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RESEARCH ARTICLE



The Power of 'Oceanic Thinking': Reimagining Small State Agency and Sovereignty Amid Sino-Indian Hegemonic Competition in the Indian Ocean

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ABSTRACT

By focusing on Sri Lanka and Maldives as small island states where Sino-Indian competition is evident, and adopting a Gramscian theoretical approach, this paper examines the spatialisation of power and deterritorialisation of sovereignty in the Indian Ocean. It poses two core questions: Where is power located in the oceanic space? And what does sovereignty mean in a maritime context? Through an analysis of Sri Lanka's emphasis on infrastructure and Maldives' prioritisation of land reclamation and spatial reconfiguration, this paper advances two interlinked arguments. First, it demonstrates that small states do not merely resist great power hegemony but actively shape the domains and modalities of competition, thereby exercising governance in spaces traditionally dominated by great powers. Second, in exercising this agency, small states enact a form of sovereignty that transcends territorial autonomy, embracing the fluidity and dynamism of oceanic spaces. Overall, this paper disrupts conventional geographies of power that rigidly separate domestic from foreign, autonomy from dependency, and land from sea, offering a reimagined framework for understanding governance in the Indian Ocean.

Introduction

While conducting fieldwork in Colombo, Sri Lanka, I passed by the seafront with one of my interviewees. As we walked along the promenade, we noticed enormous billboards presenting Colombo Port City, a new commercial zone developed with Chinese investment in the heart of Colombo. The project aims to transform Sri Lanka into a regional hub for finance, trade, and commerce, attracting substantial foreign investment (Ethirajan 2022). These billboards displayed a futuristic, computer-generated vision of the project, with images of skyscrapers and glittering metropolises reminiscent of Dubai and Hong Kong. Another sign proclaimed: 'Building a World-Class City for South Asia'. These depictions embodied what Terrefe (2022) refers to as 'tangible discourses',

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allowing us to envision an idealised future that starkly contrasts with the present reality of dusty construction sites and economic uncertainty (C. Smith 2017). In that moment, all we saw were towering cranes and Chinese-operated trucks hauling massive quantities of sand into the sea. Colombo Port City is, in fact, a vast stretch of sand reclaimed from the Indian Ocean, effectively redrawing the map of Sri Lanka. As we walked, I asked my interviewee whether they thought the sand deposited into the sea by a Chinese engineering company, and the resulting new land, could truly be considered 'Sri Lanka'. After a moment of hesitation, they suggested that perhaps it was more those images of grandeur we had seen on the billboards, those sleek, shiny new buildings, that could be considered Sri Lanka. They implied that, especially in a post-colonial and post-civil war context, what *looked like* Sri Lanka in visual terms was more significant than what Sri Lanka *was* as a defined geographical entity delineated by the Indian Ocean. Aesthetics and aspiration outweighed territoriality.

This vignette dilutes and challenges conventional understandings of the nation-state and sovereignty, inviting us to reconsider what these concepts mean within the fluid, oceanic space of small island states. This notion of fluidity, where the perception of space blends and merges, like water, with its physical boundaries, underpins this inquiry into the spatialisation of power and deterritorialisation of sovereignty in the Indian Ocean. I pose two core questions: *How do small island states like Sri Lanka and Maldives locate and exercise power within the Indian Ocean amid Sino-Indian competition? In what ways do Sri Lanka and Maldives reimagine sovereignty in maritime contexts beyond territorial autonomy?* The first question investigates the spatiality of power, shifting focus from the core of great powers to the margins of small states and highlighting how oceanic fluidity enables constant interaction between them. The second question encourages a rethinking of sovereignty beyond territoriality, using oceanic fluidity to disrupt conventional geographies of power that separate domestic from foreign, autonomous from dependent, and land from sea, in rigid, binary terms.

To address these questions, I focus on Sri Lanka and Maldives, two small South Asian island states where Sino-Indian competition is evident and manifests through investments and contrasting hegemonic normative-cultural discourses. These cases ground this paper's conceptual core of 'oceanic thinking': a framework that draws on the qualities of liquids, fluidity and permeation, to explore alternative discursive, material, and epistemological modes of governance and link them to agency as relational engagement between great powers and small states, and to sovereignty as a dynamic and deterritorialised practice. In addition to employing an environmental lexicon as an epistemological tool, an approach also used by Aijazi (2024) in his concept of 'atmospheric violence' to describe the hyper-pervasive violence in Kashmir, I primarily rely on Gramscian theory. Gramsci's (Gramsci, Hoare,

and Nowell-Smith 1971) framework is particularly well-suited for examining spaces dominated by hegemonic forces, whether they are ruling classes or great powers, while still preserving the possibility for change driven by subaltern classes or small states. Ultimately, perhaps shaped by his own subaltern position in prison, Gramsci's focus on marginality aligns with my aim to explore alternative forms of governance in the Indian Ocean.

Building on this premise, I advance two main interlinked and mutually reinforcing arguments. First, small island states are *also* capable of governing the 'ocean', or more broadly, spaces traditionally dominated by great powers. To support this argument, I demonstrate that these small island states exercise agency in the face of great power hegemonic competition not merely by resisting hegemony but by actively shaping the domains and modalities through which it unfolds. In Sri Lanka, this agency is evident in its ability to steer Sino-Indian competition within the infrastructural domain, leveraging its strategic oceanic position. In Maldives, this agency is primarily expressed through land reclamation and cross-island infrastructure. Second, in exercising this agency, small maritime states enact a type of sovereignty that goes beyond territorial autonomy, embracing the fluidity and dynamism of oceanic spaces. Sri Lanka enacts an 'aesthetic sovereignty' rooted in the grandeur and magnificence of massive infrastructures like Hambantota Port or Colombo Port City, while Maldives performs 'terrestrial sovereignty' through spatial reconfiguration and land reclamation within the Indian Ocean.

The paper is organised as follows. I first situate my study within the broader conversation on Sino-Indian competition in the Indian Ocean, providing historical background. I then outline the Gramscian framework that underpins my analysis, unpacking the concepts of 'oceanic thinking', agency, and sovereignty. Next, I present my main arguments, drawing on empirical material from fieldwork in Colombo, Sri Lanka, and Malé, Maldives, conducted between February 2024 and May 2025. The section on small state agency explores how Sri Lanka and Maldives shape great power competition, while the section on sovereignty examines its reimagining through deterritorialisation. Overall, I employ ethnographic observation and elite interviews with Sri Lankan and Maldivian foreign policy experts, government officials, journalists, activists, and politicians. To uphold ethical standards and protect participants' privacy and confidentiality, all quotations and personal identifiers have been anonymised.¹ I conclude by emphasising that, even amid traditional power flows, alternative and bottom-up modes of governance remain possible.

Locating Small State Agency in the Indian Ocean Amid Sino-Indian Competition

This paper contributes to the ongoing conversation on Sino-Indian competition in the Indian Ocean, exploring how governance not driven by great

powers can emerge even in spaces where their dominance is evident. In its simplest form, Sino-Indian competition is a bilateral rivalry between two regional powers. The Indian Ocean serves as a strategic avenue, encompassing maritime zones critical to global trade, what Ghosh (2004) refers to as ‘Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs)’ and ‘maritime choke points’, such as the Strait of Hormuz, the Strait of Malacca, and the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait (D. M. Gill 2021; Thoker and Ramzan 2018, 9). The region’s strategic importance has long attracted great power interest, from Britain’s colonial dominance to Cold War-era rivalries involving the US and USSR (Panikkar 1945, 123; Pant 2014, 188). However, Kaplan (2009) describes the Indian Ocean as ‘the centre stage for the 21st century’ due to China’s growing influence in a region traditionally within India’s sphere (Baruah and Mohan 2019). Notably, the announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 and the 2020 border clash marked a transition to open competition, particularly in the maritime domain, shifting from a ‘managed’ to an ‘intensified rivalry’ (Chakma and Dai 2022).

For this reason, several authors have characterised the Sino-Indian maritime competition in this region as a security dilemma, a situation in which one state’s efforts to enhance its security inadvertently threaten another state, prompting countermeasures that escalate tensions (e.g., Athwal 2007; Baruah and Mohan 2019; Basrur, Mukherjee, and Paul 2019; Brewster 2014; Collin 2016, 2019; Garver 2002; Holslag 2009; C. R. Mohan 2012; Paul 2019a; Scott 2008; Tariq 2016). While neither China nor India can be seen as ‘pure security seekers’, both harbour mutual concerns about naval capabilities and port access in the Indian Ocean (Collin 2019, 30). The ‘String of Pearls’ narrative reinforced the emphasis on great power rivalry (e.g., Ali 2013; Bhatti, Kharl, and Butt 2020; Kannan 2018; Khurana 2008; Madanayaka 2017; Manoharan 2021; Megal and Mirza 2022; Mendis 2012; Pehrson 2006; Uluwaduge 2022; Wong 2018). This framework highlights that Sino-Indian competition extends beyond military and security dimensions to encompass political and economic domains, particularly in infrastructure development (Baruah and Mohan 2019). Coined in a 2004 Booz Allen Hamilton report for the US Department of Defence, the term describes China’s construction of a network of strategic relationships and infrastructure in the Indian Ocean to secure energy supply routes and expand its influence (Gertz 2005; MacDonald, Donahue, and Danyluk 2004). Each ‘pearl’ symbolises a hub of Chinese influence or military presence, often linked to China’s ‘Malacca dilemma’, or the vulnerability of its energy imports through the Strait of Malacca (Samaranayake 2011, 120). Hence, China’s investments in port facilities like Hambantota and its diplomatic engagements are seen as dual-use assets for military operations and calculated efforts to encircle India (S. S. Kumar 2017, 1124; ; Pehrson 2006).

Although Sino-Indian competition in the Indian Ocean also extends to Southeast Asia (Singh 2019), I focus on South Asia, a region where India’s

post-1947 role has been extensively examined and contrasted with China's growing influence (Garver 1991, 956; Sahoo 2013, 112). In examining South Asian states in the Indian Ocean, I depart from the literature focused on great powers, arguing that such perspectives overlook the diverse modes of maritime governance. Instead, I highlight the role of small states in navigating Sino-Indian competition, as explored by authors like Attanayake (2022), Attanayake and Atmakuri (2021), Kang (2003), Kutty (2019), Lim and Mukherjee (2019, 513), Malik (2001), and McDougall and Taneja (2020). While Realist literature focused on great powers completely neglects the agency of non-Western small states, even scholarship that acknowledges this agency, including Constructivist works on norm diffusion, tends to frame it as a response and reaction to great power influence (an approach criticised, *inter alia*, by Acharya 2011, 2018).

However, my empirical findings tell a different story. To explore this alternative perspective, Sri Lanka serves as the focal point of this paper, offering a case study to examine how small South Asian states actively navigate and influence Sino-Indian rivalry in the Indian Ocean. India has historically viewed Sri Lanka as vital to its regional security and as part of its sphere of influence, considering it 'very much part of India's Raj legacy' (C. R. Mohan 2012, 147). Meanwhile, China's ties date back to the Maritime Silk Road and early Buddhist connections (Attanayake 2022). Sri Lanka recognised the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1950 and formalised relations in 1957, with early cooperation including the 1952 Rubber-Rice Pact and the 1963 maritime access agreement (S. S. Kumar 2017; C. R. Mohan 2012). In recent decades, reflecting broader trends across the Indian Ocean, China's expanding economic and military presence has increasingly challenged India's regional dominance (Khobragade 2023). The Sri Lankan Civil War (1983–2009) significantly shaped the island's relationships with both India and China, particularly due to the Tamil population's connections to Tamil Nadu. While India's 1987 peace accord with Sri Lanka restricted the island from offering military bases to third parties (Ayoob 1991; Hagerty 1991), China adopted a low-profile approach to the conflict, later supplying arms (S. S. Kumar 2017, 1113). In the war's final phase, both India and China maintained military involvement and the latter extended its role into the diplomatic arena, particularly by shielding Sri Lanka from international accusations of human rights violations (Tudoroiu and Ramlogan 2021, 150). By the 2000s, China's influence in Sri Lanka had grown substantially, exemplified by the Hambantota Port project, funded by Chinese loans after India declined support (Thottam 2009). This project, along with initiatives such as the Colombo Port City, positioned Sri Lanka as a key node in China's BRI, solidifying China's economic presence (Attanayake 2022, 114). While India continued to engage with Sri Lanka through initiatives like the Free Trade Agreement (2000) and the Trincomalee Oil Tank Farm, by 2018, China had become Sri Lanka's second-largest trading partner (G. Mohan 2017, 151–153).

While foregrounding Sri Lanka, I also introduce a second case study: the Maldives, another small island state in the Indian Ocean and epicentre of Sino-Indian competition due to its strategic positioning along vital maritime corridors. Historically, Maldives has maintained closer political, economic, and military ties with India, especially following India's military intervention to foil a coup in Malé in 1988. However, from the early 2000s, China has significantly increased its presence through the BRI (Zahir 2021). Political shifts within the Maldivian domestic sphere have further shaped the dynamics of great power competition in the small state (Ranjan 2013). Under President Yameen (2013–2018), ties with China were strengthened, while subsequent administrations oscillated between India and China (Paul 2019b; Stanzel 2018). In 2023, President Muizzu rose to power on a 'India Out' campaign calling for the removal of Indian military personnel from Maldivian territory, thereby determining a pro-China realignment (Basarkar 2024). However, this 'India Out' campaign soon proved unsustainable, given Maldives' dependence on Indian aid, tourism, and trade, leading to rapprochement. It is against this evolving and historically situated backdrop that the concept of 'oceanic thinking' emerges and becomes legible.

The Indian Ocean as a Site of Power: A Gramscian Framework of 'Oceanic Thinking', Agency and Sovereignty

Having situated the locus of this paper, the Indian Ocean as a fluid site of governance shaped by small states amid great power competition, I now introduce the three interlinked conceptual categories that constitute the backbone of my theoretical framework: 'oceanic thinking', agency, and sovereignty. I then deepen these categories through Gramscian vocabulary and theory.

At the analytical heart of this paper lies the concept of 'oceanic thinking', which I theorise as both discourse and practice enacted by small island states in the Indian Ocean in response to profound asymmetries of power, particularly in the context of dyadic Sino-Indian competition. Drawing on Hofmeyr's (2012) proposition of using the Indian Ocean 'as Method', I conceive 'oceanic thinking' as a lens that destabilises nation-state-centric epistemologies by foregrounding relationality, circulation, and transnational entanglements. Applying 'oceanic thinking' therefore entails attentiveness to the movement of people, goods, and ideas across the maritime domain, understood not merely physically but also metaphorically as a generative space of epistemic inquiry. Thus, 'oceanic thinking' also functions epistemologically as a method of thinking-with the ocean to escape materialist reductionism and reimagine power, agency, and sovereignty in more fluid terms.

Crucially, by foregrounding fluidity and interconnectedness, 'oceanic thinking' reconceptualises small state agency not as a reactive or derivative response to great power strategies, but as a constitutive force in regional political

dynamics, rooted in relationality. This agency can be understood as a manifestation of ‘oceanic thinking’ itself, materialising in maritime contexts through the discursive and practical strategies employed by small island states to engage with great powers. In this sense, agency is not a negation of structural constraints but an acknowledgement and strategic engagement with relational entanglements. Empirically, this ‘oceanic’ agency materialises differently across small island states. In Sri Lanka, it takes the form of securing infrastructural projects, while in Maldives it centres around spatial connectivity and land reclamation. Yet in both cases, the maritime context facilitates a form of fluid interactivity between small states and great powers that would be considerably more constrained in landlocked settings. In this context, the ocean is not merely a backdrop but a dynamic enabling condition for agency. The ocean here is therefore a metaphor but also a material condition: it is a conduit for global trade, a space for territorial expansion, and a strategic canvas on which power is projected and negotiated. Ports, reclaimed islands, and maritime infrastructures are both sites where agency is exercised and material features of the oceanic context that make such agency possible for small island states, as seen in Colombo Port City and Hambantota in Sri Lanka, and in Hulhumalé and Sinamalé Bridge in Maldives. Functioning as literal and symbolic nodes of interconnection and global trade, ports in particular become bargaining sites through which small island states leverage their oceanic positioning to engage great powers.

Ultimately, ‘oceanic thinking’ prompts a reimagining of sovereignty beyond the Westphalian paradigm of fixed territorial autonomy. In Sri Lanka and Maldives, sovereignty manifests respectively through monumental infrastructure and spatial practices of land reclamation and artificial island-building. What unites these manifestations, however, is their shared embeddedness in the ocean, not only as a space in which sovereignty is performed but also as a material resource that makes alternative sovereignties possible, diverging from mere territorial control. As illustrated in [Figure 1](#), my theoretical framework weaves together ‘oceanic thinking’, relational agency, and post-Westphalian sovereignty to offer a coherent and original approach to small state governance in maritime contexts. ‘Oceanic thinking’ forms the conceptual core, highlighting the ocean as both material and epistemic. From this centre, agency is defined as the capacity of small states to acknowledge and navigate their relational entanglement with great powers, while sovereignty is reimagined beyond fixed territoriality. In what follows, I turn to Gramscian theory to substantiate and deepen this triadic framework.

This Gramscian approach is distinct in its capacity to integrate material and ideological dimensions, rejecting Marxist economism and advancing ‘multi-factor explanations of events as a result of the multiple and changing relations of forces’ (Cospito 2022, 157), and in its commitment to historicism. Indeed, Gramsci’s (Gramsci, Hoare, and Nowell-Smith 1971, 244) historicism is

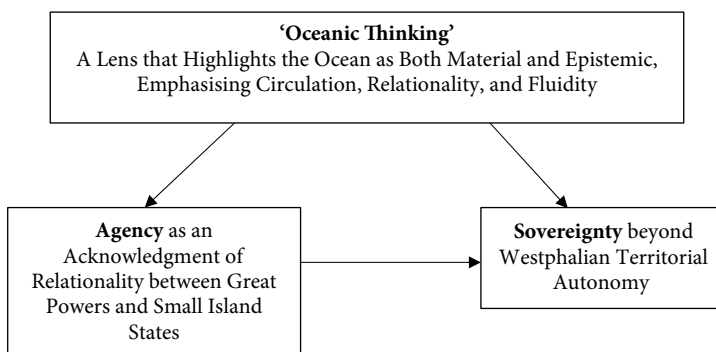


Figure 1. Gramscian theory of ‘oceanic thinking’ in small island states in the Indian Ocean in the context of great power competition.

grounded in a ‘fascination for the concrete and a suspicion of all abstractions’ (Femia 1987, 17), resisting neocolonial universalisms and transhistorical generalisations, and resonating with the context-sensitive analysis required to study Sino-Indian competition in the fluid maritime context of the Indian Ocean. In this vein, my theoretical approach does not reify theoretical constructs (Gunnell 1968, 186) but emphasises a ‘conditional vocabulary’ that remains adaptable to the unique socio-political landscapes of small states in the Indian Ocean (S. Gill 1993, 21), hence offering a strong epistemological and methodological suggestion (Bellamy and Schecter 1993, 166). Overall, while Gramsci framed subaltern revolution within class-based power structures, I transpose his framework to the international sphere. In this sense, my Gramscian approach opens space for small state ‘revolutions’, denaturalising the pervasive notion that the Indian Ocean is exclusively controlled and dominated by great powers and supporting my empirical findings at the intersection of traditional power structures and alternative small state governance.

Cultural Hegemony as a Lens for Understanding Sino-Indian Competition

To conceptualise great power influence on smaller states with competitive or conflicting intentions, I draw on Gramsci’s concepts of ‘cultural hegemony’ and ‘common sense’ as presented in *The Prison Notebooks* (Gramsci, Hoare, and Nowell-Smith 1971). Through cultural hegemony, which accounts for both physical dominance and cultural influence, ruling classes shape societal loyalty, fostering a form of power that induces consent by embedding their worldview into ‘common sense’. This ‘common sense’, as Gramsci (ibid., 419) sees it, is a ‘conceptualisation of the world that is uncritically absorbed’ by the masses. Building on Gramsci’s openness, which ‘invites and encourages adaptation’ (Guha 2011, 295), extending Gramscian concepts beyond their traditional class-based applications to the field of International Relations has

gained traction (e.g., Arrighi et al. 1982; Augelli and Murphy 1988; Cox 1983, 1987; S. Gill 1986, 1990; Overbeek 1990; Van der Pijl 1984). In particular, Cox (1983, 173) conceptualises international hegemony as inherently relational and consensual, with world orders ‘grounded in social relations’ rather than arbitrary force (Martin 2022, 84).

Applying this lens to non-Western great powers reveals how China and India project hegemony both domestically and internationally by framing their interests as universally beneficial, exemplifying the notion of hegemony as a ‘motor force of a universal expansion’ (Arrighi 1993, 149). In the Indian Ocean, India and China seek to embed their influence in the region by cultivating acceptance and alignment with their policy objectives, rather than relying solely on coercive measures. Notably, the combination of economic projects, such as India’s financing of the Trincomalee Oil Tank Farm and China’s funding of the Colombo Port City, alongside normative initiatives like academic exchanges and cultural agreements, highlights the multifaceted and hegemonic nature of power as advanced by both great powers in the Indian Ocean.

The Reciprocal Siege: Small Island State Agency as an Acknowledgement of Relationality

I expand the Gramscian framework to also theorise small state agency within the maritime context of the Indian Ocean, situating it within the conceptual paradigm of ‘oceanic thinking’. Building on the analogy established in the previous section, where Gramsci’s concepts are transposed from a class analysis within the state to an analysis of international relations among states, if the hegemonic role is fulfilled by the great powers, small states can be likened to the subaltern class. Just as Gramsci’s subalterns are constrained by ruling classes, small states operate within constraints imposed by great powers. However, just as the subaltern has the potential for resistance, these small states also exhibit forms of agency within the hegemonic system. Indeed, while Gramsci’s theory initially suggests a limited capacity for action and agency among the subaltern classes due to the concept of ‘passive revolution’, where social relations persist and popular consent is not mobilised despite political change, some passages from *The Prison Notebooks* advance a more nuanced interpretation (Bellamy and Schecter 1993, 150; Morton 2007). This excerpt is particularly significant:

‘In politics, the siege is reciprocal, despite all appearances, and the mere fact that the dominant has to show off all its resources demonstrates what calculation it makes of the opponent.’ (Gramsci [1947]1975, 351; Translation from Italian by the author)

My conceptualisation of small state agency draws on ‘despite all appearances’. Indeed, while the semblance of an impregnable structure of great power domination may be misleading, there remains a sphere of action for the subaltern classes or small states. This reciprocal siege, as articulated by

Gramsci, bestows upon the subordinate actors a subjectivity that recognises its strength and transformative potential (Burgio 2007, 77). In this sense, Gramsci diverges from deterministic interpretations of Marxism by suggesting that the subaltern are not mere passive recipients of dominant ideology; rather, they possess the potential to resist and reframe their material conditions. In particular, Bellamy and Schecter (1993) argue that Gramsci's emphasis on subjective, intellectual, and voluntaristic elements introduces an element of contingency into historical materialism, enabling subaltern classes to exercise agency within the constraints of hegemonic structures and, in the oceanic context of this paper, encouraging the examination of the intersection of traditional flows of power with alternative modes of governance.

Yet, while authors like Green (2002) equate subaltern transformation with autonomy, I argue that the exercise of subaltern agency in oceanic contexts does not necessarily culminate in full autonomy, but rather unfolds amid conditions of geographic smallness, embeddedness in great power rivalry, economic dependency, and environmental vulnerability. In other words, such agency materialises as a fluid and relational engagement negotiated within prevailing hegemonic currents. By synthesising 'oceanic thinking' with Gramscian theory and scholarship on Agentic Constructivism (Sikkink 2011), intersectionality,² and Postcolonial Studies,³ I thus conceptualise small island state agency as an acknowledgement of relationality between great powers and small states. In doing so, I propose that small island states possess the potential to transcend hegemonic constraints and engage in transformative actions, opening space for resistance and change within oceanic power structures.

Reconceptualising Sovereignty Through Deterritorialisation in the Oceanic Context

Returning to the conceptual core of 'oceanic thinking', my Gramscian framework invites a reimagining of sovereignty in the maritime context. Traditional Westphalian models define sovereignty as exclusive control over a fixed territory, with autonomy tied to legal and spatial boundaries (Agnew 1994; Carrai 2019). However, such definitions prove increasingly inadequate for explaining the political realities of small island states, whose size, geographic vulnerability, and strategic location render them deeply embedded in, and often dependent on, transnational dynamics. Rather than viewing sovereignty as a binary condition that is either intact or eroded, I problematise the sovereignty-territoriality nexus, rethinking sovereignty as a contested and contingent construct shaped by relational and spatial practices like land reclamation, infrastructure-building, and transnational engagement (Brenner 2004; Painter 2006). Crucial to this critique is Agnew's (1994, 209) idea of the 'territorial trap', which challenges the assumption that sovereignty requires absolute control over bounded space, instead highlighting broader spatial and

relational dynamics. Building on this, Brenner and Elden (2009, 354) contend that territory itself is 'being qualitatively transformed', rendering 'inherited geographical assumptions' analytically inadequate. Mountz (2013) similarly frames territorial sovereignty as 'contested', while Elden (2005, 2010) shows that territory is a 'political technology', produced through political, legal, and calculative practices. These dynamics lead to what Murton (2017, 1) calls emerging 'new systems of sovereignty and governance'.

Building on these insights, I turn to the South Asian context, where recent scholarship examines how sovereignty is reconfigured through spatial strategies and relational entanglements amid great power rivalry. Carrai (2019) introduces the concept of 'malleable sovereignty' to describe how China employs flexible legal strategies, such as the 99-year lease of Hambantota Port, to expand its influence. While this account critiques rigid Western legal norms and shows how sovereignty can operate as a politically contingent and fluid arrangement, it focuses primarily on China's logic and actions as a great power, leaving unexamined how small states might mobilise such arrangements to assert their own forms of sovereignty. Woods (2022, 2) explores how infrastructural projects in Sri Lanka, including Colombo Port City and Hambantota, produce 'differentiated claims to sovereignty' while reconfiguring national space. While relevant to this paper given its focus on the 'reclaiming of land from the ocean, and the removal of land by the ocean', especially pertinent to my analysis of Maldives, this work centres on how China's infrastructural strategy creates fragmented and contested territorialities in the Sri Lankan context. Therefore, like Carrai, Woods' focus remains on the effects of great power initiatives on the sovereign functions of smaller states.

While building on this literature, I shift the analytical lens to how small island states instrumentalise these dynamics, rearticulating sovereignty from below as a negotiated and relational practice. Suggesting, therefore, that the very contestation of space between great powers can itself become a site of small state sovereign rearticulation, Gramsci's conceptualisation of hegemony is particularly useful here. Through this lens, small state sovereignty is understood not as coercive control or rigid territorial boundaries, but as the ability to persuade and secure consent. Hence, sovereignty becomes another manifestation of 'oceanic thinking': a fluid and historically situated repertoire of practices and discursive strategies aimed at securing legitimacy amid geopolitical asymmetries. In this sense, sovereignty is not only closely tied to small state agency but often emerges from it, as the spaces and arrangements created by this agency become platforms for articulating alternative sovereignties: 'aesthetic sovereignty' in Sri Lanka, projected through monumental infrastructure, and 'terrestrial sovereignty' in Maldives, asserted through land reclamation and artificial island-building. Unlike territorial sovereignty, which rests on control over a fixed and historically inherited territory, 'terrestrial sovereignty' is actively produced by materialising land from the sea and

reconfiguring spatial connections, rendering sovereignty dynamic and transformative rather than static and bounded. Overall, my Gramscian framework centred on ‘oceanic thinking’ lays the groundwork for examining the empirical material in the following sections, which revolve around two core arguments.

Small Island States A/so Govern the Indian Ocean: Small State Agency as Shaping Great Power Competition

The first argument I advance in this paper is that small states in the Indian Ocean are capable of pursuing an alternative mode of governance to that of India and China. Specifically, drawing on ‘oceanic thinking’ understood as a dynamic interplay of discourse and practice, they enact small state agency by actively shaping and recalibrating great power competition rather than merely responding to it. In the case of Sri Lanka, this agency is evident in its active influence over the infrastructural domain of Sino-Indian competition, which is achieved by strategically instrumentalising its oceanic positioning while acknowledging the hegemonic presence of great powers and leveraging their interests.

Throughout the literature, ethnographic observations, and the interviews I conducted in Colombo, infrastructure consistently emerges as the central focal point of rivalry between India and China in Sri Lanka (e.g., Attanayake 2022; Baruah and Mohan 2019; Scobell, O’Donnell, and Ganguly 2023). In the aftermath of Sri Lanka’s civil war (1983–2009), in fact, the small state actively sought foreign direct investment (FDI) to drive its developmental agenda, leading to a significant increase in foreign engagement focused on infrastructure. China, in particular, became a major ‘infrastructural provider’, offering financial assistance with fewer conditions than Western or other regional donors, including India (Attanayake 2022, 115). Over time, India adapted its competitive strategy in response to China’s growing influence. In light of this context, Sri Lankan agency in the face of Sino-Indian hegemonic competition can be examined through two interconnected themes: first, Sri Lanka’s pragmatic approach to securing investments irrespective of geopolitical ramifications; and second, its active role in selecting projects and their locations. Below, I also discuss the case of Maldives to further strengthen my argument on alternative forms of oceanic governance and small island state agency.

‘We Simply Wanted To Get Things Done’: The Hambantota Port as a Case of Agency over Geopolitical Dependencies

Firstly, Sri Lanka exemplifies its exercise of agency as a small island state in its interactions with both China and India by prioritising infrastructural development and investments over specific geopolitical alignments. This is evident in Sri Lanka’s deliberate engagement with both great powers to rebuild its war-ravaged infrastructure, demonstrating a proactive rather than reactive role in

shaping regional dynamics. As one participant succinctly observed, ‘They wanted to attract investments for these big projects ... Sri Lanka simply needed investments, regardless of who was providing them’. In this context, several interviewees emphasised that China offered significant support without the conditionalities often attached to Western aid. A foreign affairs official explained,

‘Chinese assistance has always come without strings. They’ve never asked us to modify our domestic or international policies as a result of being recipients of the BRI largesse or any other assistance.’

This lack of conditionality stands in sharp contrast to the West’s reluctance to engage with Sri Lanka due to concerns over human rights violations in the final stages of Eelam War IV, and aligns with Sri Lanka’s otherwise deliberately inclusive approach to foreign policy (Gokhale 2015, 10). Highlighting Sri Lanka’s consistent willingness to secure support from diverse sources, another foreign affairs official articulated,

‘Sri Lanka doesn’t care about who is doing it ... Sri Lanka doesn’t refuse assistance and has never refused assistance from any of its friends, whether they are in the neighbourhood or further afield.’

In particular, by interacting with both India and China, Sri Lanka leverages the distinct modes of engagement they offer. As one participant noted,

‘India and China have two different ways of doing business and two different kinds of administration. However, what Sri Lanka wants is simply investments. We are here to prosper, to grow.’

This perspective reflects Sri Lanka’s acknowledgement of its agency in relational terms, as understood in the Gramscian sense, and its strategic acceptance of the roles of India and China as great powers. A foreign policy expert elaborated,

‘Due to the need to reconstruct, we actively accepted these spheres of influence. It was a conscious decision. The North, it’s India. The South, it’s China ... We have certain needs, and these have to come to the forefront into the future as well.’

Sri Lanka’s exercise of agency is particularly evident in Hambantota Port. Launched in 2008 with \$361 million in funding from China Exim Bank, the port was envisioned as an industrial and service hub for South Asia (Attanayake 2022, 117). Despite its strategic aspirations, the project struggled to attract sufficient business. In 2016, the port’s total revenue was just \$11.81 million, barely covering administrative costs and rendering loan repayment unfeasible (Dayaratna-Banda and Dharmadasa 2019, 15). By 2017, faced with mounting financial pressures, Sri Lanka opted for a debt-equity swap, leasing a 70% stake in Hambantota Port to China Merchants Port Holding Company for \$1.12 billion (Hillman 2018). This 99-year lease included 15,000 acres of land

for an industrial park (BBC 2017; Tudoroiu and Ramlogan 2021, 167). Although the funds were used to reduce debt, the deal attracted widespread international criticism (Abi-Habib 2018; Mourdoukoutas 2018; Wang and Ye 2019, 496). In fact, the Hambantota Port is often cited in the literature as the quintessential example of China's so-called 'debt-trap diplomacy', allegedly symbolising Chinese neo-colonial ambitions in developing nations and portraying Sri Lanka as a passive victim of Chinese influence (Behuria 2018; Brautigam 2020; Chellaney 2017; R. Kumar 2022; Scobell, O'Donnell, and Ganguly 2023).⁴ Specifically, the Hambantota lease has drawn comparisons to historical colonial agreements, such as Britain's 99-year lease of Hong Kong (Zhang 2018, 128). Critics, including Mourdoukoutas (2018), who describes Sri Lanka as a modern 'semi-colony', accuse China of exploiting Sri Lanka's financial distress to establish dominance in the region, challenging India's influence in the Indian Ocean (R. Kumar 2022; Thorne and Spevack 2017).

However, evidence I gathered through interviews conducted in Colombo challenges this narrative. A senior foreign affairs official explained,

'Developing Hambantota Port did not happen in a vacuum. We asked India first, it's not that we gave Hambantota on a platter to the Chinese . . . I know someone who was in that conversation . . . Since India said no, China was happy to help. We simply wanted to get things done.'

This statement highlights Sri Lanka's proactive approach in seeking investment, engaging with China only after India declined the opportunity, and exercising agency in navigating the competing hegemonies of the two great powers through the strategic locus of an ocean-facing port. Several participants echoed these sentiments, underscoring the intentionality behind Sri Lanka's decisions. As another diplomat noted, 'In Hambantota, I haven't heard that China encouraged any of those projects', implying that the initiative for development came from Sri Lanka itself. A senior journalist further argued, 'The decisions were made in certain rooms in this country. I personally don't blame China'. Rejecting the debt-trap narrative, another foreign policy expert stated,

'The West thinks this infrastructure in Hambantota could become a military base. However, I really don't think that's the case. Hambantota was first offered to the West and India, but only China agreed to invest.'

'Sri Lanka Gets To Decide What To Do': Sri Lanka's Role in Project Selection in Colombo Port City and Trincomalee

Sri Lanka further asserts its agency amidst Sino-Indian hegemonic competition by actively selecting infrastructure projects and their locations, countering the narrative of passivity widespread in the literature. A foreign policy representative articulated,

‘Sri Lanka definitely had an active role in deciding where the investments were going. Sure, China was looking for geopolitical leverage. But Sri Lanka wanted to invest in those projects.’

While the decision-making process is heavily affected by the country’s post-conflict priorities, the strategic oceanic positioning of the small island state is pivotal in actively influencing great power behaviour. One foreign policy expert highlighted this point, observing: ‘Every passing empire was looking at Sri Lanka with very lascivious eyes . . . there were times in history that we leveraged our location to our benefit’. By capitalising on its geographical location, Sri Lanka positioned itself as a site of competition between India and China, thereby securing funding for critical infrastructural projects. Emphasising that Sri Lanka’s role in shaping these projects extends beyond locations to project specifics, a government official noted: ‘It’s simply the Chinese way or the Indian way of doing things . . . but it doesn’t mean that Sri Lanka doesn’t have agency over what’s being built’. Reinforcing this point, an expert on Sri Lankan politics noted, ‘In choosing those projects, Sri Lanka’s leverage also increased. We were not passive recipients’.

Sri Lanka’s exercise of agency, exemplified through its active control over the nature and location of infrastructural projects, is particularly evident in the Colombo Port City initiative. Colombo Port City, launched in 2014, represents the largest foreign direct investment in Sri Lanka’s history, with \$1.4 billion funded by China Harbour Engineering Company (Attanayake 2022, 118). Officially part of China’s BRI, the project aims to transform 269 hectares of reclaimed land into a global financial hub and is designed to generate \$13.5 billion in additional investment and create over 83,000 jobs (Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute of International Relations and Strategic Studies 2020). While critics have described the Port City as a ‘Chinese enclave’ (Ethirajan 2022), its governance structure ensures significant local control. For instance, De Silva (2023, 62) notes that the majority of members on the Colombo Port City Economic Commission are Sri Lankan, challenging claims of foreign domination under the BRI. Colombo Port City serves as an example of Sri Lanka’s ability to choose the nature of its infrastructural projects, asserting its domestic priorities through a project literally reclaimed from the ocean. As a foreign affairs expert explained,

‘Colombo Port City shows Sri Lankan agency because it’s built with Chinese money, but it is also going to attract Indian money. I think who the Sri Lankans want to attract are Indians, Indians with money, rich Indians who come here and use this as a financial hub . . . There are ties of interdependence that provide opportunities for Sri Lanka to exploit.’

This statement reflects Sri Lanka’s capacity to use Chinese funding to develop a multilateral financial hub, attracting Indian and global investment. Another expert reiterated this point: ‘What you see all around us, including Colombo Port City, is Sri Lankan agency. It’s not India, it’s not China’. Another participant

expressed a similar sentiment, underscoring Colombo Port City as a manifestation of Sri Lanka's ability to attract great power interest while selecting and directing projects, thereby rejecting claims of external manipulation:

'So the objective of the BRI, and it has been stated publicly, is to create a future of joint prosperity. Then, Sri Lanka gets to decide what to do. Why should anybody be worried about it? . . . I personally think China's initiative has been a catalyst. Similarly, Sri Lanka has also encouraged countries in the West, like the United States, to take a more positive approach towards the development interests of poorer countries.'

Another illustration of Sri Lanka's agency emerges from its engagement with India regarding the Trincomalee Oil Tank Farm project. This initiative involves modernising 99 World War II-era oil tanks located in the strategically significant Trincomalee region (Brewster 2024). Once again, interviews revealed that the decision-making process surrounding the project rested firmly in Sri Lankan hands, as the country leveraged its oceanic positioning to attract foreign investment and bolster its energy infrastructure. A foreign affairs expert noted: 'India has shifted to using economics as a way of getting into Sri Lanka, making sure its economic interests are looked after but also that Sri Lanka has a say in this project'. Thus, Sri Lanka actively shaped the terms of the partnership and the implementation of the Trincomalee Oil Tank Farm project. Another participant reinforced this point, stating,

'Anything that India gives is a Trojan horse for Sri Lanka. However, that should really not be the case. We are the ones deciding what to do and where to do it, for instance in Trincomalee.'

Governing the Ocean from Colombo to Malé: Small Island State Agency and Spatial Strategy in the Indian Ocean

In light of the two points raised above, infrastructural projects, particularly those funded by Chinese and Indian investments, are initiated and overseen by Sri Lanka, thereby serving as tangible manifestations of Sri Lankan agency. This view was reinforced by one interviewee, who remarked,

'The Chinese didn't build all these nonsensical infrastructures in Sri Lanka. We wanted them built . . . It's not that China forced anything.'

Indeed, most participants rejected the notion of the so-called 'debt trap', acknowledging Sri Lanka's role in redefining its infrastructural landscape and positioning itself strategically within regional rivalries. Consequently, the majority of interviewees also defended China's intentions. For instance, a government official stated,

'I must say that at no stage has China asked Sri Lanka to share any strategic location with China or provide China with any strategic advantage. As far as I know and as far as I can

see, this request has never been made to Sri Lanka. But China has assisted Sri Lanka in many ways.’

Another senior foreign affairs official emphasised,

‘The Chinese have never tried to colonise anybody. They built a great wall to prevent others from coming, but, you know, they have not colonised anybody, unlike the British, the Portuguese, or the Dutch.’

These statements underscore that Sri Lanka’s agency actively influences great power behaviour, thereby enabling the realisation of infrastructural projects. Crucially, this has been possible due to Sri Lanka’s strategic location, historically a focal point for regional and global powers. As one participant observed: ‘Sri Lanka has agency also due to its strategic location. For this reason, Sri Lanka has strategic leverage over India and China’. However, while Sri Lanka’s agency as a small island state is partly derived from its advantageous oceanic position, which is a structural advantage in itself, this does not amount to geographical determinism. In fact, all interviewees discursively framed Sri Lanka’s engagement with great power competition as a deliberate and desired strategic choice, asserting through their narratives a form of agency that recognises and strategically navigates relational entanglements with larger powers. In line with ‘oceanic thinking’, they therefore articulate a discursive claim to agency, while also enacting a practical capacity to govern the Indian Ocean’s space alongside great powers. In this context, the Gramscian principle of relationality enables small island states to acknowledge the hegemonic presence of great powers and, based on this relational understanding, exercise their own agency by shaping great power competition. Summarising these considerations, one participant remarked: ‘We [Sri Lankans] made ourselves a site for competition’.

Maldives further exemplifies how small island states exercise relational agency through ‘oceanic thinking’ as a discursive and practical mode of governance privileging movement, fluidity, and spatial reconfiguration. In Maldives, agency is primarily articulated through land reclamation and spatial connectivity projects designed to address pressing domestic imperatives, particularly the overcrowding of Malé and the existential threat posed by climate change (Lloyds Bank 2023; UNCTAD 2023). These concerns, frequently highlighted by my interviewees, sit at the nexus of capitalising on great power rivalry and tackling local needs. As one government official observed,

‘There is a need for housing because of overcrowding. It’s the law of demand and supply, you know. It’s economics. Living in Malé has become incredibly expensive, and people need more housing.’

A local island politician added,

‘This problem is intertwined with climate change. First, local islands become uninhabitable because of rising sea levels and environmental issues. People can no longer engage in livelihoods like fishing, so they leave and move to Malé.’

In response, the Maldivian government has embarked on extensive land reclamation and cross-island initiatives. Hulhumalé, a reclaimed artificial island constructed two metres above sea level, embodies this dual response to overcrowding and climate vulnerability. A young bureaucrat explained, ‘People have started moving there because there’s a bridge to travel from Hulhumalé to Malé’, underscoring how the Sinamalé Bridge, financed by China through a USD 126 million grant and a USD 128 million concessional loan, functions as an infrastructural articulation of spatial governance that meets popular demands by enhancing mobility through linking islands across fluid ocean space (China Global Development Dashboard 2021).

As in Sri Lanka, Maldives instrumentalises great power rivalry as India and China compete to position themselves as development partners. A foreign ministry official explained, ‘India, China, Japan, yes. We need support not only for the land reclamation but also for the projects on the land once it’s there’. Another policy expert added,

‘The main competition between great powers is to be our development partner. So they offer us loans, concessional rates, credit swaps, and access to contractors for the projects we need.’

These statements reflect a pragmatic mode of engagement whereby the identity of the donor is secondary to the utility of the assistance, a dynamic further evident in how development partners shift with domestic political changes. As one senior academic noted,

‘With every change in government, the contracts are cancelled and moved to another great power . . . it’s a kind of ping pong between India and China.’

Such agency is tangibly manifested in the Indian Ocean: in the North of Malé, China’s presence is evident in the Hulhumalé development and the Sinamalé Bridge; in the South, India’s \$500 million Greater Malé Connectivity Project exemplifies a parallel logic (SASEC 2021). Both projects contribute to spatial connectivity while enhancing Maldives’ capacity to reconfigure and govern its oceanic space. An interviewee noted, ‘You see China on one side, and India on the other side’, while another added, ‘The competition is tangible, and Maldives is using it. There are two bridges, North and South of Malé, the Chinese and Indian bridges’. Additional examples, such as China’s Rasmalé land reclamation project and India’s Addu City shore protection initiative, pursue similar spatial objectives.

Crucially, several interviewees emphasised that these projects were not imposed by great powers but were shaped and selected by the Maldivian government. As one policy expert noted, ‘They give the project that the

recipient wants'. This agency is rooted in Maldives' ability to leverage its oceanic location as a form of strategic capital. A senior academic observed, 'Maldives being situated in the middle of the Indian Ocean ... gives us opportunities to leverage this competition for development aid'. Together, these dynamics show that Maldives, like Sri Lanka, articulates an agency that is both discursively constructed and materially grounded following my 'oceanic thinking' paradigm. By strategically engaging great powers in the name of fluidity, the Maldivian state exercises governance in the oceanic context and redefines its relationship to both space and power. Just as Sri Lanka governs the ocean by shaping the infrastructural modalities of great power rivalry, Maldives does so by manufacturing new territory and connecting it. Hence, both inscribing their power directly into oceanic infrastructures, Sri Lanka and Maldives reveal how small island states, through relational agency, can reshape the oceanic space.

Deterritorialisation of Sovereignty and New Modes of Connection Beyond the Nation-State

My second argument is that, by exercising agency, small island states challenge the Westphalian conception of sovereignty as territorial autonomy, fostering alternative, deterritorialised, and fluid sovereign practices. In this section, I examine Sri Lankan 'aesthetic sovereignty' through the discussion of projects such as the Hambantota Port, Colombo Port City, and the Lotus Tower, and draw on the Maldivian case of 'terrestrial sovereignty' to further substantiate my argument.

Infrastructures as 'Symbols of What Sri Lanka Aspires to Be': Aesthetic Sovereignty

In Sri Lanka, as highlighted by a foreign affairs expert, conceptualising sovereignty solely based on territorial autonomy would be 'a very restricted thing'. The Hambantota Port project vividly illustrates this tension. Initially conceived as a cornerstone of Sri Lanka's developmental ambitions, the port's construction was financed through Chinese loans. However, as discussed above, Sri Lanka's inability to service the debt led to the leasing of the port to China Merchant Port Holdings for 99 years (Moramudali 2020, 7). While framed as a pragmatic solution to economic pressures, this arrangement has been widely criticised as undermining, or even erasing, Sri Lanka's sovereignty by ceding control over the port (e.g., Brautigam 2020; Chellaney 2017; Khobragade 2023; R. Kumar 2022; Mishra 2021; Mourdoukoutas 2018; Scobell, O'Donnell, and Ganguly 2023). Such critiques, however, operate within the Westphalian paradigm and fail to account for the relational dimensions of agency embedded in this transaction and their implications for

sovereignty in an oceanic context. In Hambantota, sovereignty stems from Sri Lanka's relational capacity to leverage its oceanic positioning and strategically engage with great powers to achieve its infrastructural objectives. As a foreign affairs official observed, 'Hambantota is not just a port; it's a statement of Sri Lanka's relevance in the global trade routes', a statement that derives its force more from spectacle and display than from functional utility. On this premise, Sri Lanka maintains a form of sovereignty that I refer to as 'aesthetic', privileging the realisation of grand and magnificent infrastructural projects over strict territorial autonomy. Therefore, the small island state enacts sovereignty through visible symbols of modernity, progress, and aesthetic unity, leveraging great power engagements to shape narratives and practices of development and connectivity. By leasing Hambantota, Sri Lanka deterritorialises sovereignty, framing it as a dynamic and negotiable construct rather than a fixed territorial claim.

Another infrastructural project that epitomises Sri Lanka's aesthetic sovereignty is Colombo Port City. This initiative involves extensive land reclamation from the sea, with the aim of establishing 'a city of world-class proportions and functionality' (Ethirajan 2022). While formally under Sri Lankan jurisdiction, the project's operational framework heavily relies on Chinese investment and expertise, blurring the lines between domestic and foreign control (Attanayake 2022). This ambiguity not only disrupts traditional notions of sovereignty but also affirms the concept of aesthetic sovereignty. Indeed, by capitalising on external resources stemming from great power hegemonic competition, Sri Lanka projects a modern and cohesive infrastructural image. Here, sovereignty becomes a performative articulation of national presence, wherein infrastructural grandeur compensates for political fragmentation, especially in a postcolonial and post-civil war context, and projects an aesthetic unity that transcends the territorial boundaries of the nation-state.

The Lotus Tower, funded by a \$100 million Chinese loan, similarly embodies Sri Lanka's post-war resurgence as South Asia's tallest skyscraper. Despite its financial struggles, underutilisation, and critiques labelling it a 'failed white elephant' (R. Kumar 2022), the project underscores Sri Lanka's agency in pursuing symbolic infrastructure aligned with national aspirations. As a foreign policy expert observed,

'The Lotus Tower and Colombo Port City are more than just infrastructure, they are symbols of what Sri Lanka aspires to be in the 21st century.'

Therefore, aesthetic sovereignty allows Sri Lanka to assert its presence domestically and globally through visibility and grandeur. In doing so, it demonstrates how small island states can transcend the 'smallness' of their geographical boundaries and the territorial assumptions of the nation-state paradigm. Ultimately, this deterritorialised approach to sovereignty offers

a compelling alternative to the binary of autonomy versus dependency, showcasing the epistemological potential of small island states in oceanic contexts to reconsider foundational International Relations concepts.

'The Shape of the Islands Will Keep Changing': Terrestrial Sovereignty in Maldives

In Maldives, sovereignty materialises through land reclamations, artificial island-building, and spatial connectivity projects. In other words, following the paradigm of 'oceanic thinking', sovereignty is enacted through the transformation of oceanic space into terrestrial space and vice versa. The inherent territorial fluidity of the Maldivian archipelago, continually reshaped by rising sea levels and coastal erosion, already points to post-Westphalian forms of sovereignty that challenge control over a fixed territory (Abdulla 2020; Ananthavinayagan et al. 2024; Gagain 2012; Karthikheyan 2010; Rayfuse and Crawford 2012). As a senior academic explained,

'One part of the island, on one side, erodes away, but there is sedimentation on another side. So maybe the shape of the islands will keep changing in the future, with implications on sovereignty.'

Moreover, the Maldivian emphasis on the 'terrestrial' dimension of sovereignty (as defined above, sovereignty produced through land reclamation and the reconfiguration of spatial connections) is deeply rooted in a sense of insecurity and institutional fragility. Narratives like 'India might invade us at any time' often circulated among my participants, accompanied by acknowledgements of weak governance and the practical difficulties in exercising comprehensive control over the archipelago. As one interviewee put it: 'Due to our smallness, there is no real control'. This perceived vulnerability underpins the state's emphasis on territorial materialisation, whereby adding and reshaping land becomes a strategy to visibly mitigate existential anxieties and enact sovereignty.

Within this context, land reclamation and artificial island-building address domestic imperatives, such as alleviating Malé's overcrowding and providing new housing spaces, but also serve a symbolic and strategic role in asserting sovereignty amid environmental precarity and great power rivalry. A local island politician observed that reclamation projects often serve 'governmental purposes linked to sovereignty', while a former politician remarked that despite its geographic smallness, 'the Maldives could be viewed as a large ocean state if it could fully exploit its abundant marine resources'. As in Sri Lanka, this enactment of sovereignty is entangled with Sino-Indian competition: the small island state leverages great power presence to secure resources for land-making and infrastructure, while simultaneously using these projects to affirm its own sovereign relevance. Thus, sovereignty becomes

detritorialised and post-Westphalian, yet materially re-inscribed onto the ocean through the creation of land.

Together, Sri Lanka and Maldives illustrate how small island states can foster alternative forms of governance beyond the dominance of great powers. In doing so, they encourage a reimagining of sovereignty within maritime contexts, where the fluid and interconnected nature of the ocean, materially expressed through ports, reclaimed land, and maritime infrastructures, provides the enabling conditions for small island state agency.

Conclusions

In conclusion, I have argued that two, specific small island states in the Indian Ocean are not merely subject to Sino-Indian competition but active agents in shaping it. By serving as central nodes within oceanic or networked systems, Sri Lanka and Maldives demonstrate how small states can advance alternative forms of maritime governance distinct from those of great powers through the discursive, practical, and epistemological paradigm of ‘oceanic thinking’. By embedding themselves within these oceanic flows, small island states leverage their relationality with great powers to exercise agency. While their capacity to do so is partially structural and enabled by geography, the empirical evidence in this paper has suggested this agency is ultimately enacted through deliberate strategic choices (though, as I note below in the limitations, some of these may also function as retrospective or performative narratives of agency). Sri Lanka exemplifies this agency by shaping its infrastructural landscape, attracting Indian and Chinese investments and leveraging its strategic oceanic location to solidify its role as a trade hub. Similarly, Maldives leverages Sino-Indian competition to reclaim land and promote spatial connectivity, turning its maritime position into an asset for domestic needs.

I have further argued that, in exercising relational agency, small island states deterritorialise Westphalian sovereignty. This redefinition is grounded in the fluidity of oceanic contexts, which decouple sovereignty from traditional notions of territorial autonomy. Hence, small island states reveal that sovereignty in maritime contexts can manifest in diverse forms and across multiple sites, reinforcing my central argument that small states are capable of offering alternative governance models distinct from those subsumed within great powers’ hegemonic formations. For Sri Lanka, sovereignty takes the form of ‘aesthetic sovereignty’, wherein the small state prioritises grandiose infrastructural projects over maintaining full territorial autonomy, as seen in Hambantota Port. In Maldives, sovereignty manifests as ‘terrestrial sovereignty’, enacted through land reclamation and artificial island-building that convert ocean into territory, redrawing the borders of the nation-state amid environmental and external pressures.

Overall, I have employed a Gramscian framework to explore the intersection of traditional power flows and alternative forms of maritime governance, advancing a more nuanced and multi-sited understanding of spatialised power in oceanic contexts. By recognising that the hegemonic exercise of power by great powers indeed exists, Gramscian vocabulary and theory have highlighted the mutual nature of this influence, showing that small island states can govern the Indian Ocean as well. While traditional power flows are dominated by great powers through overt manifestations of influence, such as investments, debt-for-equity swaps, and hegemonic discourses, alternative governance is exercised by small island states through their ability to shape great power competition and advance novel forms of sovereignty.

Despite its contributions, this paper has some limitations, particularly in relation to my positionality. Indeed, my subjectivity is not a 'gaze from nowhere' (Haraway 1988, 581) but is instead shaped by factors such as language, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity (Denzin and Lincoln 2011, 12), all of which influence the process of knowledge production. As a Western academic 'outsider', my presence as audience may have led participants to perform certain roles and project a particular image of their state, shaping their responses in ways that call into question the extent to which their statements can be taken at face value. It is also possible that some of the speech acts and narratives I recount function as post facto justifications rather than straightforward reflections of strategy. In this sense, it may be more accurate to say that actors imagine or see themselves as strategic agents, constructing narratives of agency in hindsight. However, this limitation is mitigated by the fact that these narratives, even when conditioned by my involvement or framed as retrospective self-justification, can themselves be understood as part of the agency exercised by small island states, an agency often overlooked by Western media and academia.

Moreover, while acknowledging Indian and Chinese hegemony, I primarily focus on small state agency. However, a deeper analysis of these Gramscian forms of hegemony, particularly regarding the small state internalisation of models promoted by great powers as Gramscian 'common sense', could further nuance the claims of small state agency presented in this paper. For instance, Sri Lanka's emphasis on infrastructure may, to some extent, be linked to the Chinese development model and Xi Jinping's 'mega-infrastructure vision', which frames infrastructure projects as expressions of China's structural and discursive power (Ho 2020, 1462).

Finally, this paper points to two main areas for further research. First, while it suggests that 'oceanic thinking' could be applied beyond maritime contexts to landlocked small states like Nepal or Bhutan, this potential remains unexplored. Examining how the metaphor of fluidity operates in inland contexts as an epistemological tool that dwells on the marginality of actors conventionally assumed to lack power could illuminate new forms of small state agency and

sovereignty outside the oceanic realm. Second, the dynamics of small state agency examined here are largely mediated by political and economic elites. In Sri Lanka and Maldives, infrastructural and land reclamation projects are often driven by electoral incentives, marked by corruption, and can result in environmental harm. A Gramscian lens, therefore, urges closer scrutiny of whose agency and whose sovereignty are being advanced, and for what purposes, to avoid reproducing elite narratives and to capture potential disconnections from grassroots interests. Together, these considerations highlight promising directions for further research.

Notes

1. This study received ethical approval from the Social Sciences and Humanities Interdivisional Research Ethics Committee (IDREC) at the University of Oxford. The research was reviewed and approved under the reference number SSH_OSGA_SA_C1A_23_119, confirming that it met the necessary ethical standards, including adherence to national and international guidelines for research involving human participants. All participants provided informed consent before taking part in the study. Depending on the context, either written or oral informed consent was obtained, in accordance with the guidelines approved by the Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC). Measures were also taken to ensure confidentiality and secure data storage.
2. Originating in Gender Studies, intersectionality addresses how overlapping identities, such as gender, race, class, and sexuality, shape experiences of power and discrimination (Alexander-Floyd 2012; Beale 1970; Clarke and McCall 2013; Crenshaw 1991; V. Smith 1998). By extending intersectional analysis to the realm of small states, particularly non-Western small states like Sri Lanka and Maldives, this paper emphasises structural power dynamics in the context of great power competition in the Indian Ocean. For instance, Cooper (2016) highlights how intersectionality's focus on concurrent patterns of discrimination allows for a nuanced understanding of these dynamics, which is particularly relevant in contexts where small states encounter multiple layers of marginalisation.
3. Overall, the convergence between Gramscian theory and Postcolonial Studies enriches the theoretical framework advanced by this paper by providing tools for analysing subalternity and agency in contexts of asymmetrical power relations. Indeed, Gramsci, embodying 'his era's anti-colonial energies' (Brennan 2006, 233), has profoundly influenced Postcolonial theory through his concepts of hegemony, the subaltern, and the national-popular. This has been facilitated by the historicism and flexibility that characterise Gramscian theory, making the 'postcolonial reincarnation' of these concepts achievable and fruitful (Srivastava and Bhattacharya 2012, 7). The main Postcolonial authors who make more or less explicit reference to Gramsci's work are Guha (1982), Spivak (1985), and Said (1978).
4. The debt-trap narrative, which is widespread in the literature, posits that China deliberately lured Sri Lanka into unsustainable debt to gain control over strategic assets. In particular, critics argue that China's financial engagements lack safeguards to prevent undue burdens on recipient nations (Zhang 2018, 129), with loans often criticised for their lenient conditions (Hillman 2018, 9).

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