Geopolitical Importance of Island States

What is the issue?

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- Varied but simultaneous developments took place in the recent period in different corners of the Indo-Pacific.
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- They are indicative of the renewed geopolitical importance of the island states.
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Why are island states significant?

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- At the dawn of the modern maritime age four centuries ago, control of critically-located islands became important.
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- It was part of the rivalry between European powers in the Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific.
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- Islands helped the replenishment of supplies, positioning of troops and ammunition, and the host ship to do repair and maintenance.
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- Island dominance became the key to securing the sea lines of communication.
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- The Anglo-American maritime dominance over the last two centuries helped limit the contestation for the islands.
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- An exception was imperial Japan’s challenge in the decades before the Second World War.
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- Today, the rise of China has brought the island states back to the centre stage of major power politics.
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What are the recent developments?

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- **Maldives** - The Indian PM visited Maldives recently for the swearing-in of its new president Ibrahim Mohamed Solih.
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- The visit underlined the renewed warmth in the relations between the two countries.
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- Under Solih’s predecessor, Abdulla Yameen, India’s relations with the Maldives rapidly deteriorated.
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- The contestation between India and China in the Maldives got intertwined with the democratic struggle of the opposition parties to end Yameen’s autocracy.
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- They kept demanding an Indian intervention as Yameen trampled over the parliament and judiciary, but Delhi held back.
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- **Sri Lanka** - The intersection of Sino-Indian rivalry with domestic politics is also witnessed in the neighbouring Sri Lanka.
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- The international community and India too was surprised at the recent decision of the Sri Lankan President to dismiss Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe.
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- India, the US and EU, emphasised the importance of due constitutional process and supported parliament test.
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- But the Chinese ambassador in Colombo was quick to show up at the newly-installed PM Rajapaksa's office to congratulate him.
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- Notably, during the decade-long rule (2004-15) by Rajapaksa, Sri Lanka seemed to steadily move closer to China’s orbit.
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- Symbolising its influence, China won the strategic contracts to build the Colombo port city.
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- It also got the contract for the construction of a new port at Hambantota in the southern part of the island.
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- India, in turn, appeared to lose its historic primacy in the island state.
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- **Papua New Guinea** - Further east, Papua New Guinea very recently hosted the forum for Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation's annual summit.
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- It brought leaders from 20-odd countries from America to China, Malaysia to Japan and Canada to Chile to this island state.
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- Here too, there is rise in Chinese commercial and political presence in the last few years.
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- There was also a speculation that China might be in quest of a military base in Papua New Guinea.
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- So Australia and the US moved in to announce that they will fund the development of the port facilities.
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- This would be developed in the Manus Island to the north-east of the main island.
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- Notably, Imperial Japan had occupied Manus and built a military base there in 1942.
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- Australia also joined the US, Japan and New Zealand in unveiling a project to provide electricity to 70% of the island population by 2030.
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- But countries have largely failed to anticipate the intensity of China’s power projection.
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How does the future look for the Indo-Pacific?

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- Contestation for influence in the island states of the Indo-Pacific has just begun.
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- The European colonial powers could easily prevail over natives of the strategic island territories.
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- But unlike then, in Indo-Pacific, today’s major powers have to deal with the more complex domestic politics of the island nations.
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- The ruling regimes in these islands have agency and the capacity to play one power against the other.
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Source: Indian Express

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