

# INDIA SHOULD LOOK BEYOND MONEY TO DRAW LANKA CLOSER

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We can't match China's financial heft but we can leverage our cultural connect with Sri Lanka to strengthen ties

Sri Lanka's polity turned full circle with the election of Gotabaya Rajapaksa to the country's presidency last week. He became the first retired military officer to assume the top office and promptly named his elder brother, Mahinda, a two-term president himself, as prime minister. The Rajapaksa clan is back at the helm of Sri Lanka some five years after it was shown the door by voters. Gotabaya, of the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna party, won the presidency by a 10.25% margin of votes over his nearest rival, Sajith Premadasa of the United National Party-led coalition, in last week's elections. Though incumbent president Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe had come to power in 2014 on the promise of providing efficient governance, their internecine differences eventually led to a failed model of administration, which was widely viewed as a big letdown after raising expectations. The result was a longing for the Rajapaksa era.

These elections were framed by the wider security debate in Sri Lanka in the wake of a series of bombings on Easter Sunday earlier this year that killed more than 260 people and, for which, responsibility was claimed by the Islamic State. Gotabaya ran an effective campaign, which underlined his credentials as the defence secretary who managed to bring an end to the bloody civil war between government forces and Tamil rebels. A majority of voters, largely Sinhalese, have once again reposed their faith in his ability to lead Sri Lanka at a time when they feel vulnerable.

But that's also Gotabaya's Achilles heel and his biggest challenge. He has not received the support of minorities, and he will have to correct this polarization if he is to make his presidency a success. Moreover, his global outreach will also remain hostage to his past, with him being a target of a campaign for alleged human rights abuses during the fight against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, or LTTE. The United Nations has blamed Sri Lankan security forces for killing more than 40,000 people during the last stages of the civil war. And, that's why for him, regional powers such as China and India become all the more important.

New Delhi has been prompt in its outreach to the new president, with external affairs minister S. Jaishankar becoming the first foreign dignitary to call on him last week—with a letter of personal congratulations from Prime Minister Narendra Modi and an invitation to visit India. Gotabaya, who, after winning, made it clear that he doesn't want his nation to be drawn into a regional quest for influence, will be in India this week on his first foreign visit.

India's promptness in engaging with Gotabaya can be well understood in the context of concerns over the "pro-China" tilt of the Rajapaksas. Despite India making its sensitivities clear, the then defence secretary Gotabaya had pointedly let Chinese warships dock at Colombo harbour. This was followed by Mahinda Rajapaksa blaming Indian intelligence service for being the main force behind his 2014 electoral defeat.

Though the Sirisena government came to office to rectify this supposed China-India imbalance in Sri Lankan foreign policy, it could do very little about the Chinese entanglement. It was under that dispensation that China acquired Sri Lanka's Hambantota port in 2017 as a debt swap.

Chinese presence has only grown in the island-nation over the last five years, as Beijing has adopted a more assertive policy towards the Indian Ocean region. Earlier this year, Sri Lanka received a warship from China.

Sri Lanka is part of China's Belt and Road Initiative, under which it has received an estimated \$8 billion as loans, out of a total of around \$11 billion of Chinese investment in the country. China is heavily investing in major infrastructure projects, including oil refineries, the Colombo International Financial Centre, a central highway connecting the capital Colombo with the central Kandy district, and a \$1.4 billion port city next to the Colombo port.

Fears of a "debt trap" are all-pervasive, however. It was why Sri Lanka was forced to hand over control of the Hambantota port to China on a 99-year lease in 2017. It's no surprise that during his election campaign, Gotabaya promised to arbitrate anew the leasing terms of the Hambantota port, and also underlined his desire to maintain strategic equidistance from the Asian giants.

The debate in New Delhi about Gotabaya's so called "pro-China" tilt is not only sterile, but also futile. Gotabaya will be as "pro-China" as Sirisena turned out to be "pro-India". In order to traverse the tricky terrain of regional power politics, smaller states have to be pragmatic. Rather than being perpetually on the defensive about China's growing footprint in India's neighbourhood, India should play to its strengths. New Delhi will always find it difficult to match Chinese economic might. Instead, it should leverage its civilizational and cultural connect, and ensure that its economic engagement produces concrete outcomes even as its red-lines are clearly communicated to the Sri Lankan leadership.

If India has vital interests for which a partnership with Sri Lanka is critical, Sri Lanka, too, cannot become a pivotal Indian Ocean power without a substantive engagement with India. That is the reality that will continue to shape Indo-Sri Lankan ties, irrespective of who holds political power in Colombo.

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