

INDIA AND JAPAN CAN PROVIDE AN ALTERNATIVE TO BRI

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Japan

India, Japan and Sri Lanka have jointly agreed to develop the Colombo port, according to a report in Nikkei Asian Review on Monday. The tripartite work to begin next March would be on the newly expanded East Container terminal. This development will obviously be seen as a joint India-Japan counter to the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), especially with the second Belt and Road Forum having concluded recently. But that is not the most important part of the story. A number of steps taken by the Sri Lankan government in the recent past show how much the island country itself wants to loosen the Chinese grip.

After having surrendered the control of Hambantota port to a Chinese firm, Sri Lanka became an exemplar of all that could go wrong with BRI investments. Colombo's insistence that the port will not be used for military purposes by the People's Liberation Army wasn't taken too seriously. So last month, Sri Lanka used the Chinese-controlled Hambantota port to host a joint naval exercise with the United States. This was Colombo's message to Beijing and the rest of the world that Sri Lanka's sovereignty cannot be taken for granted. Earlier, Sri Lanka has also invited Airports Authority of India to operate the China-built Mattala Rajapaksa International Airport in Hambantota. Infamously dubbed as the world's "emptiest" airport, it is one more among the Chinese projects that did not yield any return for the host country.

This newspaper has held that BRI has many problems but not so many alternatives. Sri Lanka shows that there are countries out there looking for alternatives to BRI. Bangladesh has also indicated an interest in sources of funding other than the predatory loans being offered by China. India and Japan can together provide an alternative. The idea of Asia-Africa Growth Corridor is, therefore, very promising. And this latest collaboration on the Colombo port is exactly the kind of project in which India and Japan should pool their resources to the benefit of less-endowed countries in the region.

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