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Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean: Towards an Archipelagic Countermapping of Maritime Mobilities
Research Paper

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List of Acronyms

GIS (Geographic Information Softwares)
QGIS (Qualitative Geographic Information Softwares)
IR (International Relations)
SNA (Social Network Analysis
MCA (Multiple Correspondence Analysis)
WASABI (Waters, Securitization, Anxieties and Border Imaginaries)
IZOP (Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace)
BRI (Belt and Road Initiative)
MSR (Maritime Silk Road)

Abstract

This research paper problematizes the dominant logics of antagonistic representation that characterize geopolitical and International Relations (IR) discourse, particularly in relation to emergent transregional infrastructural connectivity in the Indian Ocean. It argues that cartographic depictions and discourses of geopolitics are guilty of representing transnational and transregional political relations through rigid, binaristic categories and frameworks that foreclose the possibility of more relational perspectives. By zoning in on the case of Sri Lanka, frequently rendered passive or peripheral in IR-centering narratives, it challenges rigid, securitized representations of oceanic space and territoriality. Methodologically, it comprises a countermapping of vessel mobilities around Sri Lanka, since the rollout of China's Belt and Road Initiative and Maritime Silk Road in 2018. Drawing on Edouard Glissant's (1997) archipelagic relationality, it foregrounds alternative means of framing and representing geopolitical relations, as opposed to its dominant registers of antagonism and tension. Its theoretical framework centers fluidity, dynamic relationality, and historical layering as alternatives to linear, colonial logics of mapping and power. By applying archipelagic relations through countermapping and analysis, this research contributes possibilities for more relational framings of geopolitical discourse attuned to fluidity, interconnection and the multiplicity of oceanic narratives.

Relevance or Development Studies

This research delves into central disciplinary concerns of development studies, such as in relation to epistemic production, spatial/temporal/political representation, and the pervasive influence of contiguously colonial and western IR logics. Given development's discursive and narratival reliance on maps, territory, and hierarchies of spatial ordering, it is prone to naturalizing/reifying several hierarchies that also underscore the nature, direction and magnitude of its (developmental) interventions. This is important, particularly in the context of Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean, where development has been deeply enmeshed with strategy, militarization and logistical flows. By utilizing countermapping, this research offers a visual-discursive means of engaging with these discursive-representational categories, demonstrating how conceptual, visual and material infrastructures can render certain regions/states peripheral, passive and thus subject to external logics of security, strategy and zero-sum competition. By foregrounding island mobilities to refigure a static, antagonistic depiction of geopolitical space, countermapping can be useful in facilitating reimagining development in more relational and positively entangled ways. In doing so, it can also generate conditions for the possibilities of reorienting development and governance towards plural, situated and co-constitutive understandings of power and relations.

Keywords

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Problem: Problematizing Cartography and Geopolitical Antagonisms

Maps have historically served as representational artifacts, means of visualizing space, tools for inscribing certain politico-spatial logics, and as affirmations of territorial sovereignty, thus broadly speaking as instruments of political authority and legibility. From Ptolemy's gridded world map and Mercator's 16th century atlas to the British Ordnance Survey and the Great Trigonometrical Survey of India, maps have been pivotal to European modernity's imperatives of projecting political power, ordering space and naturalizing political boundaries (Harley, 1989; Cosgrove, 1999; Ackerman, 2009; Steinberg, 2009). As the historical ruptures of colonization and decolonization culminated in the consolidation of the sovereign state, these top-down cartographic imperatives were assimilated within states' bureaucratic-administrative frameworks of regimented rule and identity building (Branch, 2014; Latour, 1998; Scott, 2020). The nation-state, in many ways, succeeds empire, paralleling its techniques of territorial abstraction and spatial demarcation through cartographic projection. The persisting postcolonial significance of cartography to world-ordering can be grounded in the epistemic context of Western IR (International Relations), a field that produces knowledge regarding the interaction of different actors (state, non-state, etc.) on the 'global' scale (Agnew, 1995, Tickner and Blaney, 2012), And while IR's spatial-cartographic orthodoxies (notably the territorial trap) have been challenged by more horizontal, decentralized mappings of power and power relations that are collectively underscored by *network* thinking (Chandler and Pugh, 2021; Pugh, 2018), traditional geopolitical maps remain the popular *visual-cartographic* means by which dominant IR logics materialize, and geopolitics is narrated. Therefore, keeping in mind the modernist residues of maps' aesthetics and visual communication and the emergent networked logics that influence contemporary map production, this research proposes the following question as a starting point: in what ways do these maps --- materializing as visual and narratival devices that shape the contours of geopolitical representation --- produce, facilitate and naturalize an antagonistic, conflict-driven understanding of geopolitical relations?

A broad array of state, non-state and non-governmental IR actors produce geopolitical maps of the world and its regions, and in doing so inscribe and concretize certain knowledge forms and ways of seeing space, which results in an antagonistic, tension-driven

understanding of geopolitical relations and worlds. Maps invoke a wide range of **multisensory** affects, emotions and sensualities (Kitchin and Dodge, 2007; Kitchin et. al., 2013; Callahan, 2020), made possible, to varying degrees, by the visuality and discursive elements of maps. And while it is not possible to outline all their **multisensory** implications here, given their dynamic and highly varied affects, here the focus on their **visual** and **communicative** commonalities, given how they are fundamental to projecting and visualizing maps' messages. The growing prevalence of geopolitical maps in public and scholarly domains pertaining to the Indian Ocean also coincides with the rollout of the BRI and MSR in 2013. This *antagonistic forestructuring* and depiction of geopolitical relations can be underscored through cartography and its narratives in the context of the Indian Ocean, a region increasingly subject to strategic scrutiny and IR's interpretative frameworks (see Kaplan, 2009).

Figures 1-6 shows a range of Indian Ocean maps with varying geopolitical foci (Somalian piracy, maritime sovereignties and expansion, military bases, chokepoints) that exemplify this representational problem.

Figure 1: Indian Ocean Strategic Map (2025), Carnegie Endowment for Peace
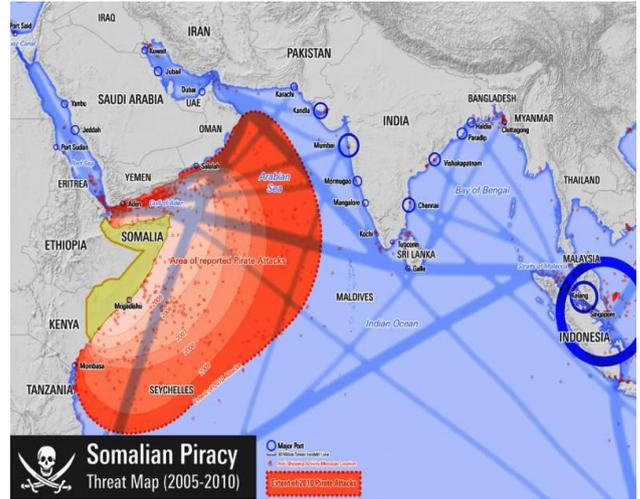
Figure 2: Somalian Piracy Map (2011)

Figure 3: Great Power Assets in the Indian Ocean
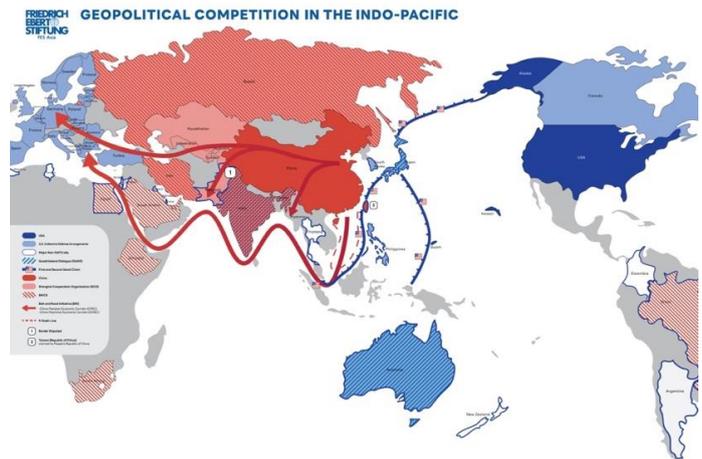
Figure 4: Geopolitical Competition in the Indo-Pacific (2025), Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung

Despite their different thematic foci, these maps characterize dominant geopolitical mapping tendencies insofar as they present a common representational outlook: they construct the Indian Ocean as a space of contestation and as a theatre of antagonism, primarily structured by the imperatives of threat, securitization and confrontation. Ranging from symmetrical, blob-like extensions of littoral lands that visualize a territorial imagination (Figure 1, 2, 4) to binary colour codings of Chinese/Indian possessions/interests that subordinate the map to logics of great power competition (Figure 4), the spatial-representational and interpretive tendencies of orthodox IR can be observed aplenty here. Figure 6 is a more pertinent example of coupling network relations with cartography, as indicated by its layering of connectivities

over a base map. Titled "Geopolitical Tension in the Indo-Pacific," it coalesces what it deems the principal referents of geopolitics--- an array of competitive geostrategic alignments and power configurations --- onto one map in an attempt to provide an overarching, synoptic view of geopolitical reality. The use of a binary colour-coding scheme, where red and blue represent Chinese and US interests respectively, once again paints an oversimplified, rigid understanding of political reality by centering logics of great power competition. China's regional/global presences, depicting using invasive red arrows (Cheshire and Kent, 2023) is visually suggestive of its threatening nature to American-Western hegemonies.[1]

These visual-spatial cues embed antagonistic perceptions of geopolitical relations and append a visual grammar to logics of confrontation, political friction and territoriality, rendering tension endemic to the relations between states, regions, actants and agents. Given IR's pretensions to universal knowledge, these dominant registers of representation become axiomatic and thus foreclose the possibility of alternate representations and imaginaries, perceptions of space, time and politics. These adversarial dynamics consequently emerge as self-evident, naturalized through geopolitical maps and their corresponding IR conceptual categories and interpretations. Such representational politics are central to rendering infrastructural projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) axiomatic with narratives, anxieties and apprehensions of geopolitical, geostrategic confrontation. The BRI's geopolitical coverage is often characterized by discourses of "enmity, unease and fear" (Chand and Garcia, 2021, p. 15) about China among Western countries. Similarly, Campbell (1998), speaking of US foreign policy norms regarding China, remarks how "certain modes of representation crystallize around referents marked as danger" and thus give geopolitical events their common currencies of conflict and tension-fraught atmospheres. Consequently, this sense of tension thus gets underwritten in the geopolitical representational in a manner that is not unequivocally linked to or materially preceded by the tangible presence of armed conflict.

By pre-fixing such discursive entry points, such maps forestructure the frames of reference, in other words the grounds along which mainstream geopolitical understandings of these regions, and their parts emerge. The visual and cartographic means through which these

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[1] Cheshire and Kent, arrows used to denote flow, movement and magnitude.
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geopolitical antagonisms are naturalized, can be further elaborated using Hall's (1997) seminal insights on the politics of representation and how the other is turned into a spectacle through visuality. Maps visually operate as semiotic structures, using an assemblage of codes and signs to generate and fix meaning through visual and symbolic association (Hall, 1997). Consequently, map symbols as geopolitical signifiers become the visual markers through which power hierarchies, inequalities and representational differences operate and are naturalized. And while American-Chinese entanglements are quite illustrative of these geopolitical antagonisms, this discussion on great powers to segue into a focus on its marginalized others; the epistemically codified stereotype of the *island state*, whose complexly heterogenous agencies, spatialities and temporalities are recurringly subordinated to the utilitarian, zero-sum logics of great power rivalry and strategic gain. This great-power-centric approach conversely unfolds as the practice of geopolitical belittlement (O Hau'ofa, 2006), which starts with the simplistic act of denoting an island as small. Small, in the context of islands, mutually appends notions of dependency and political insignificance, thus reifying colonial-modernist notions of islands as remote, vulnerable places. Sri Lanka's depiction as a node in China's expansive BRI network further exemplifies this, given how it shapes the possibilities of Sri Lanka's representation by primarily situating it within great-power-centric logic. Pertinent examples include the Strait of Malacca -- often depicted as a locus of geopolitical and maritime tension, which representationally transforms Sri Lanka's engagements with China into an unwitting part of China's broader, expansive String of Pearls strategy. In this context, the chokepoint, or rather its insertion on a geopolitical map, becomes a central code/symbol/signifier of importing strategic resource-driven considerations and external logics of power onto questions of Sri Lankan agency. Such antagonistic geopolitical signifiers and narratives, by subjugating Sri Lanka to external, top-down logics of power and agency, deny it a fullness of representational and relational multiplicity.

Given this problematic, this research draws upon the case of Sri Lanka to illustrate how dominant geopolitical antagonisms, their cartographic signifiers, and discursive correlates can be interrogated and unsettled to facilitate and produce alternate geopolitical imaginaries. Sri Lanka's islandness, historically sedimented over years of colonial rule and knowledge production, also finds itself perpetuated through conventional IR frameworks (Jazeel, 2009), producing and engendering several popular representational tropes of insularity, remoteness and containment. As Siriwardne-de-Zoysa (2022) articulates, this islandness is challenged by Sri Lanka's conceptualization as an island hub, and as a nodal position "across various networked trans-local relations of trade and enmeshed political

interests" (p. 77). However, such increasingly relational representations must be further scrutinized regarding the extent to which they can subvert and unsettle existing conceptions of islandness, as well as regarding their manner of framing relations.

This research challenges Sri Lanka's island hub notions, which encode its spatial representation and discourses with presumptions of peripherality, strategic utility and vulnerability in a manner that furthers antagonistic perceptions and reifies an IR-centric understanding of the world. It shed light on how (counter)mapping, as a particular visualizing of discourse, can visibilize the multiplicity and simultaneity of relations, mobilities and representations that are subjugated, distorted and obfuscated by IR-centric cartographic-geopolitical imaginaries. As theoretical anchor, the project borrows from Glissant's (1997) archipelagic relationality, characterized by a move towards relationality, a problematization of a rigidly linear spatiotemporal sensibility, and reimagining difference beyond its modernist conception and as a productive site of transformation. Given that this project concerns islands and their representation(s), it is also about emergent relations, fluidity and entanglement unfolding in the Indian Ocean. This research deploys countermapping as an epistemic-discursive intervention through which dominant spatial-political tropes can be challenged and thus conditions of possibility can be created for alternate, more relational readings of space, place and polity.

1.2. Research Objective

This research seeks to challenge western IR-centric geopolitical imaginaries of the world which entail antagonistic, tension-driven understandings and representations of geopolitical relations. It focuses on Sri Lanka as a case study, an island state currently enmeshed in different infrastructural connectivity paradigms in the Indian Ocean. It comprises a QGIS-based countermapping of Sri Lanka's maritime mobilities to provide an alternate visual and cartographic depiction of geopolitical relations. Framed using Eduardo Glissant's (1997) theory of archipelagic relation, which centres fluidity, entanglement and relational movement, this countermapping also seeks to subvert colonial, linear logics of mapping. Broadly, this research constitutes an interdisciplinary countermapping that draws upon insights from poststructural IR, political geography and countermapping literature to explore how power, space and visual representation are mutually entangled in the production of

geopolitical knowledge and power and how such visual interventions can generate newer, relational conditions for the possibilities of geopolitical knowledge and its representation(s).

1.3 Research Question(s)

How can the countermapping of maritime infrastructures and mobilities challenge dominant narratives of confrontation, tension and competition in the context of emerging infrastructural connectivity?

With this in mind, the following sub-questions can be proposed, highlighting further, complementary aspects of this research:

- How can aesthetic and structural design choices in countermapping, given the affective, visual and sensorial dimensions of maps, subvert and reframe antagonistic, competition-centric depictions and discourses of geopolitics?
- How can countermapping, undergirded by archipelagic relational thinking, challenge and reframe depict antagonistic framings of islands, as exemplified by the mutual tropes of geopolitical dependence and insignificance?
- How can archipelagic relationality be productively mobilized to alternately anchor peace initiatives, and what does this entail for the prospect of peaceful geopolitical imaginaries?

1.4 Structure

The first chapter introduces the research problem of antagonistic geopolitical representation, framing it in correlation to the messy confluence of cartographic and dominant relational logics and showing how geopolitical maps conform to these reductive logics. This is followed by the research objective, and an outlining of the research question and its various complementary sub-questions.

Chapter 2 comprises the methodology, starting with an overview of the overarching theoretical commitments that underpin the mapping methodology. This is followed by an account of the data collection and tabulation process. The section concludes with a reflection

on the mapping processes conducted in this research, an overview of the possible limitations, and how the countermapping process mediated them.

Chapter 3 introduces the theoretical framework for the project. It provides a critical overview of dominant relational mapping practices in IR. It then elaborates upon the case study of Sri Lanka, an island hub, in terms of both maps and discourses. Finally, it presents the key theoretical anchoring for this research, grounding it in Eduardo Glissant's framework of archipelagic relations.

Chapter 4 explains the findings of this research, mainly using the maps oriented around Glissant's theoretical building blocks. The first section concerns operationalizing opacity through the aesthetic, structural choices of the maps. The second finding pertains to how this countermapping creates a cartographic depiction of creolization, thus helping challenge Sri Lanka's limited conception of relations as an island hub.

Chapter 5 presents the third finding, building on the insights from the countermapping research. It examines the possibilities of alternate relational geopolitical imaginaries and the political methods and framings that can be used to generate them.

Chapter 6 provides the conclusion, summarizing the key findings of the research.

2. Methodology for Countermapping

This countermapping exercise and related research is undertaken by the Sri Lanka case study team, as part of the [WASABI (Water, Securitization, Anxieties and Border Imaginaries)](#) project at ISS, which studies the lives, experiences and imaginaries in the context of securitized and securitizing water borders. Funding for this research was provided through the Starter Grant, issued by the Dutch Ministry of Science, Education and Culture. The data and maps produced for this research are licensed under Creative Commons (CC), facilitating information sharing and availability for a wider audience.

2.1 Positionality and Reflexivity: Ethical Considerations

Maps, as instruments of power have, been historically endemic to development, its imaginaries and the consolidation of its logics. My interest in this countermapping research stems from how maps' creative and imaginative capacities, can challenge and subvert the colonial, top-down imperatives of geopolitical mapmaking. Given that mapping and countermapping are themselves ethical processes (Duggan and Gutiérrez-Ujaque, 2025), it is important to overview these considerations. As someone from the so-to-speak global South, I am acutely aware of how mapping can help challenge conventional development narratives and unveil newer forms of meaning-making in ways that are freed from the constraints of Eurocentric geopolitical thinking.

As a Pakistani who is researching on the maritime context of Sri Lanka, I occupy the paradoxical position of being regionally adjacent but politically distant from Sri Lanka. This means that even though I am more familiarized with the wider discursive and geopolitical context of the Indian Ocean (that Pakistan is also implicated in), I am less acquainted with the Sri Lankan context. To amend this, I have immersed myself in an interdisciplinary array of regional scholarship regarding Sri Lanka, through collaborating with academics, and thus cultivated a critical reflexivity through which my own biases and partiality in this research can be recognized.

Over the course of this countermapping and research, my outsider status entailed containing with and mediating a number of limitations. Most importantly, the interpretation of local and geopolitical spatial narratives regarding Sri Lanka is influenced by my unfamiliarity with the local languages, and my own national geopolitical context that is centred around Pakistan. These factors ultimately influence my access to and understanding of Sri Lanka's maritime geopolitics and cartographic imaginaries. As such, my work aims to ensure that the geopolitical representations I produce remain sensitive to local epistemologies while also interrogating the broader structures of power that shape them. Therefore, by engaging in a critical reflexivity vis-à-vis my own epistemic position and framing of knowledge, I have attempted to work with these identified perspectival constraints.

2.2 Ontological and Epistemological Considerations

This research constitutes an interdisciplinary act of countermapping, i.e. making (Culcasi, 2025; Ragazzi, 2023) and analysis that draws upon insights from a range of academic scholarship and disciplinary approaches; critical IR, critical geopolitics, decolonial thinking,

island studies, post-representational cartography, and archipelagic Caribbean philosophy, to ground its theoretical commitments and framings. By engaging in countermapping, this research seeks to build upon Culcasi's (2025) insight that mapmaking hardly figures in writings and analyses of maps. In doing so, it seeks to (a) provide an ontological starting point for this countermapping and research, and (b) reflect on the use of QGIS in terms of methodological viability.

Borrowing from island studies, and keeping in mind its relational objectives, this countermapping research identifies onto-epistemology as its starting point, thus framing epistemology, i.e. knowing and ontology, i.e. being as mutually constitutive domains that cannot be separated from each other (Pugh and Chandler, 2021). This approach aligns with Barad (2007), who rejects inter-action in favour of intra-action, arguing that objects and agents are not pre-givens but emerge and are constantly made and remade through relation. Such embodied, relationally entangled frameworks are also germane with the mapping imperatives of this research, which following Kitchin and Dodge (2013), reorient maps as partial, processual artifacts. This is to say that there are no perfect, final, or better maps. Maps are always fragmentary, always in a process of becoming, and so always embody a partial, fragmentary representation of the world. These theoretical commitments to partiality, contingency and emergence highlight the central political imperative of this research: using mapping to reimagine and recast Sri Lanka through its relational entanglements and connectivities.

This countermapping research uses QGIS (Qualitative Geographic Information Systems), which given its integration of quantitative, rational and non-heuristic aspects and outcomes, is best seen as a mixed methods approach. QGIS involves a varying combinations of empiricism and non-rational knowledge, which means that it need not be strictly defined as quantitative or qualitative, scientific or unscientific. Instead, it carries together these different, seemingly contrasting frameworks and sensibilities, thus providing a space "for the productive tension of colliding epistemologies" (Brown and Knopp, 2008). Given this and the explicitly non-empirical imperatives of this research, the use of QGIS necessitates a negotiation with several positivist (and also non-positivist) frameworks that underpin its hardware and algorithms, and which subtly, implicitly or explicitly influence the mapping process, and its affective, discursive interpretations (Pavlovskaya, 2009). Therefore, methodologically for the countermapping, the idea is not to reject positivism or substitute it

with another epistemological framework. Instead, drawing on Ragazzi's (2023) insights about mapping's many simultaneous and multidisciplinary logics, the objective is to complement QGIS's empirical focus with its visualizing abilities. This is also its main methodological viability, presenting empirical data in a manner that allows for viewers/readers to get a "feel for the main components of a broader phenomenon" (Ragazzi, 2023, p. 8) such that that tabulated forms of empirical data are unable to replicate. This advantage also illustrates another benefit of QGIS's visualizing abilities, its ability to present information in a non-rational manner which allude to its aesthetic and sensorial dimensions. These are central to this research's imperatives, given how they cannot be accounted for solely by rational analysis and must be augmented by more interpretive methods (Ragazzi, 2023), which can speak better to the visualizing, affective aspects of mapping.

2.3 Data Collection

The data for this research comprises a list of maritime vessels with country flags, which have officially frequented Sri Lanka between the years 2018-2024, a time period contiguous with the growing proliferation of infrastructural connectivity projects in the Indian Ocean region. The data and corresponding visual information on maritime infrastructures was collected by a local research consultant in Sri Lanka using publicly available port and naval logs. Initially, the raw data was tabulated on Microsoft Excel. Later, it was refined to introduce geospatial coordinates for the different vessels. The data collected here is from four major Sri Lankan seaports: Hambantota, Galle, Colombo and Trincomalee.

2.4 Data Processing for Mapping

Over the course of a two-month period, the WASABI case study team met several times to reflect on the mapping process and provide feedback regarding the geospatial visualizing of the data. This mainly involved developing categories of relations/ship visits and deliberating on the use of visual symbols for the map design. Consequently, this was a reflective and co-creative process of mapping. The final, refined version of the dataset contains the following categories of information per military vessel: ship name, the year of visit, mapping coordinates for longitude and latitude, ship type and purpose. Several tools and platforms

were used to tabulate and refine the data. Grok 3(AI) was used in the early stage of data organization to identify key ports in the various countries of the vessels' origins. This was a pragmatic decision undertaken to ensure consistency across all origin countries. Additionally, given that the data pertains to military vessels, their precise routes were not mapped given the classified and strategically sensitive nature of military vessel information. Later, MarineTraffic was used to plot the typical shipping routes in relation to Sri Lanka's main four ports for which the data was available. By presenting warship movements through typical shipping routes, these maps also foreground the increasingly dual-nature maritime infrastructure use as illustrative of relational entanglements. Latlong.net was used to identify the latitude and longitude coordinates to improve the geospatial mapping of ship visits. For the geospatial visualization, QGIS (offline) was used. Through cartographic visualization, QGIS situates these maritime mobilities within the geographical materiality of the Indian Ocean, thus generating possibilities for the articulation of alternate geopolitical narratives.

2.5 Reflecting on Limitations Vis-a-Vis Mapping Choices

Given the dynamic, differential and highly variegated processes, outcomes and affect(s) of mapping, it is paramount to consider the structural choices and limitations encountered in the process of data collection, tabulation and geospatial visualization. This section outline two limitations, each of which influenced the countermapping process. These are regarding (1) the temporal scope of the data, and (2) regarding the classified, sensitive nature of the information visualized on the maps.

The first limitation encountered was regarding the nature of the dataset. The data collected is 2018 onwards, whereas Sri Lanka's involvement in the BRI and generally infrastructural connectivity projects predates this. Consequently, this data only contains a snapshot of Sri Lanka's maritime interactions given its limited coverage, which cannot be characterized as a comprehensive, quantitatively accurate mapping of vessel mobilities. However, the central concern of this research is not empirical precision, rather it is representational. This reorients the research's focus from concerns of empirical accuracy towards how the data is interpreted and represented. To further elaborate on this, the use of the collected data, insofar as the numerical quantity of ship visits is concerned, only serves the purpose of geospatially visualization, so as to foreground the multiplicitous and contemporaneous nature of maritime mobilities around Sri Lanka. The visualization then

becomes a marker for the affective sensing, interpreting and politicization of mobile maritime infrastructures, instead of being judged through the cartographic yardstick of empirical accuracy. This decentring of informational transparency further extends to the ports of origin in the dataset, which were randomized using generally available data on the frequency of port traffic within the respective origin countries. Once again, this illustrates the research's approach to decentring the land-based referents of maritime movement, instead focusing on movement itself.

The second limitation can be explained through the nature of the data which is based on warships and military vessels. Here, the problem emerges in terms of its restricted scope, given how maritime and oceanic movements and activities in the Indian Ocean are not just confined to military vessels, but rather comprise a multitude of maritime infrastructures, operations and activities. This limitation pertains to the naval logs, which do not contain any information about container ships that are privately owned. As a result, ships without any country flags or under country associations are not mentioned in the dataset, and consequently not represented on the map. This, then, pertains to the sensitive nature of information and concerns of confidentiality with handling the data. As mentioned before, the dataset is of warships, and therefore contains specific information regarding their movements, routes and specifications. The disclosure of this information can potentially entail both ethical and security risks, given how it may intersect with other themes like maritime strategies and national security, which makes it important to exercise caution in the handling and potential sharing of this material. As a result, in the final cartographic representation of the data, such identifiers that can potentially reveal confidential information, encompassing ship names, locations, and routes, have been anonymized or omitted to comply with the imperatives of ethical research and security factors. As mentioned before, for the process of mapping, these routes were generalized using MarineTraffic to address this confidentiality problem and provide a more generalized depiction. At the same time, this scope of the dataset also useful because it helps contend with ongoing, real-world developments in the Indian Ocean region, characterized by a rapid proliferation of warships and military vessels.

3. Literature Review

This chapter outlines the background for this research, focusing on two key themes that help introduce the conceptual framework for the countermapping exercise and related research. First, it provides a critical overview of contemporary dominant relational mapping, as underscored by the ubiquitous metaphor of network thinking. In doing so, it demonstrates the inadequacies of network thinking for this research, indicating the need for alternate ways of mapping and representing relations. Second, it elaborates on the case study of Sri Lanka through the discursive and representational trope of island hub, paradoxically constituted by notions of islandness and connectivity. Explaining how this trope is mutually produced and reified through geopolitical maps and discourses, it shows how such framings restrict the possibilities of Sri Lanka's cartographic, discursive and political representation and reify its peripheral status within antagonistic, geopolitical narratives.

3.1 A Critique of Dominant Relational Thinking: Problematizing Networks

This sub-section provides a critical appraisal of dominant relational thinking, as exemplified by the metaphor of network thinking. While networks encompass a diverse array of analytical and methodological approaches (Hafner-Burton et al., 2009), this research is concerned more specifically with their metaphorical affordances and implications. First, this sub-section highlights the need for assessing networks, and in doing so, presents a brief overview of their recent proliferation in the social sciences. It then critically defines network thinking, primarily using Coward's (2018) insights to show the ways in which network thinking constrains the possibilities of relational representation.

This research's focus on networks, and the necessity of attending to this aspect is based on two reasons. Firstly, they are implicated in the production and politics of mainstream geopolitical maps. Even as network thinking typically juxtaposes itself to the objectivist tradition of cartography, they have been used together extensively throughout recent history, and as the common practice of layering network flows over base maps entails, are mutually entangled in the production of geopolitical knowledge and power. Secondly, this particular focus is necessitated by how networks have proliferated across several fields and disciplines and have become ubiquitous with relational thinking and mapping. For critical IR practitioners specifically, network analysis has emerged as an integral tool for articulating the relationships between actors at different scales. The analytical and metaphorical affordances

of networks thus characterize a range of post-structural theoretical developments that have acquired salience in IR: Latourian SNA, assemblage thinking, SNA (social network analysis), Bourdieusian MCA, and ANT, among others (Coward; 2018, Ragazzi, 2023) (national/transnational/regional). This also echoes policymakers' and mapmakers' relational turn towards the mapping of relations and relational entanglements to facilitate problem-solving techniques (Chandler, 2020, p. 281). Another similar turn has taken place in island studies, where islands, framed as sites of relational entanglements, are instrumentalized to facilitate problem-solving techniques (Chandler, 2014a; Pugh and Chandler, 2021; Pugh, 2018).

Collectively, these changes signify an ontological shift in mapping, from its more linear, objective days in traditional cartography towards more processual and contingent understandings in the contemporary context. Centering plurality and flux, they are increasingly concerned with the articulation, depiction and governance of contingent, non-linear processes, outcomes and effects (Chandler, 2020). Despite the different, varying resonances of networks across different disciplinary and theoretical strands, this research identifies three broad entailments of network thinking, borrowing from Coward's (2018) work. Bringing these different discursive implications together helps coalesce how networks entails a particular, metaphorical way of thinking and being in the world. Firstly, networks foreground relations of connectivity through the interlinking of different nodes which can comprise a range of human and non-human entities. Secondly, they are comprised of novel actors, "distributed, non-hierarchical, semi-autonomous entities bound into flexible, strategic relationships" (Ibid., p. 452). Thirdly, their depictions are post-territorial and non-contiguous, which can be seen from how they are rendered as abstract, topological two-dimensional/three-dimensional diagrams and visualizations that are not grounded in geographical notions of space. This can be extended to include their disembodied nature, which essentially implies that they are separated from "surrounding, contiguous matter and relationships" (Ibid., p. 453).

Network thinking certainly offer a useful conceptual-methodological apparatus for presenting interconnection, insofar as it foregrounds relationality, hones its attention on immanent, non-linear occurrences and phenomena, and thus implies a departure from modernist framings of Euclidean space, linear time and Cartesian dualism (Wiedorn, 2021). It has also been central to unsettling IR's notorious territorial trap and static geographical

depictions (Agnew, 1994; Ragazzi, 2023). However, as de Goede (2012) and Cowen (2018) illustrate, it is also unable to fully subvert the totalizing, reductionist modernist endeavors and imperatives that it originally emerged in opposition to. Here, three broad limitations of thinking through networks can be identified. Firstly, networks amount to an overdetermining of relations and relationality, the black box nature of the network's nodes denies them their own agency and substantiveness, whereby they are not seen to exist outside of the relations they form or exist outside of the network they are deemed to operate within (Coward, 2018). This amounts to an act of homogenizing, whereby nodes are defined primarily in terms of how they relate to that particular network of relations. In doing so, networks fails to incorporate or account for the potentialities and systemic modifications that arise from nodes' individual, intrinsic abilities. Therefore, while traditional cartography has been guilty of positivism, networks' reductionism works in an opposing direction, i.e. through an overdetermining of relations and by essentializing mapping as a topological exercise and construction.

Secondly, the network's nodes are premised on complete transparency and legibility of entities and their interrelations. This tendency is exemplified through two key features of networks. This problem emerges from how nodes representing entities are defined almost entirely through their linkages, i.e. their relations with other nodes and entities in the network. The nature of this correlation is mainly quantitative, assigning numerical values to the size, density and distribution of relations. Moreover, networks have no fixed outer limit and can expand endlessly to incorporate other entities, subject to their relevance for that network. This expansive interiority of networks, entailing the absence of an external boundary, means that networks can endlessly expand and assimilate weak correlations and tenuous linkages, risking the possibility of essentializing entire groups, communities and identities (Coward, 2018). Indeed, as the centrality of networks to surveillance regimes and risk analysis indicates, they still remain central to top-down, transparency imperatives of governmental agency (Amoore and de Goede, 2008). As is later explained in the conceptual framework, this transparency is problematized as a central problem in Glissantian thought, given its extensive implication in colonial, imperial and extractivist histories and imperatives. Thirdly, the disembodied nature of the network means that it de-emphasizes fail to adequately account for the affective dimensions of place, space and time. In this sense, they are unable to adequately incorporate the "feelings of structure" (Williams, quoted in Coward, 2018) that are often central to representation, and which emerge through culture and community.

Following these claims, one can discern how network thinking, across different disciplines and methodologies, risks a limited and totalizing understanding of relations. In doing so, it risks reifying top-down, authoritarian aesthetics of mapping through (a) its disembodied, detached framing of networks, and (b) its partially-effective-at-best addressal of relations and their representations.

Given its limited representation of relations, network thinking appears inadequate for addressing and upturning the central problematic of antagonistic geopolitical representations. Infact, as the case study section will further highlight and contextualized, they are doubly constructive in antagonistic depictions of relations, essentializing geopolitical dynamics by pre-supposing intentions, patterns of behaviour and responses, and producing adverse representational implications for small states and islands. Adding to this, networks are historically complicit with narratives of securitization, risk and terror (Saxena et al., 2004). SNA, for instance, has been extensively used in creating security networks post 9/11, as well as to map terror cells (de Goede, 2012; Wasserman and Faust, 1994). Consequently, given these antagonistic legacies, and networks' aforementioned constraints in representing relations, this research looks beyond networks' constrained conception and instrumentalization of relation, towards open-ended, *archipelagic* framings of relationality. This underscores the decision to use QGIS for the countermapping exercise, given how it anchors representations in an embodied, spatially grounded manner through using the world map as backdrop. Moreover, contrary to dominant relational depictions, these WASABI countermaps do not seek to qualify their depiction of relations by assigning a quantity to them, or by empirically framing and analyzing their flows. In that sense, they do not carry forward a mapping of relationality that furthers transparency and legibility but rather reorients mapping towards more creative, imaginative possibilities and processes, as visually creative artifacts that entails more diverse, multiplicitous and irreducible framings of relations.

3.2 Sri Lanka: A Case Study for Island Hub Representations
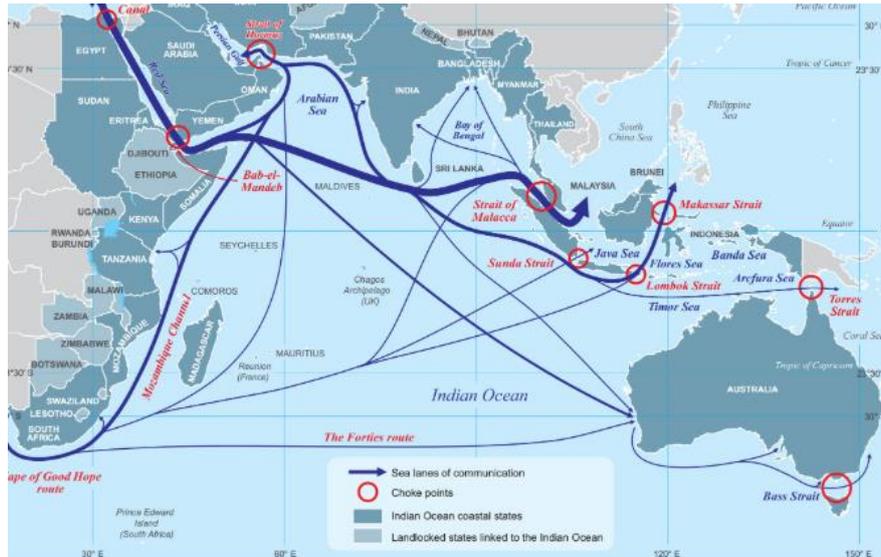
Figure 5: Maritime Map with Sri Lanka in view

This section elaborates the case study for this research; Sri Lanka as an island state in the Indian Ocean, grounding it in the notion of island hubs. It unpacks island hub notions in relation to its discursive constituents, i.e. contrasting notions of islandness and connectivity, showing their relevance for the Sri Lankan context. Through this framing, it shows how Sri Lanka's geopolitical identity is constrained in terms of both maps and accompanying discourses. This trope of island hubs is selected, given its particular capacity to simultaneously illuminate and work with two contrasting contemporary notions regarding Sri Lanka (and islands in general), i.e. islandness and connectivity. These conform respectively to (1) the historical, colonial notion of islandness that pigeonholed islands into narratives of remoteness, seclusion and disconnection, and (2) more contemporary notions of connectivity where islands, portrayed as resilient and connective entities, are framed as hubs, interlinked nodes and as productive sites of interaction and exchange. Finally, it grounds this discussion of Sri Lanka as island hub in geopolitical maps and discourse, illustrating how it materializes as and through the mutual tropes of dependence and insignificance. In doing so, it demonstrates how dominant geopolitical depictions of Sri Lanka are constitutive and generative of the initial research problem, i.e. the antagonistic registers of geopolitical representations.

3.2.1 Discursive Representations of Islandness

Islands have featured resonantly in the modern, colonial imagination, metaphorized as zones of exception that existed in dichotomous opposition to the continent/mainland. This essentialized, static view of islandness has generated a slew of associative discourse, narratives and tropes of containment, insignificance, insularity and vulnerability (Deleuze, 2004, Wöll, Pugh and Chandler, 2021; 2023)It should be remembered however, that for Sri Lanka's case, a further elucidation of island hubs necessitates an engagement with the historical, political and representational specificities of the Sri Lankan context. Sri Lanka's islandness, then, can be traced in terms of material origins to the colonial encounter in 1815, when British troops defeated all remaining organized opposition and for the first time unified the island under colonial rule. Sri Lanka's islandness thus historically emerged as a specific colonial mapping that sought to delineate the island's space and render it legible and governable under British colonial rule. Over the years, through acts of repetition, reification and discursive consolidation, islandness was inscribed and naturalized as a pre-given fact of Sri Lanka's existence (Jazeel, 2009). This can be evidenced from its pervasiveness across different representational domains and aspects of Sri Lanka's existence. For instance, islandness remains the dominant spatial configuration for "most hegemonic discourses of Sri Lankan nationhood" (Jazeel, 2009), as well as across the domains of tourism, infrastructural development and geopolitics (Godamunne et al., 2022; Ward, 2023; Woods, 2022). It is helpful to further points out that Sri Lanka's islandness is not a static or historically defined phenomenon confined to a specific time period, rather it is contemporary in terms of how it continues to be enacted, performed and consolidated presently, thus indicating a more ongoing, processual notion of islanding (Radicati, 2017, 2020). While a detailed overview of the various discursive and material sites in which islandness has materialized for Sri Lanka is beyond the purview of this research, the main objective here is to show its persisting nature and its discursive-representational hauntings, foregrounding how islandness continues to hold prominence in the Sri Lankan spatial and political imagination.

3.2.2 Hubs: A Limited Relationality for Sri Lanka

Having discussed how islandness manifests in the Sri Lankan context, this section addresses it paradoxical discursive correlate, hubs,[2] which are layered over, coexist with and thus

complicate discourses of islandness. While the notion of hubs also denotes Sri Lanka's precolonial exchanges, entanglements and connectivities, the use of hubs here denotes a more specific, present context – as indicative of and shaped by globalisation and contemporary, disembodied notions of connectivity. Hubs, or hubness as Radicati (2017) coins the term, is both spatial and temporal and emphasizes many Sri Lankans' desire to boost Sri Lanka through oceanic connections. As Siriwardene-de-Zoysa (2020) writes, the notion of hubs and hubbing complicates and adds nuances to extant notions of islandness, "drawing attention to the diversity of crisscrossing movements, flows, and circulations between people, animals, goods, ideologies" (p. 77) that characterize island spaces and identities. Within this context, Sri Lanka is often imagined not as an autonomous, agential site of exchange and relation-making, but as a marginalized peripheral conduit and node within larger global networks of logistics, capital and power, framings and interpretations that borrow heavily from network thinking. Such tropes, while centering and appreciating connectivity, also simultaneously reproduce and reify top-down framings and hierarchies of dependence and marginality, subsuming Sri Lanka under external logics of power. Layered in conjunction with islandness, hubbing does not fully dispel notions of island containment and insularity by invoking connectivity, rather they amalgamate unevenly and nonlinearly to produce particular "readings of openness and insularity, connectivity and disconnection that are reproduced materially" (Siriwardene-de-Zoysa, 2020, p. 77).

3.2.3 Island Hubs in Geopolitics: Maps and Discourses

Having explained how island hubs encompass paradoxical, converging and competing discourses of islandness and connectivity, this section shall ground island hubs and their interpretive affordances in terms of geopolitical maps and their discourse. For this, let us return to Figure 4, a holistic map of geopolitical dynamics.
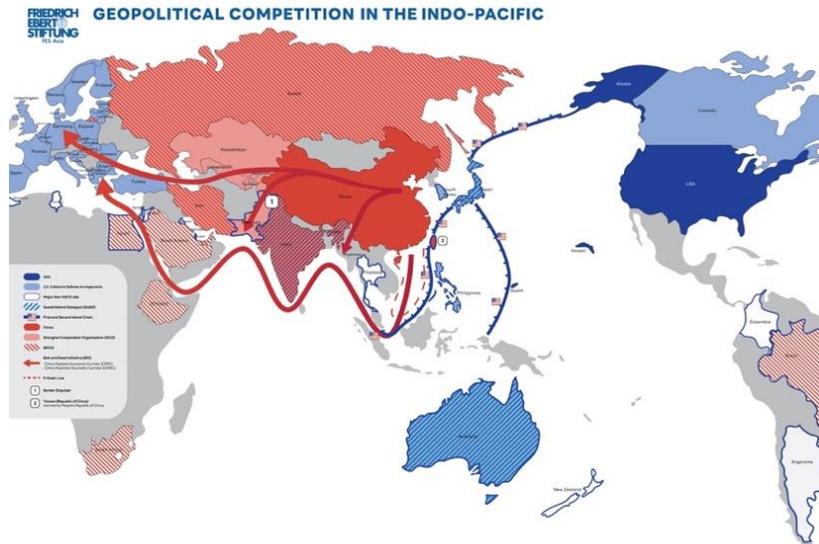
Figure 4 (repeated): Geopolitical Competition in the Indo-Pacific

The outlining of the research problem illustrates this earlier, touching upon how this map subordinates geopolitical discourse to great-power-centric logics, engendering antagonistic depictions. Here, I will address how these representational tendencies specifically concern Sri Lanka. Figure 4's manner of depiction reduces Sri Lanka to an unnamed landmass, located along the path of an alarming, vivid red arrow. This resembles what Harley (1982) would call a cartographic silence, in terms of how it renders Sri Lanka absent from the map. To answer the question of how this map facilitates notions of hubs along routes (Siriwardene-de-Zoysa, 2020), it embeds the imagery of a small, seemingly inconsequential landmass enveloped and encircled by an alarming, expansionist BRI network. This map thus serves as a visual metaphor that facilitates Sri Lanka's geopolitical peripherality and marginality. It not only renders Sri Lanka absent from geopolitical discourse, but also defines, when, in relation to what, and how Sri Lanka is invoked and depicted in mainstream geopolitics.

These mapping tendencies are not just significant visually and affectively, but they also correspond to, facilitate and reify real-world narratives, which can be illustrated using two mutual tropes of *insignificance* and *dependence* entailed by island hubs. Working in tandem, these imply a discursive double bind, whereby islands are treated as marginal, irrelevant and unworthy of mention in geopolitic, except in relation to external referents, forces and aspirations. This discursive materialization can be illustrated through Sri Lanka's BRI engagements with China, through the example of Hambantota, a deepwater port in southern Sri Lanka, exemplifies how smaller states are subsumed within external,

overarching logics and narratives that feed into antagonistic representations of geopolitics. Started in the mid 2000s under Mahinda Rajapaksa's tenure, the project sought to transform Sri Lanka's maritime activities with financial and technical assistance from China but faced setbacks due to high project costs and frequent delays in construction. After nearly a decade, in 2017, as the project seemed resigned to failure, Sri Lanka renegotiated the terms of its agreement with China, giving greater concessions, whereby China Merchants Port Holdings acquired Hambantota on a long-term lease period of 99 years. This development was received with apprehension and alarm in the geopolitical domain, cited as an example of China's increasingly aggressive and expansionist policies, with China accused of weaponizing loans against a weak, helpless Sri Lanka to gain greater political and economic leverages. This culminated in the consolidation of the trope of debt-trap diplomacy, where a creditor nation lends money to a borrower (nation) on unsustainable terms with the intention of gaining leverages, and one that continues to be prevalent in geopolitical discourses vis-à-vis China, especially when it concerns the BRI and MSR initiatives. The intention here is not to ascertain the veracity of these claims regarding Chinese motives, or the true nature of China's intentions. Much has been said on it already, both for and against (Brautigam, 2020; Carmody, 2020; Himmer and Rod, 2022). Instead, this geopolitical trope serves as an example of, and to underscore the prevalence and synonymity of such antagonistic narratives in geopolitical discourses concerning China (Gangte, 2020), their representational implications and their constrained, antagonistic manner of depiction.

This adversarial framing oversimplifies complex geopolitical realities and relations, collapsing a broad set of actors, agencies and relationships into the binarist category of malignant great power and vulnerable small island, coupling the two in an essentialized, dominant-subordinate relationship. To bring this discussion back to its cartographic referents, the controversies surrounding Hambantota are part of, and have proved contiguous with another geopolitical trope related to China's infrastructural endeavours, i.e. the String of Pearls theory. This is frequently used by strategic, dominant IR-adjacent analysts to describe China's maritime/naval ambitions, which the metaphor construes and connotes as "inherently hostile and expansionist" (Dixon, 2014, p. 389). Hambantota is frequently invoked as a constituent of this String of Pearls strategy, an analytical tendency that subordinates the question of Hambantota Port (and by extension Sri Lanka) to China's expansionism. The String of Pearls theory shown through Figure 5, when represented on a map, does not visually differ significantly from Figure 4's holistic depiction of geopolitical reality.
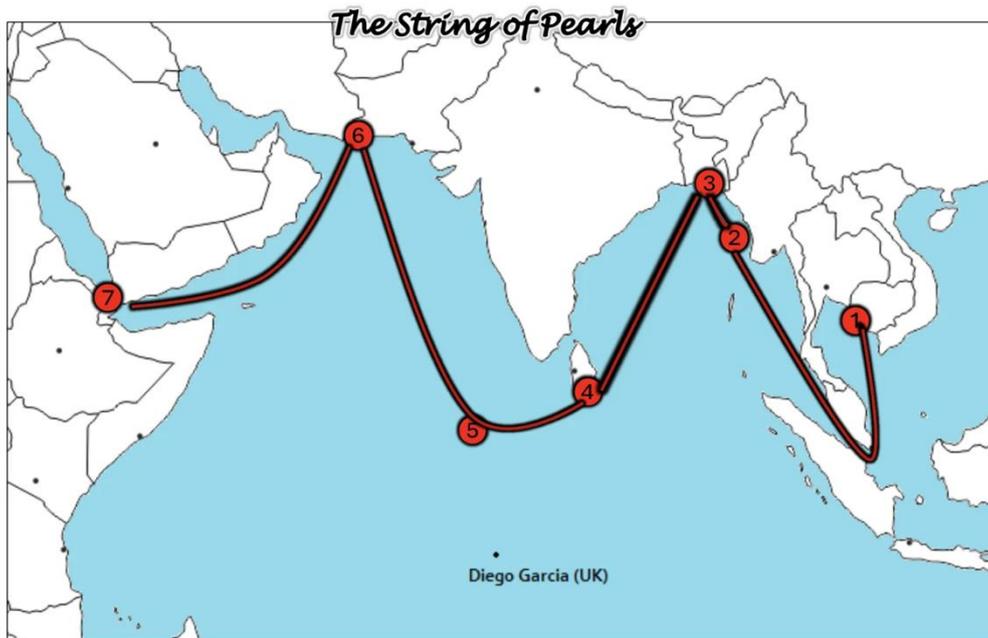
Figure 6: China's String of Pearls

Once again, Sri Lanka is visually (and later discursively) subsumed by this layering of relations, only becoming significant (or even visible) by virtue of Hambantota's relevance to the MSR and China's naval expansionism.

This particular manifestation of island hub imaginaries thus reduces and prefixes Sri Lanka's infrastructural entanglement by treating it as the natural outcome of the island state's fixed position vis-à-vis regional great powers, relying on a vocabulary steeped in Western IR logics. This framing enables a form of geopolitical reductionism that denies the island's multiple relational possibilities. The cartographic reification of islandness thus functions as a distortion, one that is rooted more in external apprehensions and logics than local agencies and aspirations. In turn, this constrained interpretation of Sri Lanka is cognate with several accompanying, narratives and representational tendencies in geopolitics. It essentializes the Indian Ocean as a zone of competition between regional and transregional great powers, turning smaller countries like Sri Lanka into flashpoints of competitive, resource-driven geopolitical tension. This section shows how geopolitical maps, given Sri Lanka's context, can serve as visual shorthand for island hub logics and discourses, reifying notions of containment, insignificance and limited, conditional relationality. Given these problematic representations, this countermapping research serves to unsettle such notions of island hubs,

providing an alternate cartographic depiction that can be generative of more horizontalized and relational geopolitical discourses and representations.

4. Conceptual Framework

In response to the research gaps posed above by the limitations of dominant relational thinking, and constrained island hub representations of Sri Lanka, this section outlines the conceptual framework through which this countermapping research frames its findings. Relying primarily on Eduardo Glissant's notion of archipelagic relationality, which he most elaborate explicates in Poetics of Relation, but also using complementary literature and interpretations of Glissant's work, this section elaborate this framework through the three interrelated discussions/sub-sections: (1) Glissant's seminal notion of creolization and its implications for relational thinking, (2) the right to opacity in terms, operationalized through map aesthetics and visual design, and finally (3) Glissant's notion of Relation and its significance for spatial and political imaginaries. Together, they provide an integrated framework which enables a critical reframing of how smaller states are represented within geopolitical discourse, positioning countermapping as a subversive exercise that can produce more positive relational depictions and reclaim the political and relational complexity of island spaces and their entanglements. These theoretical insights are framed in relation to the

4.1 Creolization: An Alternate Framework for Relational Identity

For Glissant, the condition of the world is characterized by Relation, and comprised of the process of creolization, which for Glissant (1997) increasingly characterizes the contemporary world, and which he juxtaposes to the homogenizing and difference-subsuming imperatives of economic globalization. Creolization, then, is different from cultural hybridity, which for Glissant is a problematic term because it promotes a linear, static and dichotomous understanding of cultural and relational interactions. Creolization, entails a more continual state of transformation entailed by cultural encounters, thus alluding to more nonlinear, unpredictable and indeterminate framings of identity and being. In doing so, it denotes a more horizontal, rhizomatic understanding of interaction, unsettling chronological fixity and methodological traceability, embodying the Glissantian imperative that identity cannot have a

singular, unified origin (Drabinski, 2019). This theoretical intervention, then, seeks to open up notions of identity to multiple origins and plural constituents. Glissant was well cognizant of the limitations of framing difference in modernist and post-modernist thought, as evidenced by his distinguishing of (1) an invasive, arrow-like nomadism and (2) circular, errant nomadism. While invasive nomadism denotes the imperial, arrow-like trajectory of conquest and settlement, its circular iteration is aligned with notions of circularity and adaptability, presenting a more horizontal, rhizomatic sensibility of relation.

To further expand on the conditions under which creolization unfolds, it is important to elaborate Glissant's emphasis on the geography of reason (Drabinski, 2019), which is an ethical and political call to situate identities, experiences and their representations in the specificity of place. It emphasizes notions of particularity, and of attentiveness to the contingencies of different contexts, narratives and histories. This act of situating helps resist and subvert universalist frameworks/knowledges/representational tendencies that erase distinct realities and experiences (Rosemberg, 2016). This contrasts with networks, often alluding to a contemporary globalizing form of relation, assume logics of connection and connectivity that are removed from the textures of place and geography. Networks can thus work to produce and reify such placeless universalisms, which obscure and paper over the inequalities and asymmetries in which relations also unfold.

The second related aspect of creolization pertains to its emphasis on movement and fluidity. First, for Glissant, creolization's processes of transformation and relation-making are specifically driven by movement, or what he calls errantry, of people, ideas and infrastructures. Creolization, then, is about a relation-making that is produced through and constituted by movement across space (Rosemberg, 2016). Again, staying attentive to Glissant's emphasis on the specificity of place, the focus here is on movement as a concrete, historical and political process that is materially grounded in physical, geographical space. This can be juxtaposed to nodes' disembodied nature, since they are abstracted from any geographical notion of space or place. Nodes and their linkages, as the mainstay of network analysis, are thus unable to depict relations and relationality as emerging through movement across space. Further, given their non-contiguous, instantaneous nature, they are also unable to illustrate how these nodes and their linkages emerge and materialize (Coward, 2018). Given how this research pertains to mapping Sri Lanka's maritime movements, creolization, as a theoretical framing that is attentive to both the specificity of place and the materiality of

movement, emerges as a more suitable framework for theoretically anchoring these oceanic mobilities.

To add to this, creolization fundamentally emphasizes the indeterminate, unpredictable and nature of interaction and relations. There is thus an element of (partial) unknowability that emerges from relational interactions, which defies a transparent, legible mapping. Glissant's framing of indeterminacy can thus be juxtaposed to networks' ways of characterizing relations, i.e. which work primarily by assigning a quantity/number to the linkages between nodes. Consequently, this countermapping research orients itself away from empirical exactitude in representation and moves towards more ambiguous visual framings in an attempt to materialize Glissant's alternate political imperatives. This idea of movement and fluidity, however, is not just about physical traversing, but has metaphorical implications (Wiedorn, 2021; Drabinski, 2019. Given that it is also about seeing ideas and entities in greater fluidity, it has transformative implications for the framing of identity, which in Western modernity is seen as having singular, easily traceable origins. Glissant problematizes questions and concerns of identity in modernity through filiation, the notion of a singular roots and lineages. For Glissant, this exploratory and framing tendency is implicated in colonial histories and violence, and reifies a hierarchical, root-based understanding of identity. Maps, frequently critiqued as static, unchanging depictions of reality (Wood, 1983; Edney, 2005; Scott, 2020), thus can be seen as part of the problem of oversimplified representations and framings. Subsequently, this countermapping research, grounded in Glissant's insights, reorients itself towards dynamism and more diverse conceptualizations of identity.

It is by using these three themes emerging from creolization: (1) the geography of reason, (2) the emphasis on movement and fluidity, and (3) rhizomatic, relational notions of identity, that this research seeks to address the second research sub-question, regarding the reductive, antagonistic framings of islands in geopolitical cartography and discourse.

4.2 Opacity and Aesthetics

This unpredictable dynamism of cultural exchange paves the way for another salient concept in Glissantian thought: opacity, a political demand that emerges in response to the

modern/colonial imperative of transparency and legibility. Opacity emphasizes that peoples, cultures and ideas need not be fully understood by others to be respected, or for that interaction to be valid and productive. By shifting emphasis from modern legibility to the untranslatability of cultural interaction, Glissant subverts universalizing, totalizing approaches to knowledge. Approaches that seeks to render a cultural formation, belief system, or polity fully legible and transparent assume complicity in its epistemic erasure and concealment. Network thinking, whose analytical robustness is premised on the legibility of its nodes and their linkages, is thus also guilty of such transparency imperatives. This is exemplified by the ubiquitous application of the network within security policies and practices (de Goede, 2012; Coward, 2013). Even as network thinking aspires towards processual, iterative depictions, its desire towards legibility, coupled with its routine use in identifying and classifying threats, renders it particularly problematic in relation to my research, whose central concern is the antagonistic tenors of geopolitical representation. Contrarily, a Glissantian opacity does not demand complete disclosure, arguing for the irreducible complexity of entities, identities and relations, and in doing so, seeks to occlude their classificatory capture.

Methodologically, opacity is today being variably utilized across an array of fields and disciplines, however, this section seeks to ground opacity in a discussion on cartographic aesthetics, i.e the visual design and elements of the map. This theoretical ouvre, to paraphrase Glissant, stems from the claim that opacity is not a built-in or pre-given condition but something that needs to be politically accomplished. Far from a stable designation, it requires constant (re)enactment and reworking. This reframes opacity more actively as a political tool (Jeyasingh, 2025) and less as a passive, backdrop-esque ontological reality (for more, see McKittrick, 2020). This research seeks to operationalize opacity in the domain of aesthetics, i.e. the visual design of the maps. Given this countermapping research's emphasis on the (multi)sensorial effects of maps/mappings, the discussion on operationalizing opacity in map design also useful in grounding the affective, non-heuristic implications of the maps. It should be noted here that aesthetics' role within cartography is heavily contested, ranging from the traditionalist critique of aesthetics as unscientific and detrimental to maps' functionality, to poststructuralist critical cartographers' suspicions of aesthetics as rooted in hegemonic ideological and discursive commitments (Wood, 1983; Harley, 1988).

However, aesthetics need not be pigeonholed and typified as such. Mapping, after all, comprises a creative and subversive process (that can remobilize and rework aesthetics towards other ends, in this particular context, towards operationalizing opacity in map design. This countermapping research consequently echoes the call for a renewed emphasis on aesthetics (Nestel, 2025), but echoing Glissant (1997), further argues that aesthetics be decoupled from what it usually signifies: map accuracy, clarity and ease of readability (Robinson, 1979). After all, in order to operationalize Glissantian opacity for such a countermapping project, one must go beyond cartography's conventional aspirations towards a more opacitic, contingent reading of maps where they simultaneously revealing and conceal in the process of relaying information. Consequently, this research reorients its application of aesthetics, away from its frequent use in improving map readability and legibility, insteads as a tool for materializing and projecting the affective, sensorial and non-heuristic potentialities of maps. This culminates in the depiction of a controlled ambiguity that can materialize opacity in the visual and cartographic domain. This research's focus on aesthetics is grounded in different elements of the map design, i.e. labelling of places, linetypes and graphic symbols, and color contrast choices, which are central elements in the process of geopolitical mapping and storytelling (Lo Presti, 2024).

It reimagines maps as sites where partiality and indeterminacy can provide a less familiar but still nonetheless productive visual grammar for reframing geopolitical relations. Finally, regarding this particular interpretation of opacity, it is important to proceed with caution. This is because while opacity is about rendering ambiguous, in this case, the maps' visual design, it should not be conflated with a plea for more unintelligibility and vagueness. Rather, it is more about carefully and attentively "working out what stories we can… bear to tell," (McKittrick, 2020, p. 7) along with "a plea to be cautious about how and when we tell stories" (Ibid.). Opacity, then, as much as it about rendering ambiguous, is also about revealing and rendering visible, but in a manner that is conditional and contingent.

By capitalizing on the creative and imaginative potentials of opacity, this section frames it in relation to map aesthetics and visual design, providing an integrated approach for visualizing opacity through maps. In doing so, this particular section of the conceptual framework addresses the first research sub-question, i.e. how the structural choices of mapping can entail reclaim and reorient the visual politics of the map.

4.3 Relational Imaginaries

Glissant's Relation, grounded in the Caribbean experience of migration, slavery and colonialism, presents cultures, identities and being(s) in a constant state of interaction and thus transformation. As is mentioned earlier, instrumentalizing the moment of cultural exchange to frame identity (and the materialization of relation), Glissant depicts a more open-ended, contemporaneous process of cultural contact with dynamic, unpredictable and non-linear outcomes. By using the French "relation" instead of its English counterpart, Glissant attunes us to a processual, erratic and verb-like understanding of relation. Thus, Glissantian Relation parallels the metanarrative of the network in its processual, iterative outlook, as well as in its plea to move beyond spatially, temporally and agentially *flattening* perspectives (Wiedorn, 2021). Given that Glissant's philosophical endeavors are inherently about a creative reimagining of the politics of place and space, it is important to examine their implications for imaginaries. For Glissant, and imaginary refers to a collective consciousness, or a common set of ways in which the world is lived and experienced.

While the network's totalism overdetermines topology in its depiction of relations, Glissant helps situate back these relations in lived, material and embodied experiences and contexts. Additionally, given their insubstantive nature, nodes are unable to situate themselves in or show movement across physical space. Glissantian Relation reintroduces the materiality of physical movement through the sea, presenting a counter to the unsituated abstraction of network thinking. The sea (or any aqueous body) is not just a static backdrop, but rather the fluid, flowing vessel for relation, carrying history and the many non-linear, disparate flows of time (Drabinski, 2019). The sea, then, also serves as a connective tissue for the different places, or what Glissant calls the different archipelagos of the world. This particular framing helps de-essentialize the static, continental framings of places by presenting them in a state of constantly transforming identity. As Rosemberg (2016) puts it, "place… is not a territory that roots; it does not confer identity but is relative. Place is, as a matter of fact, thought of as a meeting space where all worlds intermingle, an anchorage point connected to all the elsewhere" (p, 4). These broader implications of relation are used in this research to open up the question of spatiopolitical imaginaries in the Indian Ocean and their productive potential for relational and peaceful geopolitical representations.

It is through these three interlinked Glissantian categories that *archipelago* is posited as a metanarrative alternative to the *network*, as both grounding metaphor and theoretical framework for this research, given the network's constrained, totalizing view of relationality. As mentioned earlier, while not providing a concrete methodological framework, Glissant's concepts serve as relatively open-ended but generative instructions that can be coupled with and thus build upon other critical frameworks for this countermapping research. This amalgamation of theoretical frameworks helps articulate a different *archipelagic* rendering of relations, contingency and emergence. This is especially pertinent for Sri Lanka, a peripheralized island whose discursive-representational life in the Indian Ocean is inundated with externally imposed logics of great power-centric security, islandness and territorial containment.

5. Findings

Utilizing the above developed conceptual framework, this chapter presents the first half of the findings and analysis. In doing so, it focuses on the WASABI countermaps, using all four maps in conjunction and explaining them using Glissant's (1997) notion of archipelagic relationality. This countermapping and accompanying research reveals two main themes and four sub-themes through which the imaginative, political imperatives of an archipelagic relational countermapping are revealed. This chapter seeks to address the first two research sub-questions, primarily situating it in terms of the maps and their analysis. Before proceeding further, however, it is important to describe the maps' content.

5.1 Describing the Maps' Contents

Four maps were produced as part of this research (Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4), mapping various aspects of the same data: warships and military vessels that have visited Sri Lanka's four main ports between 2018-2024. Figure 1 conducts a year-wise categorization of vessels, while Figure 2 categorizes them by the purpose of visit. These are designated as follows: **goodwill**, **logistical** operations, **operation** missions, **security** and **patrol**, **formal** and **diplomatic** reasons and **foreign** cooperation. Figure 3 aggregates all the visits from each year on a single map frame, providing a more comprehensive but also complexified depiction of

the maritime data. All three maps use similar frames, with a larger Euclidean base map that provides a general, zoomed-out view, and an inset map that magnifies the Sri Lankan landmass. This magnification of Sri Lanka serves the pragmatic function of visually clarifying the dense clustering of ship mobilities which are much less discernible from the larger map, but it also serves the more explicitly *political* purpose of centering Sri Lanka within regional infrastructural connectivity, and as the locus around which these maritime mobilities emerge, overlap, intersect and circulate. Figure 4 provides a time-series, year-by-year depiction of these ship movements, arranging side-by-side several inset maps onto a single frame, one for each year.
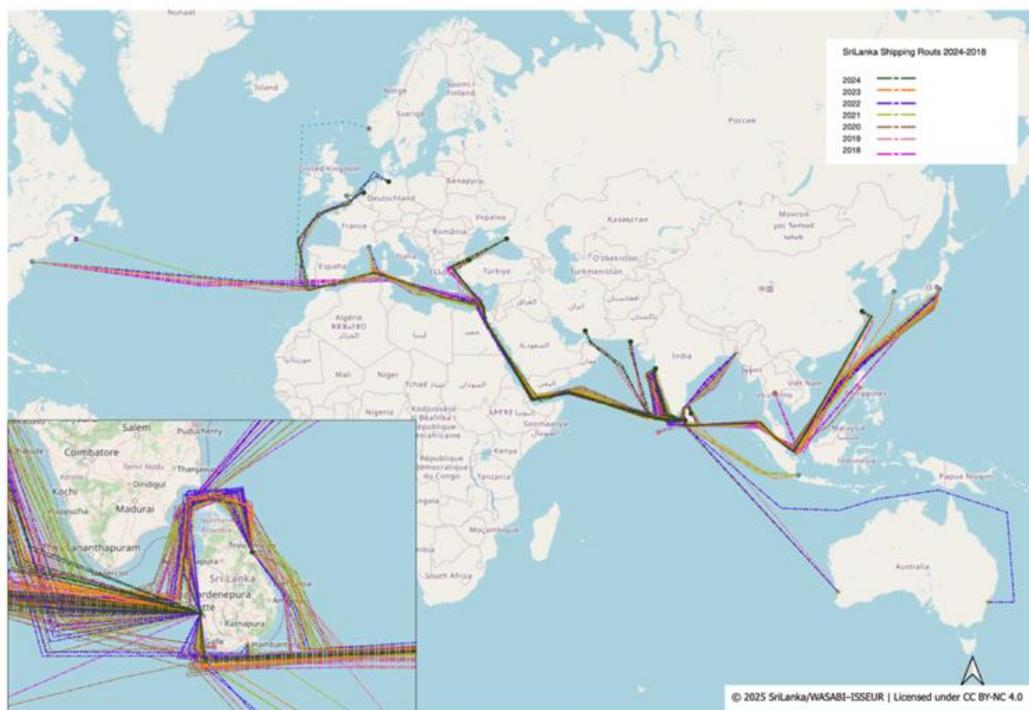
Map 1: Shipping Routes (Years Map)
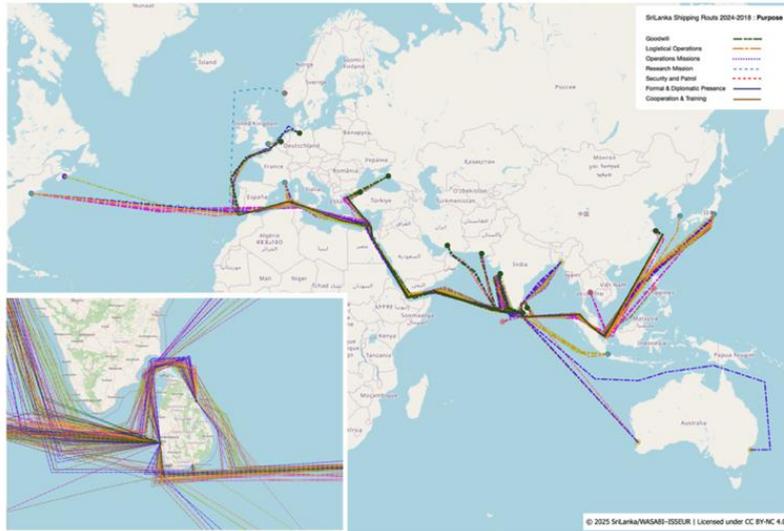
Map 2: Shipping Routes (Purpose Map)
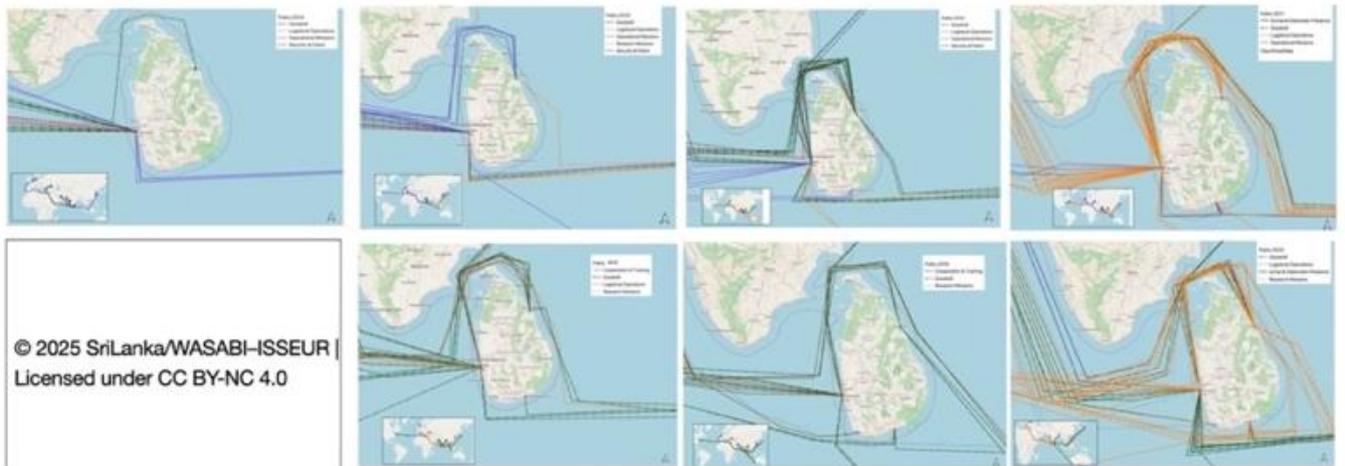
Map 3: Shipping Routes (Year-by-year overview)

Map 4: Shipping Routes (Overview)

5.2) Relational Mapping: Maps as Instruments of Opacity

Using the WASABI countermaps, this first finding argues that opacity, when used as an aesthetic principle in map visual design to subvert totalizing, reductive practices in geopolitical mapping and representation, can challenge antagonistic, competition-centric depictions of geopolitics. It illustrates how the WASABI countermaps operationalize opacity through their visual design, across two interrelated domains of the map's, and in general, geopolitical representation: **space** and **relations**. Within this framework, the base Euclidean map pertains to spatial elements, whereas the layering of maritime flows comprises the map's relations. This distinction is purely arbitrary – given how space and relations cannot be neatly separated into static, prefigured entities, but serves a more functional purpose here. This, then, is not to promote a binarized understanding of the base map as space and the flows as relations, but rather to illustrate the visual aspects through which opacity gets encoded in the maps' visual design. Through a strategic deployment, it helps clarify how opacity is operationalized differently across different representational aspects of the maps. In doing so, this section attempts to answer the first sub-question: *How can map design choices, given their aesthetic, affective and political entailments, subvert antagonistic, competition-centric depiction of geopolitics and infrastructural connectivity?*

Map 1 serves to illustrate ship routes against a geographical backdrop. However, as an initial viewing quickly reveals, this is not very visually clarifying. To describe the visuality of the map, it comprises a series of different colored, often overlapping and crisscrossing lines that emerge from different places on the map and converge around the Sri Lankan landmass. Notably, it does not tell us much about the more granular details of the vessels and their activities. The chaotic, overlapping nature of the lines in both the main and inset frames makes it further difficult to trace individual vessel pathways. Countries are unevenly labelled in different languages, further obscuring the readability of the map. If these maps visualize geopolitics, standard markers of geopolitical maps are often missing from them: key ports, strategic island bases, chokepoints, etc. Visually, then, the map provides an ambiguous-at-best depiction of these maritime mobilities. This incorporation of visual ambiguity and partial indeterminacy in the appearance of the map, however, is a conscious decision by the research team, mutually arrived at over our collaborative reflections on the mapping process. Given this, the presence of unconventional features on the WASABI maps need not be interpreted as an indictment of cartographic negligence or inferior quality, rather it serves a more explicit political and representational purpose of layering opacity in the visual design of the map. This is done by focusing on two sites of this layering, (1) the depiction of **space** and **spatial** elements, which I explain using the Euclidean base map, and (2) the maps' depiction of **movement** and **relations**, which are grounded using the maps' colorful lines depicting maritime flows.

5.2.1. Relational Mapping: Opacity in Geographical Representation

In this sub-section, I show how opacity is operationalized through the depiction of space and spatial elements, relating to the base geographical map of the WASABI countermaps: (1) naming/labelling choices for the maps, and (2) the strategic, subversive use of cartographic silences/omissions to unsettle and disrupt dominant norms of geopolitical mapmaking.

Starting with naming choices, it can be seen that endonyms have been used to label countries on the map(s), hence they have been labelled in their respective national languages. On the surface, this decision, which results in a proliferation of different linguistic labels all over the map, creates visual confusion and ambiguity. It embeds differing levels of legibility and accessibility in the map, contingent on the readers' context and varying extents of

familiarity. This, then, can be sharply distinguished from standard cartographic practices which center legibility and communicability (Boria, 2008). Exonyms have colonially and historically served as instruments of transparency, culminating in reductive, epistemically violent practices of renaming and translation (Glissant, 1997). In that sense, the use of endonyms, by resisting a simplistic translation of place-names, interrupts and reframes the visual and linguistic accessibility of the map to illustrate a political-representational commitment to opacity. This, then, also provides a cartographic alternative to standard geopolitical mapping and mapmaking practices, where the use of English for functionality purposes culminates in a homogenizing, reductive depiction of place-names.

The *second* aspect of spatial representation in map design concerns the strategic use of cartographic omission, deliberately excluding certain political/geographical map features in a manner that challenges the naturalness of dominant geopolitical representation. While the notion of cartographic silence is typically synonymous with the epistemic violence of map and acts of political censorship (Harley, 1988, Huffman, 1995), its incontrovertibly political and performative nature (Wood, 1983) means that the exclusion or removal of certain map design features/categories of organizing and presenting information can also serve to unsettle the naturalness of dominant geopolitical framings, cognitively, visually and discursively. Over the course of our discussions, we made the active decision to omit chokepoints from the maps, particularly in relation to the Strait of Malacca, which as has been priorly explained, constrains and limits the possibility of Sri Lanka's representation. This omission of chokepoints thus serves to unsettle a narratival device that routinely figures in, and facilitates antagonistic, competition-driven geopolitics interpretations of the maritime sector. By displacing their discursive centrality to geopolitical narration and representation, this countermapping exercise creates conditions of possibility for new relational worlds to emerge and be visualized and projected in the domain of geopolitics.

5.2.2 Colours and Symbols as Agents of Opacity

This section shows how opacity was operationalized vis-à-vis the depiction of relations on the map. As cartography's architecture (Gerlach, 2014), graphics and symbols are central to maps' depictions, representational tendencies and consequently their politics. The second aspect of applying opacity here, concerns this use of mapping features, specifically in relation to the maps' lines depicting maritime connectivities and flows. More specifically, I explain

how opacity was operationalized by focusing on two interrelated mapping choices: (1) the selection of graphic symbols to depict movement, and (2) the chromatic, color-related choices for mapping.

Regarding choice of symbols, the maps make an active effort to avoid the use of arrows or arrowheads in representing these connectivities, thus displacing a focus on magnitudes and direction that characterizes legibility for standard maritime depictions. This was done for two reasons, (1) to decenter legibility and empirical precision as vectors of map effectiveness, and to (2) minimize the possibilities of antagonistic interpretations which arrows/arrowheads are historically complicit in, as indicated by the alarmist use of arrowheads in strategy and migration maps (Van Houtum and Lacy, 2020). In addition to this, the omission of key ports makes it hard to identify the exact origin port of a maritime voyage, outside of a loose national association. Again, this is deliberate since it seeks to illustrate and visualize the map's alternate emphasis upon fluidity, oceanic and trans-oceanic flows, and their in-between nature. This alterity of emphasis away from land is further underscored by the vivid, chromatically diverse arrangement of the lines, which also comprises the most visually salient feature of the maps. These particular choices, then, subvert the dominant frames that restricts the possibilities of maritime representation to its land-based referents, which in this context constitute the problematic of continental thinking that entails rigid, territorial views of the world (Glissant, 1997).

The use of different linetypes, mostly semi-dashed-dotted but also straight and dotted, characterizes an attempt to depict movement and flows in multiplicity (Ingold, 2009), but it also seeks to visually encode a molecular sensibility towards mapping (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987).[3] These map lines, depicted to embed the visual character of a partial tracing instead of a more definitive pathway, embody what Deleuze (1987) calls lines of flight, "not continuous lines, unbroken and straight, but combinations of flows and incisions, a continuous stuttering (and) stumbling…" To further elaborate on what lines of flight characterize politically, it is useful to look at *molecular* lines, which emerge as the underlying, fluid and connective processes of change and becoming. They underly existing, rigid *molar* power structures, hierarchies and dualisms (Gerlach and Jellis, 2015). This research attempts to visually encode

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[3] Deleuze and Guattari's work has much in common with Glissant's theorizing of relation and origin. Glissant adopts the model of rhizome from Deleuze and Guattari's philosophical works.

this processual sense of molecularity and becoming through a gestural tracing of maritime passages and flows, centering a processual, transversal understanding of lines that aligns with Glissant's (1997) errant, fluid sensibilities. The use of dashed-dotted lines is also an effort to circumvent the enclosing, encircling and (oft-antagonistic) definitiveness of conventional graphic symbols, thus framing movement in a more fluid, discontinuous and opacitic manner which is epistemically and politically more illustrative of archipelagic relationality. This partial tracing, emplotted through the use of various linetypes, can be juxtaposed to the dominant mode of representation for geopolitical maps, as can be seen in Figure 7's depiction of global maritime shipping routes. The WASABI map also avoid using arrows in an attempt to depict the movement in a less definitive and unidirectional manner. This alternate representation is useful because it occludes an emphasis on directionality, which often serves as a marker of linear flows, again underscoring the map's emphasis on movement and in-betweenness.
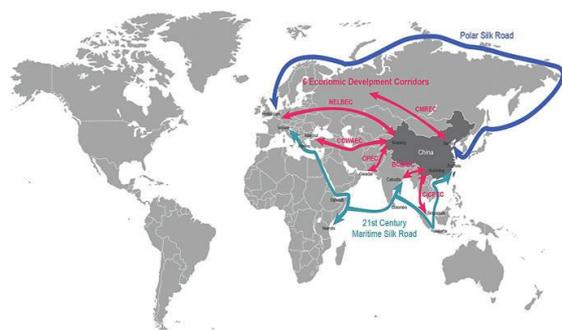
Figure 7: Global Maritime Shipping Routes
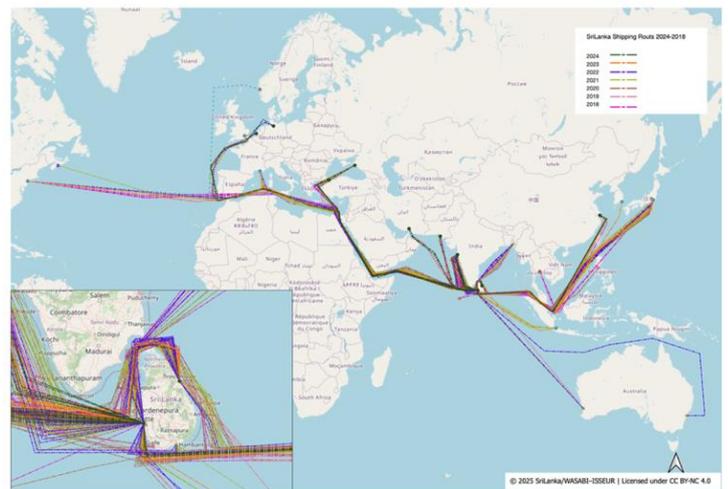
Map 1 (repeated)

The aforementioned use of linetypes to depict movement thus seeks to foreground a visually ambiguous, opacitic depiction but one that nonetheless points to an expansive, irreducible unfolding of relations.

Color choices comprised the second half of our reflections regarding the depiction of movement and relations, given their centrality to cartographic depiction, sensemaking and affect (Pickles, 2004). While different colors have been used to illustrate the flow lines, we

have taken care to prevent the visualizing of stark color contrasts, or of chromatic schemes that can potentially entail alarmist or antagonistic representations. The bright and vivid appearance of the lines, given the use of different colors, here visually accentuates the diversity and multiplicity of movements and flows, showing the concurrent, overlapping and crisscrossing nature of their emergence and unfolding.
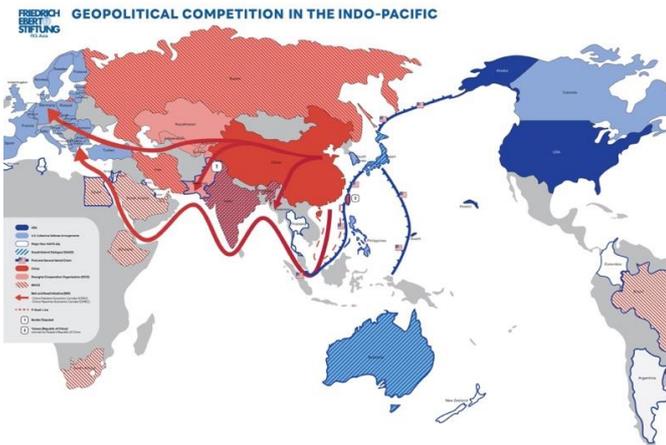

Figure 4 (Repeated)
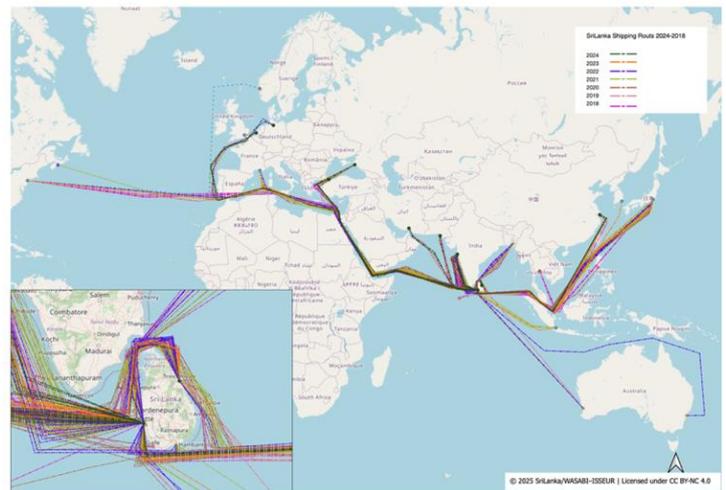
Map 1 (Repeated)

Again, as the history of color use in mapmaking history shows, certain contrast schemes, notably red and blue, are synonymous with antagonistic perceptions and visualizing modernist binaries. These maps replace this visual arrangement for a diverse, differential use of colors to represent movement that alludes to a greater multiplicity but one that is also ambiguous in its manner of depiction. Simultaneously, the softer color gradients entailed by the color choices attempt to subvert the possibility of alarmist and antagonistic interpretations of the map, as observed below. Consequently, the diversified use of colors in the maps entailing softer color transitions (Lo Presti, 2024) and gradual gradients characterizes an attempt to visualize relational multiplicity, also juxtaposing itself to the antagonistic perceptions embedded by mainstream geopolitical maps. Here, it is important to keep in mind how opacity's not only conceals but also reveals. Having explored how opacity can be operationalized in the mapping of maritime information, this research now turn to opacity's more productive, generative aspects, which for Glissant constitutes the entangling, relation-making process of creolization.

5.3 Beyond Island Hub Representations: Reframing Sri Lanka Geopolitically

This finding argues that a countermapping of Sri Lanka's maritime mobilities, when coupled with creolization, helps subvert discursive island hub notions of Sri Lanka. It does so by illustrating how this this countermapping of Sri Lanka's maritime mobilities visually challenges island hub notions of Sri Lanka, and in doing so subvert the discursive tropes of dependency and significance that constrain Sri Lanka's geopolitical representation. First, focusing on the contents of the data pertaining to ship visits, it highlights the different, variegated nature of maritime operations that make up the dataset. Subsequently, using this empirical grounding, it explains how these countermaps perform a cartographic rendering of Glissant's creolization, framing its insights in relation to the discourses enabled by the maps' design. Lastly, it frames these insights in the discursive and material context of antagonistic geopolitical representations, showing how through unsettling one of its narrative markers, i.e. the essentialized role of smaller states, newer conditions of possibility can be generated for archipelagic relational framings of Sri Lanka. In doing so, it also attempts to answer the following research sub-question: *How can countermapping, undergirded by archipelagic relational thinking, challenge and reframe depict antagonistic framings of islands, as exemplified by the mutual tropes of geopolitical dependence and insignificance?*

5.3.1 The Changing Nature of Maritime Representation: Reframing Geopolitical Antagonisms Through Maritime Data

Figures 2 and 3 emerge as layered representations of maritime and specifically naval circulation, where the emphasis on routes and dense clustered mobilities seeks to foreground connectivity through movements and flows. Figure 2, for instance, shows seven categories of ship visits in the map legend: **goodwill**, **logistics**, **operations**, **research**, **securit**y/**patrol**, **formal** and **diplomatic** presence, and **cooperation**/**training** exercises. These lines appear as a rhizomatic depiction of these maritime operations, spreading out laterally, unevenly and errantly across an oceanic backdrop of blue. They simultaneously converge, diverge, overlap and co-exist, revealing to us the diverse, highly variegated nature of Sri Lanka's unfolding maritime engagements. By spatially plotting these different purposes of visit onto the same maps, this mapping exercise also reveals how similar and contrasting forms of mobility can

co-exist, overlap and intersect, illustrating the diversity and breadth of activities, exercises and purposes that emerge from within a singular maritime dataset.

Here, it is instructive to focus on the frequency and yearly distribution of the categories of visits. Figure 3 shows a zoomed-in, year-by-year distribution of these maritime operations.

"Sri Lanka Shipping Routs: Comparing Maritime Operations 2018–2024

Map 3 (Repeated)

Of the *seven* designated purposes of ship visits, only two can be exclusively associated with a typically military imperative, i.e. operational missions and security and patrol. All *five* other categories of visit comprise activities/sectors typically associated with civilian domains of action, which makes for an interesting observation given how the dataset exclusively pertains to warships and military vessels. As the year-by-year maps shows, the nature of these activities has changed over the years. However, a quick look at the maps reveals that traditionally naval activities are not very frequent, and are infact, interspersed with other visit purposes. This is exemplified by how, even though there are more operational missions following 2021, before this they are virtually absent from the map. The WASABI maps thus reveals the changing and increasingly diverse nature of maritime activity, particularly regarding warships and their morphing, expanding domains of deployment. These empirical observations parallel real-world developments in the Indian Ocean, where the classic divide between civilian and military domains is increasingly blurred, owing to the increasing standardization of communication and information-sharing systems. Naval vessels are now increasingly deployed across, and interoperable and interchangeable with commercial and other non-naval, civilian-purposed vessels. Ports too, are increasingly equipped with dual purpose features, further illustrating the interoperable nature of maritime infrastructures. This also coincides with the increase in maritime cooperation exercises,

which indicate another use of warships towards positive peaceful means, i.e. fostering bilateral and multilateral forms of cooperation and improving regional relations.

These real-world developments, however, are not reflected as well in mainstream geopolitical representation and knowledge-framing, where the presence of warships, irrespective of their operational intents, is unequivocally construed as alarming and exacerbating tension, thus facilitating antagonistic, confrontational geopolitical atmospheres Contemporary geopolitical reporting and coverage, grounded in IR-centric vocabularies and framings, reveals the persisting common currency of these antagonistic representations. For instance, an overview of several strategic thinktank publications commenting on geopolitics in the Indian Ocean (Cadell, 2024; EurAsian Times, 2025; Gupta, 2024, Jayarathna; 2024; Ramzy, 2024; Saha, 2024; Thanabalasingham, 2023) reveals how the presence and visibility of warships can exacerbate tension and alarmism. Examining their headings, one finds an abundant presence of one or more of the following words: crisis, warfare, battle and spy, all of which can be seen to allude heightened tensions, insecurity and alarmism. As this countermapping of maritime data illustrates, however, this interpretation of antagonism need not be an unequivocal representational outcome of naval presence/visibility, given how the functionalities of military vessels are expanding far beyond traditional warmongering activities. Infrastructures, material or discursive, are not "passive sites… in the service of preexisting hegemonic power but can themselves route, block, challenge, or rework power in particular ways" (de Goede and Westermeier, 2022, p. 1). Maps possess power far beyond their materiality, particularly how they can be mobilized as discursive and narratival devices. This research consequently demonstrates how existing data regarding military vessels (which invoke narratives of tension and alarmism) can be cartographically depicted outside of dominant, competition-centric representational tendencies, and possibly as a site of interdependence, co-constitution and relationality. In doing so, this data provides an empirical anchor for attempting to unsettle Sri Lanka's constrained island hub representations, by addressing the maps and the possibilities of discourse they generate. Grounding these empirical observations in creolization and relationality helps explain and produce a different knowledge about Sri Lanka and its relations to the rest of the world, which is what this research focuses on next.

5.3.2 Subverting Sri Lanka's Island Hub Representations Through Creolization

Grounding itself in the changing nature of maritime activities, this section presents the second half of the second finding. Focusing on mapping's political, representational and discursive potentialities of maps, it illustrates how the WASABI maps help subvert Sri Lanka's island hub representations, unsettling notions of illness and limited connectivity. In doing so, it provides a cartographic depiction that can facilitate more archipelagic, relational means of depicting island states in the context of emerging infrastructural connectivity. Overall, this exercise attempts to subvert the common currency of antagonistic geopolitical interpretations and framings, creating less antagonistic and more archipelagic, relational conditions of possibility for geopolitical discourse.

To start, two significant aspects need to be highlighted. First, there is the geographical imperatives of the WASABI countermaps, i.e. in terms of the Euclidean base map, which characterizes a cartographic attempt to resituate relations and connectivities back in the materiality and physicality of space. This may sound truistic given how maps, However, this serves to emphasize how contrast with relational and network mapping, which are committed to abstract, topological depictions of space. In contrast, the WASABI maps discard such abstracted, disembodied depictions of space and relations, grounding Sri Lanka through a limited but nonetheless geographical form of representation. While this resituates them in geographical space, it also underscores the materiality of movements, mobilities and flows. Second, I want to emphasize the maps' fragmentary nature, as evidenced by the partial scope of its representation. Regarding the scope of representation, these maps are specifically concerned with Sri Lanka. This is further exemplified by the inset maps, which while nonetheless maintaining some level of ambiguity for opacity purposes, also zoom in on and emphasize Sri Lanka as the central focus of representation. Again, these maps do not attempt to, or provide a comprehensive depiction of geopolitical reality, as tends to be the norm representationally, but enact and cartographically depict a particular aspect of it, centering Sri Lanka in terms of its maritime entanglements. These maps, then, characterize an attempt to depict infrastructural and maritime connectivity from the perspective of Sri Lanka, grounded in its specific maritime commitments and contingencies. This is further accentuated by the visual arrangement of the frames in Figure 3, where the inset and main map frames are switched to reorient the perspective of the viewer. This inversion of map hierarchies thus

resonates with Glissant's counter-geographical imperatives to center the local and the particular for the universal.

To further clarify this question of geographical-representational specificity, this countermapping does not call for a simple replacement of cartographic and geopolitical universalism with Sri Lankan localness. Consequently, even as it centers Sri Lanka as its subject of representation, it does not seek to replace or claim ascendancy over other forms of cartographic representation. Rather, following Glissant (1997), this countermapping exercise frames this question of geographical-representational specificity in response to Western IR-centric geopolitical essentialism which materializes through the visualities and politics of maps, and challenges it by foregrounding an opacitic, relational particularity of Sri Lanka's maritime lifeworlds. These two contiguous mapping choices, (1) depicting relations cartographically instead of as linkages between diesmbodied nodes, and (2) centering Sri Lanka as the maps' subject of representation, jointly draw upon Glissant's plea to resituate relations and identities in the materiality and geographic specificity of space and place. These maps, then, by grounding representation in the geographical-cartographic context of Sri Lanka, perform the role of depicting and cognitively, visually and affectively signposting this contingent, unfolding of creolization and archipelagic relations.

The prior analysis indicates how the WASABI maps, by focusing on Sri Lanka, characterize a particular alternate modality for islands and smaller states in the context of emergent infrastructural connectivity. Another way of approaching this is to consider the nature of cartographic intervention, which directly pertains to the dominant modes of representation for overarching infrastructural visions and projects. To further elaborate, while the maps recast Sri Lanka as the locus for a deluge of maritime infrastructural entanglements and flows, they do not do so in relation to any particular project or agreement, which becomes clear from looking at the maps. Visually these maps coalesce fragments from different infrastructural/maritime connectivities to represent them as a single polychromatic, discontinuous unity of flows around Sri Lanka that is not reducible to its individual movements/voyages and must be read/ interpreted/ by contending with its visually and informationally opacitic nature. This is best exemplified through Figure 4, the most visually dense iteration of the four maps, which represents all of these entanglements in their fullest and most granular detail, visually foregrounding a multiply complex and necessarily irreducible mode of depiction. Given that the question of place and its spatiotemporal

specificities also entails a discussion on identity and identity-framing (Glissant, 1997; Drabinski, 2019), what does it imply for Sri Lanka, cartographically and discursively?

These maps transform Sri Lanka's cartographic identity from an object of geopolitical insignificance to a locus around which a vividly illustrated multiplicity of flows, entanglements and relations is seen to unfold. Aesthetically too, this gets encoded through how the layering of connective lines renders Sri Lanka partially invisible in the mainframe map, moving away from implications of geopolitical insignificance towards a more emergent, ongoing sense of dynamism and transformation for Sri Lanka. In this sense, they also characterize an attempt to foreground the fundamentally complex and irreducible nature of creolization, in other words a "fusion of… elements drawn from all originating cultures but resulting in a configuration in which these elements… can no longer be disaggregated" (Hall, p. 15).

To make this exercise specifically about identity, which here is constituted by and through relations and relational exchange, this mapping comprises an attempt to reframe Sri Lanka as a connected, archipelagic entity that is seen as being made and remade through these (connective) lines, which enact rhizomes of relations spreading laterally and unevenly across the world, materializing for Sri Lanka an unpredictable and ongoing sense of relation-making and creolization. The origin/origins of this creolizing process cannot be easily or definitively defined or listed down in terms of national identity, rather the maps only allude to relational multiplicity, saying that Sri Lanka's maritime relations are co-constituted by an irreducible multiplicity of national actors and actants that cannot and should not be collapsed, synopsized or reduced in the act of mapping. This attempt to depict a multiplicity of origins and the co-constitution of relations embodies an attempt to subvert Glissant's (1997) problematic of a root-based, essentialist and hierarchical search for origins, i.e. filiation, and replacing it with a more rhizomatic, heterogenous and multisource conceptualization of relations and connectivities. This singular, oversimplified depiction of identity in maps can be observed using Figure 5, a map of state associations/blocs. By homogenously coloring states/members of the same association/formation, the map visually reduces diverse representational identities to the logics and imperatives of that formation, thus presenting a limited, unidimensional framing of identity. In contrast, the WASABI maps, notably Figures 5 and 6, offer a more fluid, transforming and creolizing conception of identity for Sri Lanka,

presenting uneven, vividly depicted movements and flows through a different logic and purpose of chromatic choices.

Figure 8: Map of Geopolitical Associations

To turn to the discursive correlates of these cartographic-representational choices, this polychromatic, archipelagic diffusion of flow lines also subverts notions of Sri Lanka as an island hub, insofar as they materialize through the two mutual geopolitical tropes of dependency and insignificance.
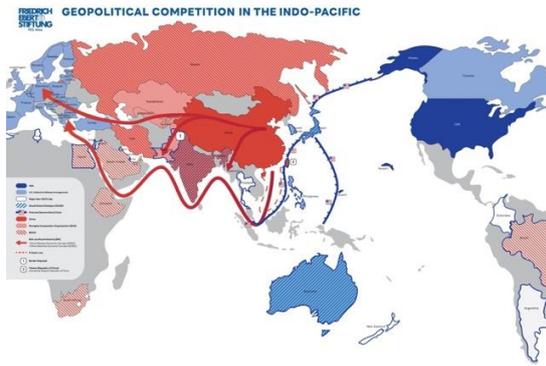
Figure 4 (Repeated)

Figure 8 (repeated)

Map 4 (Repeated)

Both geopolitical maps can thus be seen as guilty of framing identities through *filiation*, a Glissantian term denoting modernity's problematic search for unique, singular origins and roots. In contrast, the WASABI maps characterize a more rhizomatic depiction of Sri Lanka which defies being subsumed by great power logics of infrastructural competition and domination, but also simultaneously professes its own partial, contextually specific nature of representation. In that sense, these maps also embody an attempt "to criss-cross verticality and horizontality" in an effort to undermine the vertical and scalar sensibilities of orthodox cartographic geopolitics" (Gerlach, 2014, p. 30). In doing so, the WASABI countermaps represent an attempt to materialize a geopolitical representation for a creolizing Sri Lanka, reframing it as mediated and co-constituted through its maritime movements and connectivities. Therefore, for these maps, we have opted for a more dynamic, emergent depiction of Sri Lanka; one that inscribes a palimpsestic, non-linear, and ongoing sense of relational transformation and morphing, creolizing identity. This countermapping, through a visual intervention that unsettles discursive island hub notions of Sri Lanka, also generates

newer possibilities for framing Sri Lanka's interstate and regional relations towards less antagonistic and more cooperative, positive relational depictions. Given this countermapping intervention and its implications for Sri Lanka's discourse, the next chapter shall address the question of geopolitical imaginaries to further ground the transformative potentialities of this research.

6. Towards Geopolitical Imaginaries of Peace

Building on the imaginative capacities of the WASABI countermaps, the following chapter presents the third finding of this research, arguing that Glissant's archipelagic relational imaginaries enable and facilitate a reimagining of geopolitics in the Indian Ocean, transforming the antagonistic logics that constrain and undermine peace/peace-oriented initiatives into more cooperative, relational possibilities. It does so by focusing on the example of the 1971 Indian Ocean as Zone of Peace (IOZOP) resolution, briefly outlining its contents and framing them in the context of Sri Lanka's commitment to a neutral, non-aligned international politics. It problematizes this skepticism regarding the practicality of implementing this resolution in the present-day context, showing how it results from a particular, antagonistic way of framing and thinking about geopolitics. This is further evidenced using the countermapping's empirical data. By unsettling this narratival fixity of geopolitical discourse, this section shows how Glissant's imaginaries of relation, when used to frame the IOZP, generate the possibility of more productive depictions and discourses of regional coexistence grounded in cooperation, interdependence and entanglement. In doing so, it seeks to answer the third research sub-question: *how can archipelagic relationality be productively mobilized to alternately anchor peace initiatives, and what does this entail for the prospect of peaceful geopolitical imaginaries?*

6.1 Sri Lanka and the 1971 Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace Resolution

In 1971, Sri Lanka tabled an item before the United Nations General Assembly, calling for the Indian Ocean to be declared as a zone of peace. Officially titled "Declaration of the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace" (IOZP), this was subsequently approved as Resolution 2832 XXVI and was based on two broad propositions. First, it called for the

demilitarization of the Indian Ocean, primarily in terms of halting ongoing military escalations, and removing military bases and nuclear installations owned/operated by great powers from the region (UN General Assembly, 1971). Second, it emphasized the need to establish forms of interstate cooperation outside of military alliances, calling for the Indian Ocean's unimpeded use by vessels of all nation-states, and that the region would not be utilized for threatening hinterland or littoral states. (Ibid.)

Emerging from the heyday of Cold War politics, IOZP established the Indian Ocean as a contested site of geopolitical meaning, by offering a strong contrast to the paradigm of superpower militarization and competition, which was seen as posing a threat to the stability and security of littoral states in the Indian Ocean region (Buzan, 1981). It occupies an interesting position in the geopolitical imagination of the Indian Ocean, as well as Sri Lanka's self-conception as a small yet strategically significant island state. For Sri Lanka, this was symbolic in two main ways. Firstly, it was an expression, on the international stage, of Sri Lanka's non-aligned foreign policy stance, decentering antagonisms and confrontations and thus presenting a stark contrast to the great power alliances and logics that characterized mainstream geopolitics (Buzan, 1981). Secondly, by spearheading the resolution, Sri Lanka positioned itself as an advocate for the rights and concerns of smaller states often effaced by a superpower-centric militarization and securitization. Consequently, for Sri Lanka, the IOZP was not just ceremonial, but about the projection of its self-imagined role in a specific, alternate geopolitical imaginary of peace and regional cooperation. This geopolitical imaginary proposed by Sri Lanka underscored a different moral vision for the Indian Ocean, as a buffer against top-down power politics and great power tendencies, instead of as a theatre of geopolitical tensions and conflicts. The earlier resonances of the IOZP were visible in the 1950's through Sri Lanka's involvement in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which the notion of IOZP initially came from, and whose ethos and political agenda was underscored by a rejection of superpower-centric, East-West binaries of alignments (Kandasamy, 2024). In this sense, the IOZP thus became a primary means for islands to position themselves as part of alternate geopolitical discourses. Contrary to coercive modes of power exercised by great powers, this was hinged on the belief that smaller powers could wield and exercise geopolitical influence through moral leadership. This emerging sense of agency was also linked to Sri Lanka's postcolonial, nation-state aspirations. Having recently emerged from the throes of colonialism, Sri Lanka also sought to actively establish its

geopolitical presence as a neutral state mediating and promoting regional cooperation through the strategy of non-alignment.

Today if IR and strategy studies scholars and their publications, who have written abundantly on the IOZP's geopolitical status, are to be taken seriously, the IOZP emerges as an unrealistic, even naïve proposition for the Indian Ocean. Initially deemed as an unrealized, unsuccessful artifact of Cold War geopolitics, its current existence is also framed as unrealistic and impractical for the contemporary context of the Indian Ocean (Kumar, 1984; Deen, 2024. This skepticism typically arises in relation to the Indian Ocean's antagonistic geopolitical framings, centered on apprehensions and anxieties regarding militarization and competition in the region. This research, far from taking these claims' veracity for granted, instead argues how this skepticism is a product of particular discursive and representational configurations that naturalize the Indian Ocean as a zone of conflict. This research argues that such a common currency of representation is not an inevitable outcome of analyzing and presenting geopolitical realities but is rather influenced and rendered possible through Western-IR and strategic-studies-centric analytical tropes and narrative signifiers. These disciplines, grounded in realist and neorealist epistemic lenses, conceive of the Indian Ocean as a strategic space (Kandasamy, 2024), thus naturalizing it as a site of narratives of resource-driven competition and geopolitical tension. This fashioning of the Indian Ocean as a strategic frontier, a "theatre for geopolitical conflict", or as a packed "geopolitical arena," (Kumar, 1984; Kupriianov, 2019; Ramzy, 2025) is thus dependent on and made possible by its discursive referents, chokepoints, military bases and great power rivalries. This portrayal of geopolitical antagonisms places constraints on the productive possibilities and potential of the IOZP in materializing peaceful imaginaries and relational depictions of geopolitics. It renders the IOZP's propositions untenable with the prevailing vocabularies of geopolitical discourse and reporting. The seemingly 'unrealistic' nature of the IOZP thus stems from the conceptual architecture of mainstream geopolitical thought, and how it forecloses the possibility of alternate relational imaginaries. In order to reassert the transformative aims of the IOZP, one must decenter the competition-centric paradigm and the discursive elements that enable it. Here, by mobilizing archipelagic relational imaginaries to frame the IOZP and its political aspirations, this research helps reorient perspectives on the Indian Ocean beyond its status as a "geopolitical chessboard" (Deen, 2024; Singh, 2015; Kupriianov, 2015) but as a relationally entangled space framed through epistemologies of positive relations, cooperation and co-existence beyond the limited frames of dominant, Euro-American IR thought. Today,

as the maritime sector undergoes transformation and a proliferation of emerging infrastructural connectivity projects that transforms (as shown by the countermaps' empirical data), it is necessary to re-examine these initiatives, unpacking their productive potential towards more relational political and representational ends.

6.2 Archipelagic Relationality: Implications for a Peaceful Geopolitics

The following section shows how Glissantian imaginaries of relations can provide a more relationally productive framing for the IZOP initiative, thus unsettling its seeming incompatibility with the contemporary geopolitical situation and enabling it to be considered more seriously generative of peaceful geopolitical imaginaries. It does so in two interlinked ways.

First, through an attentiveness to the particularity and contingency of historical narratives, Glissant's relational imaginary helps shift the locus of the IZOP away from great powers and great-power-centric lenses of geopolitical analyses. For Glissant, this general abstraction, which here takes the form of typically appending the IZOP to concerns of Indian or Chinese power and influence, is an epistemic reduction and violence that needs to be challenged through the particularity of historical narratives (Wiedorn, 2021). This is not to dispute the facts of geopolitics, or to say that great powers, both in the Indian Ocean and externally, will not or should not have a say in regional and interregional relations, but rather to decenter their military-centric tendencies to shift the locus of geopolitical representation regarding peace initiatives away from their antagonistic implications. This emphasis is redirected towards smaller littoral states like Sri Lanka, whose own historical and political emergence is intimately implicated in the IZOP and the geopolitical imaginaries it proposes. As a postcolonial political strategy, the IOZP was geared towards shifting the symbolism of the Indian Ocean away from a maritime asset to a peaceful zone of cooperation. Moving away from reductive framings of the Indian Ocean as a "British lake" (Kumar, 1984) and as the "theatre of geopolitical conflict," the IZOP aligned with Sri Lanka's postcolonial framings of identity, which were geared towards interdependence and regional cooperation. In doing so, it underscores the necessity of considering political histories and paying to the differential, variably complex political motivations and aspirations of states and actors to better understand the regional context. By reframing the region's littoral and hinterland states

as archipelagic entities, the interdependence and regional cooperation imperatives of the IOZP can be more productively mobilized. In fact, the IOZP alludes to a regional form of identity, one in which a member state's involvement would entail a more than national sense of identity and belonging, which was in turn constituted by relations. This parallels Glissant's (1997) fluid and evolving conception of identity, along with the political imperatives for smaller, subaltern actors and agencies to productively remake them in the aftermath of empire and in the face of ongoing neo-colonialist realities.

Second, linking this to the earlier point, Glissant's imaginary allows for a radically different conception of oceanic space, thus reframing the role of the ocean from a passive, strategically valuable space to a more connective, dynamic materiality. This is important, especially keeping in mind that the non-aligned movement, in terms of metanarrative, comprised efforts to reclaim the Indian Ocean from imperial control and domination. In this sense, the Indian Ocean is transformed as both a material and epistemic medium of linkages for Sri Lanka. It serves to function as a space of solidarity, linking together the different African and Asian states that constitute the new notion region, and which are linked together by histories of violent conquest, extraction and anti-colonial resistances. However, this common ground, metaphorized by the ocean as a connective space, is not just about the past but about imagining collective futures based on solidarity, cooperation and positive relational coexistence (Wiedorn, 2021; Kandaswamy, 2024). Once again, this question of the sea links back to more fluid notions of geopolitical identity. By laying claim to a form of cosmopolitanism that seeks to complicate notions of identity beyond the nation state, this IOZP is once again paralleling Glissant's (1997) complex, multisource notion of identity which rejects singular, root-based genealogies. As mentioned earlier, the transposability of archipelagic relational concepts to the IOZP context is further evidenced by how Glissant (1997) considered the Indian Ocean to be a world region undergoing creolization and made up of different entanglements, histories and crisscrossing narratives.

7. Conclusion

This research explores how the countermapping of maritime mobilities can subvert antagonistic, competition-centric framings and representations of geopolitics. It does so by attempting to answer the three formulated research sub-questions: (1) how map aesthetics and

structure can visualize political commitments to reorient geopolitical maps, (2) how the countermapping of island spaces can help subvert antagonistic framings of islands in geopolitical discourse, and (3) how archipelagic framings of relations can provide a more productive grounding framework for grounding geopolitical imaginaries oriented towards peace.

This countermapping research begins with an exercise in the visual design of the map, which is used to operationalize opacity as a visual politics. The visual ambiguity of the maps counters narratives of transparency and legibility which are central to modern mapping processes. This is done through the use of mapping choices regarding visual features, including color choices, use of symbol and the exclusion of certain dominant geopolitical map features to unsettle their antagonistic geopolitical representations. Moving forward, it turns to questions of island hubs, examining how the countermapping helps subvert maps and discourses of Sri Lanka pertaining to this discursive trope. By narrating these maps using creolization, the research points to possibilites of more that are generated by this critical reflective and making exercise. Finally, this research terms towards the notion and questions of geopolitical imaginaries. It does so by centering the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace (IZOP) as its exemplary peace initiative, showing how its current impracticality and unrealistic nature is the product of a certain dominant IR-centric, geopolitical mapping which essentializes the Indian Ocean as a zone of antagonism and bubbling tension. Instead, by coupling it to and explaining it through Glissant's (1997) archipelagic relational imaginary, a more realistic vision of the IZOP can be realized, which can in turn generate possibilities for the generation and consolidation of other peace/peace-oriented initiatives, thus actualizing a more positive relational depiction of geopolitics.

To summarize, this research underscores the antagonistic tenors of geopolitical cartographies and discourses, which constrain the ways in which smaller states and islands are represented in geopolitical discourse. In doing so, it contributes newer, relational ways of framing recent geopolitical events like emergent infrastructural connectivity, using it to actualize more productive relational geopolitical imaginaries for the Indian Ocean region.

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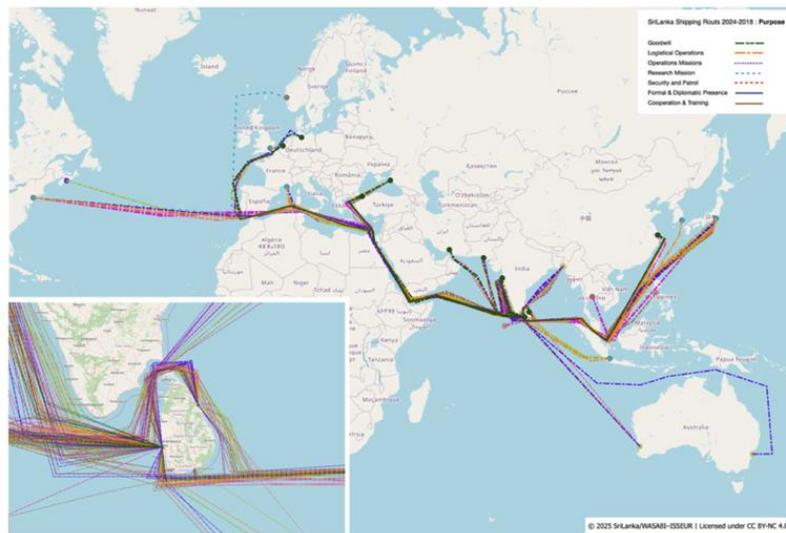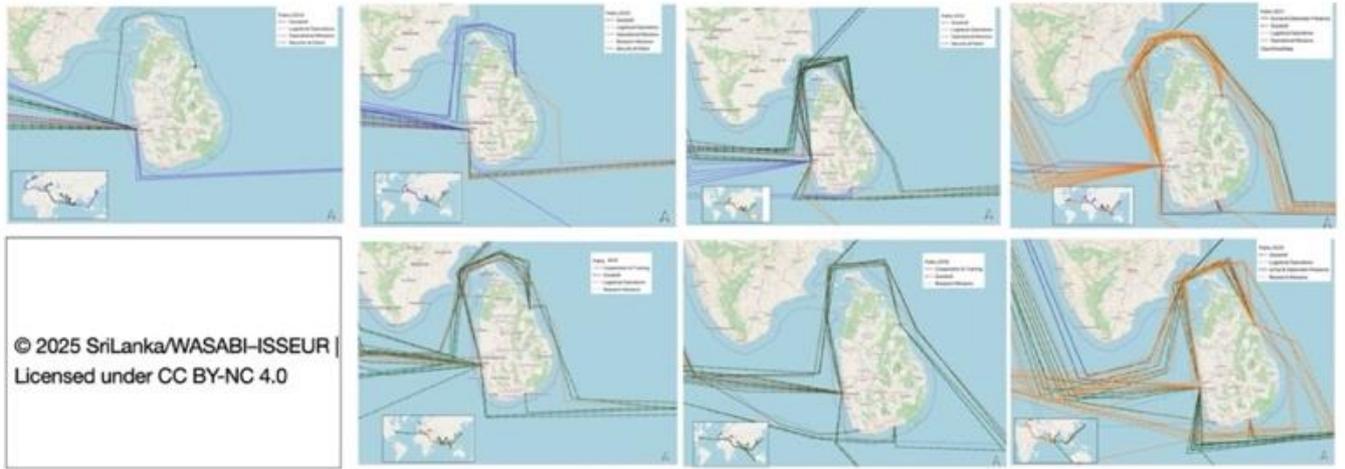
Appendices

Appendix 1: WASABI Countermaps
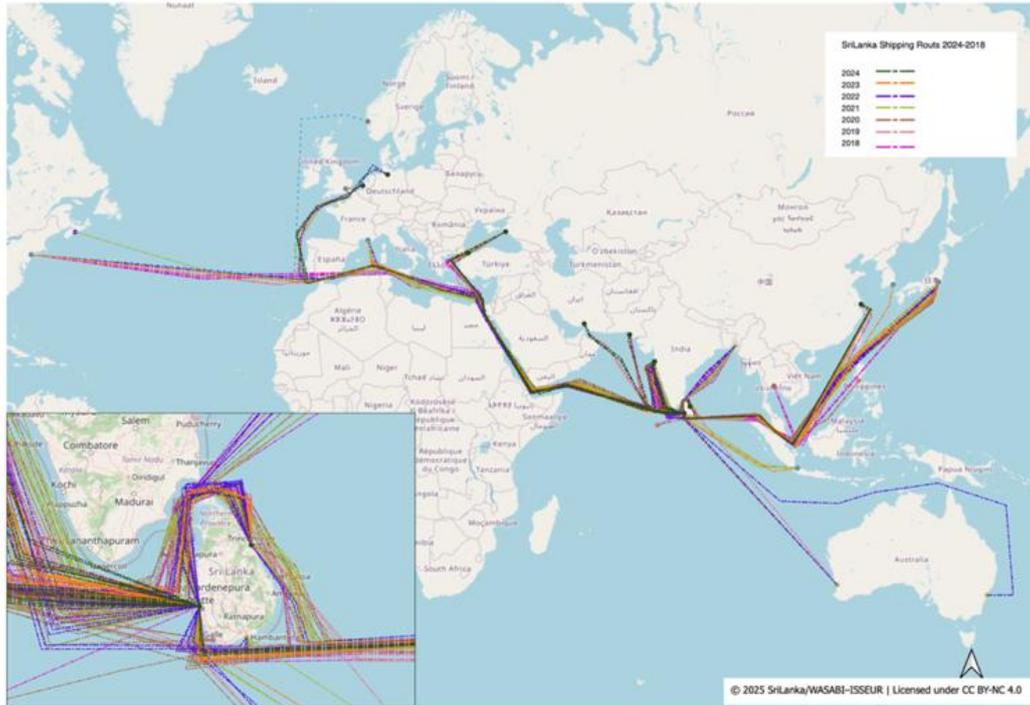
Map 5: Shipping Routes (Years Map)

Map 6: Shipping Routes (Purpose Map)

Map 7: Shipping Routes (Year-by-year overview)

Map 8: Shipping Routes (Overview)