

TOWARDS A COLOMBO RESET

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Even before the new president of Sri Lanka, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, was sworn in, the narrative about Colombo's renewed "tilt" towards China and against India had taken root. The headline, however, misrepresents the complex power play involving Beijing, Delhi and Colombo.

The Great Game in the Subcontinent is not limited to just India and China. It is quite easy to forget the considerable interests and influence of many other powers in the region, including the US, European Union, Japan and Russia. Meanwhile, the exclusive focus on major power rivalry masks the agency of South Asian political elites and their capacity to manoeuvre among the major powers.

In coping with the fluid geopolitics around India, Delhi has no reason to be taken in by the media's definition of the Rajapaksas — Gotabaya and his brother Mahinda, who ruled Sri Lanka as a president during 2005-15 with a strong hand — as inherently "pro-China".

Although the Rajapaksas had blamed India for their defeat in the 2015 elections, they have sought to make up with Delhi in recent years. South Block has rightly put aside its reservations about the Rajapaksas and has been engaging all the major political formations in Sri Lanka. The stage, then, is ready for a reset in the bilateral relations between the two strong governments in Delhi and Colombo.

That reset involves addressing the structural factors that have complicated the relationship between Delhi and Colombo. One of them is the China question. India is acutely aware that China's economic and strategic salience in the Subcontinent will continue to grow and is not tied to the regime leadership in its neighbourhood.

Consider the case of the outgoing coalition led by President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe that proves the irrelevance of labelling governments in Colombo as "pro-China" or "pro-India". It came to power criticising the Chinese projects in Sri Lanka as financially unsustainable. Two years into power, the coalition extended full backing to the Chinese projects. It was this so-called "pro-India" regime that offered China a 99-year lease on the Hambantota project. To add insult to injury, the "pro-India" government stalled key projects of interest to Delhi.

In any case, Delhi can't expect its neighbours to shut down economic and commercial engagement with Beijing, notwithstanding the many questions about the terms of China's assistance on projects, including those under the Belt and Road Initiative. But Delhi will be right to ask Colombo not to take steps with Beijing that threaten India's security. Delhi and Colombo need a clear understanding of mutual red lines relating to national security and a political comfort level to discuss cases that fall within the orange zone. That should help prevent the recurrence of the controversy over Chinese submarines in Colombo port that generated so much bad blood between the two nations in 2014.

On Monday, [The Indian Express](#) reported on the new Lankan leadership's eagerness to signal goodwill towards India. The report quoted sources close to the Rajapaksas as saying that China is a "trade partner" while India is a "close relative". That perhaps is as good a description as any. Other terms used to describe the new policy include "neutrality" and "non-alignment" between major powers.

As the world rediscovers the geopolitical value of Sri Lanka at the heart of the Indo-Pacific, Colombo has huge opportunities to leverage its location for national benefit. A prudent and important part of that strategy would be to avoid provoking India. Delhi too would be wise to be mindful of Colombo's security concerns and find ways to develop long-term strategic cooperation with Sri Lanka.

Delhi needs to invest some political capital in resolving problems such as the long-standing dispute over fisheries. Beyond its objection to China's BRI projects, Delhi, either alone or in partnership with like-minded countries like Japan, should offer sustainable terms for infrastructure development. Delhi also needs to contribute more to the development of Colombo's defence and counter-terror capabilities.

The second structural factor shaping India's relations with Sri Lanka is the Tamil question. India's involvement in Sri Lanka's tragic civil war has been far more consequential than the China factor in complicating Delhi's relations with Colombo. Delhi has certainly learnt the dangers of being drawn too deep into the domestic conflicts of neighbouring countries.

Successive coalition governments in Delhi from 1989 to 2014 struggled to balance the pulls and pressures from Chennai and Colombo. The strong mandate in 2014 had given Modi greater room to manage the competing imperatives on the Lanka policy.

But the Tamil question has not gone away. If the new government in Colombo can advance reconciliation with the Tamil minority, it will be easier for Modi to strengthen ties with the Gotabaya government. But the Tamil issue is no longer a bilateral one between Delhi and Colombo. The Western powers have expressed deep concerns about the war crimes in the military campaign against the LTTE and the need to bring those responsible to book.

The Rajapaksas have declared that they will not bend before foreign pressures. India knows that too much heat from the West will automatically increase China's leverage in Colombo. If the Tamil question continues to have a big impact on Sri Lanka's foreign policy, Delhi needs to look beyond old formulae to try and encourage reconciliation within Lanka and across the Palk Strait with Tamil Nadu. With a strong government in Sri Lanka, it is time for Delhi to think boldly about its relationship with Colombo.

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