diplomacy has accelerated the dissemination of information, particularly during times of crises (Jayatilaka, 2020). Additionally, it ensures that communication channels do not discriminate on the accuracy of information – this was witnessed largely during the COV-19 crisis when countries extensively relied upon social media platforms to communicate with citizens and the world at-large to disseminate information on curbs, restrictions, etc. Did it happen to control any existing mechanisms of trust or reliance on the government in any way? It does not seem so.

It is, therefore, too early to deduce as to whether the COVID-19 pandemic has greatly impacted the way foreign diplomacy is conducted. However, it has brought leaders to a new sense of understanding diplomacy through a different lens. Costs of international travel have certainly been saved and if the impact on foreign relations has been remained status quo, then digital diplomacy could be well be considered as part of the states' foreign policy agendas in the long-term. However, it should not be a difficult change to embrace since digital diplomacy has been in the works much before the pandemic hit the world. In 2012, Russian President Vladimir Putin designated online diplomacy as one of the most effective foreign policy tools (Permyakova, 2012). In India, the Ministry of External Affairs extensively used Twitter to evacuate over 18,000 Indian citizens from Libya during the civil war in 2011 (Lewis, 2014). Prime Minister Narendra Modi has, for long, been discussing the importance of social media platforms and regularly calls on his

cabinet and party members to use the platform to “remain ahead of the curve on digital diplomacy” (Lewis, 2014). Conclusively, it remains to be seen as to how the course of face-to-face diplomacy stands against its digital counterpart in the years to come.

Conclusion

With the Indo-Lanka relations having seen its fair share of highs and lows, history displays a rather difficult state of ties between the two neighbours. While several reasons have led to resentment between the two countries, one of the aspects which has remained a part of bilateral discussions and has contributed to the growing areas of concerns is that of the fisherfolk dispute. The tensions, having originated from questions over sovereignty of the small island of Katchatheevu, chiefly involved the coastal population of the two countries. Issues ranging from non-adherence to international law, to the role of interpersonal relations enjoyed by the heads of state/government in the process of geopolitics, the frequent arrests of fishing communities by authorities on grounds of venturing into ‘international waters’ and the ever-growing concerns of marine ecology, the Indo-Lanka ties have come a long way in the past 49 years. However, while present day relations between the two have largely been approached through soft power diplomacy, the contestation emanating from Katchatheevu does tend to surface from time to time. India’s foreign policy has unarguably seen a steady improved over the last 6-7 years with New Delhi showing more assertiveness in international relations. Realising the need to sustain cordial ties with immediate neighbours and to maintain peace in the South Asian region, the Indian government could possibly evolve its approach to the issue of Katchatheevu with Sri Lanka. The need to pursue a rules-based/lawful approach, particularly in matters pertaining to international

law and foreign policy, is crucial to both India and Sri Lanka from the perspective of standing by the right principles.

Figures

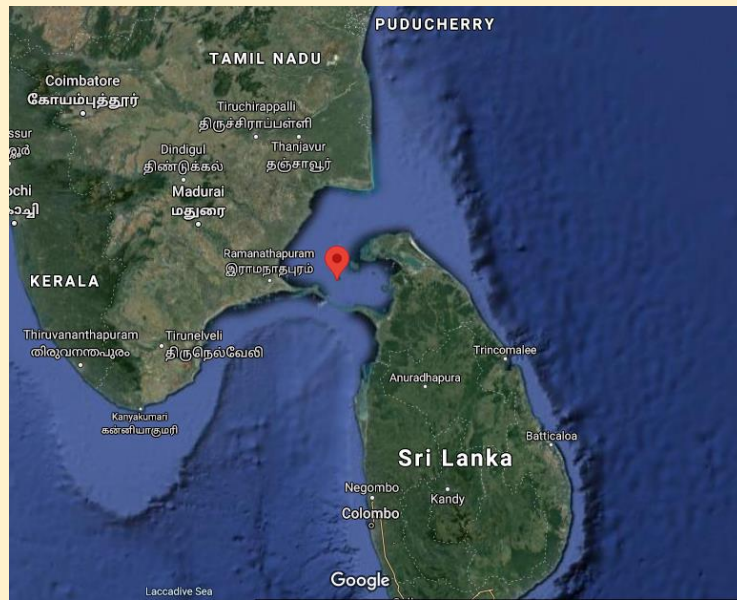


Figure 1: Geographical Location of Katchatheevu Island

Source: Google Maps

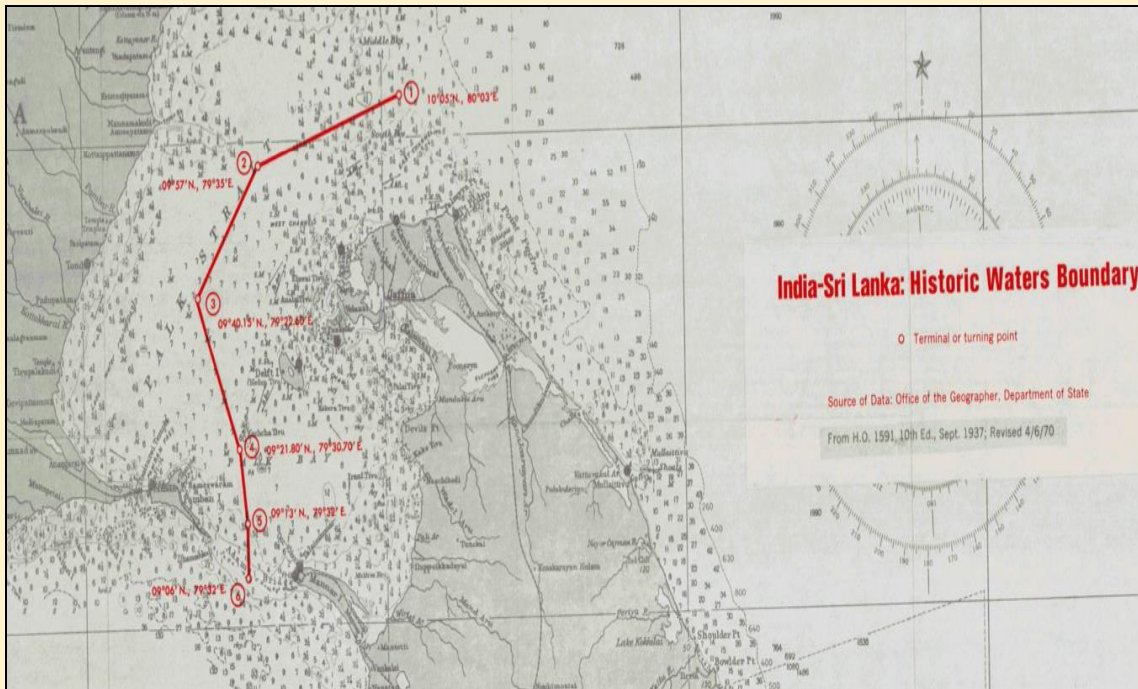


Figure 2: Limits in the Seas No. 66 - Historic Waters Boundary: India-Sri Lanka.

Source: Office of the Geographer, US Department of State

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