



FIGURE 01: PROPOSED THAI KRA-CANAL ROUTE

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The Indian Ocean has several "choking points" which give access to it. One of them which has been of huge concern to commercial shipping comprise the Strait of Malacca. It is the main sea lane between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea leading to the Pacific Ocean. The oil-tanker traffic uses it as the primary route between the Middle East oilfields and the oil-hungry nations in the north and east Asia. It has been projected that more than 20 million barrels a day — much of it destined for China — will need to traverse the Strait of Malacca by 2020. Consequently, the security of the vessels has become a wake-up-call due to the Strait being prone to piracy.

It's littoral States of Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia, have enhanced security, including co-ordinated sea patrols and of air surveillance, for the benefit of all. The outcome has been a dramatic downturn of sea piracy in 2004. However, another negative factor which relate to the Strait has been it's narrowing to 12.5 kilometers. Accordingly, a mega-oil tanker accident in the narrow part in the Strait could create a major backlog in this sea route affecting imports for weeks to the oil-hungry nations.

In these circumstances, seaward planners have been actively considering an alternative route to the Strait of

Malacca. It's outcome has revived interest in the long standing proposal to cut a sea-level canal across the Kra Isthmus of Southern Thailand. This has intrigued the influential business community, academia, and politicians in Asia. Some Thai politicians have been strong advocates of this Canal. In 1978, an international engineering firm hired by a Thai Foundation prepared a preliminary engineering and economic survey report. It had recommended a 102-km long route from a place called Songkhla in the east, to a point north of Satun in the west. (See Figure 1). Subsequently, in 2003, it was reported that the Thai Cabinet had hired a Hong Kong based company to conduct a feasibility study. The latter had estimated it's cost at the time to be about US\$ 20 billion. Consequently, the proposed project had stalled over the massive cost, and also due to it's environmental impact. On the other hand, an internal US Defence Department Report prepared in 2005 claimed that China as part of it's alleged "string of pearls" "maritime strategy involving forward

THE THAI KRA CANAL

- it's strategic relevance for Lanka's development

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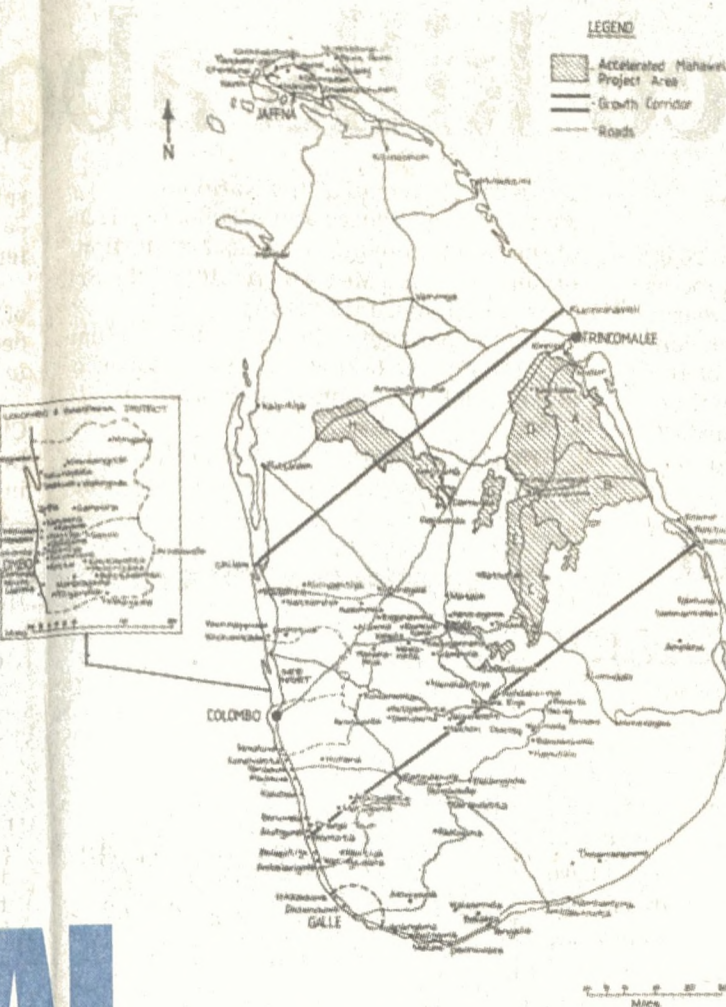


Figure 08: Colombo-Trincomalee Bi-polar development corridor, (mendis, 1982)

Island chains. Accordingly, it claimed that the large quantity of the world's shipping which expected to use the new sea route, not only reflected a huge economic value, but will correspondingly imply an increasing requirement of security. Hence the reason for India's interest in engaging with it's South East Asian neighbours as per it's "look east" foreign policy. Meanwhile, the proposed Kra Canal could pose a serious economic threat to Singapore.

Thus, seaward analysts have expressed that, "Thailand has much to gain, as Singapore has much to lose".

In the aforesaid transformation of world shipping envisioned in the Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka cannot be on the sidelines. It must be proactively engaged in becoming an integral part of the change. The island nation being halfway between Europe and Asia on the proposed new sea route, has the immense potential to be the recipient of a

substantial share of it's inherent benefits. It's strategic value is what was highlighted by David Soysa in his recent Article wherein he strongly advocated a five-pronged road map to prepare for what he predicted as the "third revolutionary change in shipping and trade" (See Sunday Island of 21.12.2008). It's consequent impact envisaged on both Ports of Hambantota and Trincomalee, crystallises the ground reality of same. Thus, according to Soysa a pragmatic shipping visionary had predicted that, "12000-18000 TEU container vessels of the future carrying less than ship loads of containers will be induced to terminate their East-West voyages in a port like Hambantota to the Far East ports using the obsolete but yet seaworthy 4000-6000 TEU vessels." Further, Soysa had asserted "Trinco or Hambantota, or even both, are ideally located to become the oil hub for the region between the Middle East and the Pacific Regions".

My contribution in this Article is a rejoinder to further enhance the awareness of the general public, and to draw the attention of the public policy makers on the significant potentials to be harnessed from the proposed Kra Canal sealand.

The strategic relevance for Sri Lanka in reaping the beneficial fallout from the Thai Kra Canal should not be viewed exclusively in ports development. It's confines should not only be seaward by the preparation of master plans for both Hambantota and Trincomalee ports. On the other hand, these are two key nodal settlements in the already prepared National Physical Plan which has provided the necessary inputs for it's landward connectivity.

Continued on page 12

The Thai...

From page 7

The prospects for the country's overall economic growth will arise from the complementarity of the seaward and landward linkages of the ports. The synergies of networking the key nodal areas by the physical and economic development of land in our small island nation is a critical factor in the forward planning process. The latter ensures the coupling of producers and consumers in both urban and rural areas. In turn, it signifies the captive hinterlands of the Hambantota and Trincomalee nodes which can be spatially configured in it's respective Regional Physical Plans. It's corresponding bounds could then develop to a spatial pattern similar to what is in the hinterland of the Colombo port. Accordingly, the suburbs and the urban core areas of Hambantota and Trincomalee will emerge over time to mutually reinforce each other. It's outcome will be the multi-sectoral contribution to the National GDP, and to the Provincial GDP of the Southern and Eastern Provinces. It's occurrence as per the respective Regional Physical Plans will provide for the integration of the economic, physical, social, & environmental, aspects of land therein. The lack of the latter approach is largely the cause for the provincial disparities in our small island nation. It's overarching trigger has been the non compliance of the Provincial Councils with the provisions of the Town and Country Planning (Amendment) Act No.49 of 2000, which had tasked the Provincial Regional Planning Committees chaired by the Provincial Chief Secretaries, to formulate the Regional Physical Plans for promoting the development of their respective Provinces.

In the above context, the contribution by academia have dominated the design of spatial configurations of settlement nodes. Accordingly, the example of the likely pattern of a spatial strategy formulated some time ago for steering the development of the "Greater Trincomalee" area based on its port-related potentials is shown in Figure 2. It's current review is now opportune arising from the beneficial fallout from the proposed Kra-Canal sea lane.

The corresponding nexus of Greater Trincomalee with its counterpart in the Colombo - centered south-western seaboard, in the form of a bi-polar development corridor between the two, augurs well to create the conditions conducive for the landward spread of the benefits in developing the Trincomalee port. The overarching outcome of same will be its synergy with the on-going massive development in the Mahaweli areas of this bi-polar corridor. (See Figure 3)

A similar spatial configuration can be formulated for the landward development arising from a "Greater Hambantota" area, based on its port-related activity. It's links to the national spatial strategy, will correspondingly capture the cascading landward impact of the development of Hambantota port consequent to the Kra-Canal sea route.

In these circumstances, the consideration of the proposed new sea lane offers the opportune time for Sri Lanka to be engaged in the preparation of its seaward and landward planning in advance of the beneficial outcomes. The public policy framework for same is inherent in the Town and Country Planning legislation which has tasked the Provincial Councils and the Local Authorities within whose territorial jurisdictions are the ports of Hambantota & Trincomalee.

The past practice has been for Regional and Local Physical Planning to be undertaken by the aforementioned apex agencies for the Provinces and the Local Authority areas. The reason for same being the absence of cadres in the Provincial Councils and in the

Local Authorities for the recruitment of qualified Physical Planners. It's only exception was that of the Municipalities of Colombo and of Dehiwela-Mt-Lavinia. Consequently, the development orientation with a forward looking vision for its respective areas had never originated in these second and third tiers of governance. The consequence was the exclusive reliance on the apex agencies to in-fill the technical content of plan preparation. The latter inherently lacked it's "ownership" which in turn denied the vision for the future development of the area. In essence, it has been the absence of this driving force to induce the development process and its sustenance. The outcome being therefore confined to a clinical approach devoid of commitment by the actual stakeholders of the area.

The beneficial outcomes of the Kra-Canal sea lane cannot be coupled with the type of situation as described above. The people of Hambantota and Trincomalee in particular, and of Sri Lanka in general, cannot become recipients of partial development from only the Ports. The existing provisions for harnessing its landward synergies which had been hitherto untapped must be activated by the implementation of the Physical Planning legislation. This should be the underlying imperative for the Provincial Councils of the Eastern and Southern Provinces, and for the Local Authorities of the designated jurisdictions of Hambantota and Trincomalee, and of its hinterlands.

The imminent dawn of the post-conflict era in Sri Lanka also suggests that the time is now ripe for the culture of peace-time planning to re-emerge in promoting development, after nearly 25 years of "planning in a crisis". In the latter context, the areas of Greater Trincomalee and of Greater Hambantota, are particularly promising for integrated physical planning. In same, the impact therein of the proposed new sea lane to the Kra Canal cannot be overlooked.