


The Story Behind The World's Emptiest International Airport

Wade Shepard Contributor 

I travel the New Silk Road, reporting on the developments that are shaping the 21st century.

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Hardly anybody goes to Sri Lanka's Mattala Rajapaksa [International](#) Airport (HRI) because they have a flight. No, the air transport hub is currently a daily flight or two away from being completely defunct, and the people who do go there tend to be tourists making a side trip from the nearby wildlife parks to see the stunning, fully modern airport in the middle of the jungle for themselves.

I arrived at HRI, which is located in Sri Lanka's southern Hambantota district, in the mid-morning to find a group of tourists huddle together in front of its passenger terminal. I asked them why they wanted to visit an empty airport.

"It is a really beautiful building," one of them told me matter-of-factly.

This airport is a landmark, a sign of progress in this region of Sri Lanka, which is located in a forested area a 250 kilometer drive from Colombo. The airport has a 12,000 square meter terminal building, 12 check-in counters, two gates, a runway long enough

to handle the largest commercial jets, and capacity for one million passengers per year.



The entrance corridor of Mattala Rajapaksa International Airport. Image: Wade Shepard

I paid the negligible cost of admission and walked in through the main entrance. A great hall, naturally brightened by massive windows, led me to a giant statue of Guan Yin, the bodhisattva of compassion, which sits right at the heart of the terminal. As I walked, my footsteps echoed through the building. There were few other sounds — no flight announcements over the PA, no passengers yakking on their cellphones, no taxi drivers trying to solicit a fare. The high-ceilinged corridors were absent of any visitors, except for myself.

Other than that, everything looked as an airport should: the information booth was fully staffed with three sharply dressed young women, security guards were at their posts, cleaners were

scrubbing the floor, the souvenir shops glistened, and a small cafeteria had a cook and a cashier dutifully at work. This airport was fully in service, despite the lack of a viable reason for it to be.

The rise of Mattala Rajapaksa International Airport



A Sri Lankan Buddhist monk takes pictures of an unseen Sri Lankan airlines Airbus A-340 which... [+]

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The story as to how this airport rose and fell is a dive into a quagmire of national politics, geopolitical maneuvering, raw corruption, and the hunger of China to invest in massive infrastructure projects along what has subsequently been dubbed the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road.

It was long understood that Sri Lanka needed a second international airport. Traffic through Colombo was getting too heavy and the country was in the active process of trying to develop its hinterlands to curb the social and economic disparity

that was growing between the nation's capital and everywhere else. At a cost of \$209 million, \$190 of which coming in the form of loans from China, Mattalla was selected as the site for the country's number two air transport hub.

However, the master plan was much broader than just this airport alone. The idea was that Hambantota would be transformed into Sri Lanka's second most prestigious city. It would become a place built on international trade and commerce, that would be full of joint ventures, FDI, and everything a modern city could desire. In addition to the international airport, there would be a gargantuan, \$1.4 billion-plus multi-stage deep sea port, a large industrial zone, a massive conference center, a world-class cricket stadium, housing developments, and a hotel and tourism area all held together by some of the best new highways in the country.

“It was the government itself that felt that if you want to really get it off the ground you have to bring all of these elements together in a very ambitious way,” Dushni Weerakoon, a researcher at the Colombo-based Institute of Policy Studies, explained the logic behind the project. “They were going to put up off-shore a kind of mixed development project, so you fly in and everything is there that you want: the conference facilities, the golf courses . . .”



senior economist at Hayleys Plc in Colombo. “So I don't see that being viable any time soon. To have an international airport you need to have a resident population, you need to have attractions to make foreigners want to come there, and you need some commercial infrastructure. They just don't have it in Hambantota.”

Hambantota was to become the shining achievement of the Rajapaksa regime, and the nomenclature of the area's big projects do not conceal this fact in any way. Mattala Rajapaksa International Airport is complemented by the nearby Magampura Mahinda Rajapaksa Deep Sea Port as well as the Mahinda Rajapaksa International Cricket Stadium. This was a president who for nearly a decade virtually ruled as a dictator, appointing his family members and friends to positions of power and keeping the country in a very firm grasp. At that time, it

seemed only natural that he would name some of the country's biggest undertakings after himself.

In terms of funding this series of massive projects, Sri Lanka had to look beyond its borders. However, due to soured relations with the West, which included the [turning off of economic concessions and aid](#) from the EU and United States due to accusations of war crimes during the later stages of the country's decades long civil war, Sri Lanka was forced to find a new donor. Fortunately for the Hambantota dream, China was more than willing to fill the void. At least US\$4.8 billion, mostly in the form of soft loans, were allocated from China during Rajapaksa's reign.



No planes here. The empty ramp and runway of Mattala Rajapaksa International Airport.
Image: Wade... [+]

It is Sri Lanka's geographic position which is of interest to the upstart superpower from the east. The island nation sits in the center of the Indian Ocean, a region which boasts 25% of the

land, 40% of the oil and gas reserves, and a third of the population of the planet, as well as lying right on China's primary supply route of crude oil from the Middle East and Africa. Sri Lanka was to become a major hub along the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, a series of interconnected, Chinese run/invested ports stretching from the Yangtze and Pearl River Deltas through Southeast [Asia](#), across the Indian Ocean, up the coast of Africa, and through the Suez Canal to Greece. This initiative has more descriptively been referred to as the “String of Pearls” by the US Department of Defense, as it can be visualized as a series of maritime nodes stretched over the clavicle of Eurasia.

In March of 2013, Mattala Rajapaksa International began receiving commercial passenger flights.

“At the beginning, we had seven flights [per day],” a manager at the airport told me. “From here to Colombo we had two flights. It was full of passengers. Even the staff members, we couldn't book a seat. That meant it was fully packed.”

While many of the flights were technically full, most of the traffic was for transit passengers, with local demand from Hambantota being almost non-existent, as SriLankan Airlines later admitted. In 2014, as many as [3,000 flights served just 21,000 passengers](#) at the airport.

Against all fiscal reasoning, SriLankan Airlines, the country's flagship carrier, was pressured into operating a hub at Hambantota by President Rajapaksa, who strategically positioned his brother-in-law as the airline's chairman.



The cook at Mattala Rajapaksa International Airport. Although virtually without passengers, the... [1]

Dharmapala, and Therothippam, in addition to Colombo. However, many of these routes were short lived, being quickly canceled by retreating airlines due to a lack of profitability. While the airport itself was registering losses of around \$18 million per year.

The decline of the Hambantota dream

Strong opposition soon rose up against Rajapaksa, and public outrage was whipped up by his political opponents about his expensive Chinese-backed projects — headlined by [Colombo Port City](#) and the Hambantota developments. The campaign of an opposition leader proved successful, and Sri Lanka's 2015 presidential election saw the man who ruled with impunity for a decade unceremoniously toppled.

The challenger, Maithripala Sirisena, attracted a vast amount of public support by accusing Rajapaksa of corruption, trashing relations with India and the West, as well as selling the country's future to China — yes, some of those large infrastructure loans

were accruing interest fast, and the cost of paying off HRI alone was [topping \\$17 million per year](#).



A waiting area without people at Mattala Rajapaksa International Airport. Image: Wade Shepard

Sirisena vowed that if he became president he would scrap many of Sri Lanka's Chinese-backed projects, and when he came to power in early 2015 that's exactly what he did. One of his first motions as president was allowing SriLankan Airlines to [cancel all flights to Mattala](#) and liquidate its hub there.

"But the reality is Mattala Rajapaksa International is not needed and is a distraction in SriLankan's efforts to turn itself around," ran a press release by the airline about [why it shut down operations at Mattala](#). "The flag carrier continues to be highly unprofitable and having to meet the political requirement of developing and operating a second hub will make it even harder to meet its targets for financial improvement."

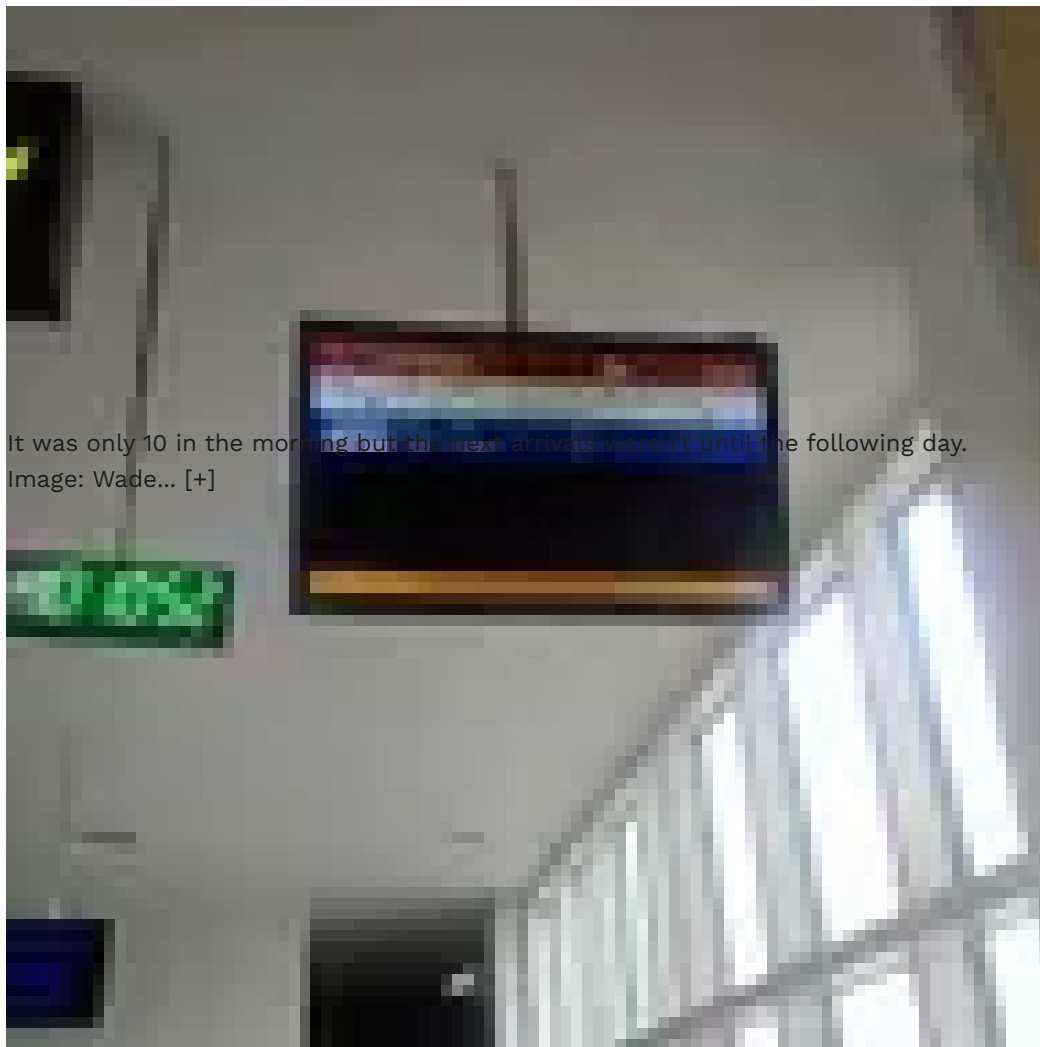
HRI was then left on the verge of tumbling from white elephant to completely defunct. The expensive new airport with hardly any flights soon became a national punchline and gained international infamy. Stories about the airport's descent into irrelevance ran rampant — such as how one of its unused terminals was turned into [a warehouse for storing rice](#), how 300 soldiers and police officers were [mobilized to keep out wild animals](#), how sections of its tarmac were being rented out as [long-term parking lots for unneeded jets](#), as well the simple fact that non-flight related activities were [generating more revenue than flights](#).

"They have a problem, there are lots of animals in the airport," a local man who ran a hotel in the town center of Hambantota told me. "There are birds and elephants."

"There are elephants in the airport?" I queried, admittedly surprised.

"Yes, yes, it is the jungle," he said. "They walk in and get in the road."

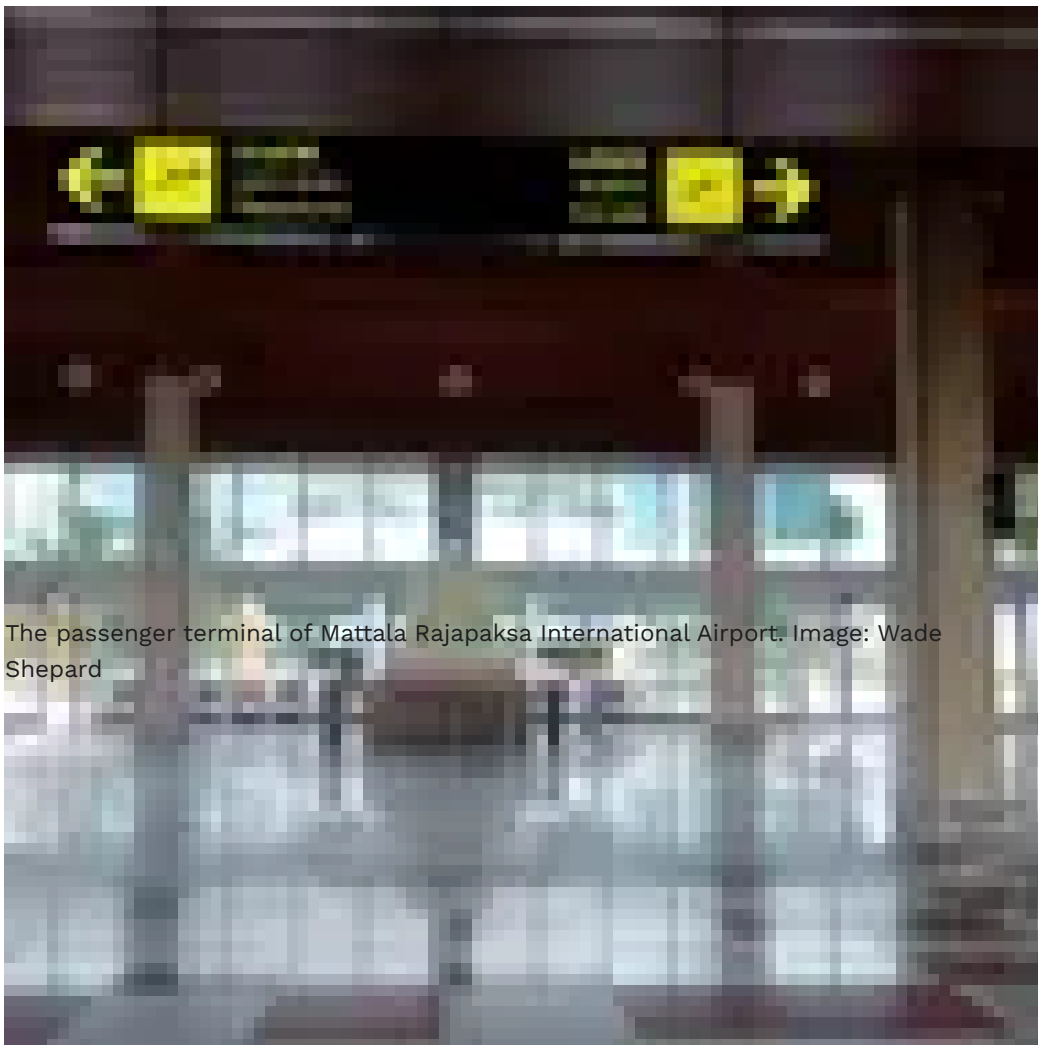
"It's going bad for us," the manager admitted. "Now we are getting from bad to worse, because there's no flights and no point to even operate the airport."



It was only 10 in the morning but the next arrivals weren't until the following day.
Image: Wade... [+]

A little hope?

However, a glimmer of hope recently surfaced for the airport in the jungle. Cinnamon Air, a domestic Sri Lankan airline, began a new daily service between Hambantota and Colombo just this month. The reason for this is not because the place is starting to bud as a new epicenter of commerce, as originally intended, but because its proximity to wildlife parks, beaches, small villages, and nature makes it an idea location for tourists.



The passenger terminal of Mattala Rajapaksa International Airport. Image: Wade Shepard

“We have a number of government buses,” he informed me with a smile, “but we have no time schedule.”

He then advised me that I would probably be better off walking five kilometers to the highway junction and then hitching a ride from there.

Conclusion

As China’s ghost town diplomacy continues its advance across Eurasia, the future of the Belt and Road will not be told by the size of the project or the cost of the investment but by the quality of what is being built. Quality, in this sense, is measured by the degree to which these new infrastructure projects stimulate the local economies they touch. In the case of Mattala Rajapaksa International Airport, this isn’t much — yet.

“They take the long-term view of the engagement,” Weerakoon explained China’s investment model. “It’s not two years or three years, it’s ten years or twenty years.”



The virtually empty road leading to the virtually empty airport. Image: Wade Shepard

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