

DELHI'S COLOMBO CHALLENGE

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Sri Lanka

Dec 03, 2019-Tuesday

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India's proactive approach led to New Delhi being the destination of Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's maiden foreign visit less than two weeks after his election. External affairs minister S Jaishankar visited Colombo within a day of Mr Rajapaksa taking office to establish contact with the new regime in Sri Lanka, and to send out the message that New Delhi wished to make a fresh start with the Rajapaksa brothers. India's outreach to Mr Rajapaksa is based on the government's new approach of working with whoever is chosen by the people of neighbouring countries, instead of propping up favourites. Mr Rajapaksa too sent out the right message, telling the Indian leadership that the country will remain a priority for his government, and that no "third force" will be allowed to come in the way of bilateral cooperation. This is significant because of the fraught relationship New Delhi has had with Mr Rajapaksa and his brother, current Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa, who was perceived as close to China during his earlier stint as president.

In his interactions with the Indian media, Mr Rajapaksa acknowledged the misunderstandings dating back to his brother's presidency, but also made it clear India needn't worry about Sri Lanka's relations with Pakistan or China. However, he added that other countries in the region must make greater investments in Sri Lanka to provide an alternative to China's largesse. Mr Rajapaksa gave ample hints that his government is doing a rethink about the devolution of powers to the northern and eastern regions of Sri Lanka, where Tamils are in a majority. According to Mr Rajapaksa, development, and not just devolution, is the answer to the Tamil question.

Given that the Indian side has called on the new Sri Lankan government to take forward the reconciliation process to fulfil the aspirations of Tamils, it is clear the two countries will have to find common ground on this and other issues. Such accommodation is all the more necessary in view of Sri Lanka's proximity to strategic sea lanes of communication and China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean region. Indian diplomacy has its task cut out.

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