

A glaring geopolitical contest

The geopolitical contest between India and China in Sri Lanka is no secret, but it has never been as blatant as was seen in developments last week.

Cabinet spokesperson Rajitha Senaratne, in a recent media briefing, spoke of Sri Lanka having to “balance” the two powers, in the context of China holding a majority stake in the southern Hambantota port, and a proposed joint venture giving India a 70% stake in running the nearby Mattala airport.

Sri Lankans were hardly surprised by Mr. Senaratne’s comments, which simply reflected Colombo’s challenge in this “balancing act” with its immediate neighbour and a willing lender. How this played out at the Cabinet meeting the previous day is more significant.

In the wake of India raising concern with Sri Lanka about a Chinese project to build 40,000 homes in the north, President Maithripala Sirisena is said to have advised the Cabinet to take a decision after consulting India and the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), which represents northern Tamils. New Delhi had earlier complained about the “opaqueness” in choosing the builder, reportedly without a competitive bidding process.

Days after the Cabinet meeting, the TNA urged the government to award the contract to India, sources in Colombo told *The Hindu*. The TNA conveyed to the Indian mission here that the people of the north would like brick-and-mortar homes, rather than the controversial pre-fabricated homes that they rejected when the Resettlement Ministry earlier pushed the idea.

India, which has already built 46,000 houses in the north through a grant of \$270 million, has suggested the option of a loan through its Export-Import Bank for the alternative it can offer.

As many as 1,65,000 houses are still needed in the north and east, nearly 10 years after the war. As for the people living there, all they need is a suitable home after decades of displacement and destruction. Who builds it is hardly their concern.

From their point of view, it would be rather unfair if Colombo further delayed addressing this basic requirement, that too because of a geopolitical tussle.

In recent times, India and China appear keen on a wider presence in the island. While Prime Ministers Ranil Wickremesinghe and Narendra Modi (who joined him through video-conferencing) flagged off the expansion of an India-aided ambulance service in Jaffna last weekend, President Sirisena launched the construction of a China-funded hospital in his constituency Polonnaruwa, some 300 km away, in the North-Central province.

New gift

While Mr. Modi said that “In good times and bad, India has been, and will always be the first responder for Sri Lanka”, Mr. Sirisena announced receiving “another gift” — a fresh \$290 million grant — from China for “any project of my wish”.

With the coming projects and new grants, the strategic competition is no longer confined to the Southern Province, home to Hambantota and Mattala. China has begun moving northward and India southward, building 1,200 homes, in addition to model villages, though negotiations on New Delhi’s ‘pet projects’ of further developing the Trincomalee oil tank farm and the East Container Terminal in Colombo have not progressed.

As Mr. Senaratne noted, it is surely a balancing act for the government. However, it is not just about managing the two powers. Balancing the people's interests and its own foreign policy priorities is the real challenge.

Both India and China are deepening their presence in Sri Lanka amid a strategic competition — China has begun moving northward and India southward, building 1,200 homes

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