

India, China and the political crisis in Sri Lanka

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Summary

As they try to secure their high stakes in Sri Lanka, New Delhi and Beijing are adapting to Colombo's internal dynamic. But it would be unwise to see the political developments in Colombo as a zero-sum game.

As the world reacts to the political crisis within Sri Lanka, it is no surprise that India and China appear to be on opposite sides of the widening domestic divide. Colombo's giant neighbour, India – separated from the island republic by the Palk Strait that is barely 80 kilometres at its widest – has always been an important factor in Sri Lanka's domestic politics and international relations. Over the last decade, China's economic and political salience in Sri Lanka has steadily grown.

China's rising maritime profile in the Indian Ocean and India's effort to maintain its primacy in South Asian waters has seen Beijing and New Delhi jockey for position in the littoral. Meanwhile, the United States (US) and its allies are beginning to appreciate the significance of Sri Lanka's geopolitical location at the heart of the Indo-Pacific.

The domestic politics of Sri Lanka, its economic choices and its foreign policy orientation have all become inextricably tangled with the deepening geopolitical tensions in the Indo-Pacific. As a power struggle unfolded in Colombo at the end of October, New Delhi and Beijing were quickly sucked into Sri Lanka's internal dynamics.

That President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, who came together to end the decade-long rule of strongman Mahinda Rajapaksa in January 2015, were increasingly at odds with each other was no secret in Colombo. But few observers had predicted that Sirisena would sack Wickremesinghe and install Rajapaksa as the Prime Minister in such a peremptory manner.

Many in Colombo questioned the President's right to dismiss the Prime Minister under the constitution, Sirisena made matters worse by delaying a floor test of majority support in the Parliament. While Wickremesinghe claimed he still enjoyed the support of the majority, Sirisena appeared to be giving time to Rajapaksa to produce the necessary numbers by engineering defections.

While few major governments were ready to recognise Rajapaksa as the new Prime Minister, the Chinese Ambassador in Colombo met him and conveyed the best wishes of President Xi Jinping. The spokesman of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Beijing justified the move by stating that China would stick to "[the principle of not interfering in the domestic affairs of other nations.](#)"

Although this was the articulation of a well-known Chinese position, it appeared rather different on the ground – that Beijing is throwing its political lot with Sirisena and Rajapaksa in Colombo’s internal political contestation. After all, it was during Rajapaksa’s years of presidency (2005-15) that China rapidly gained ground in Sri Lanka.

Rajapaksa’s decision to grant key strategic infrastructure projects to China, including the Colombo Port City, the Hambantota port and the Mattala airport, and his government’s decision to host Chinese submarines generated much strategic anxiety in New Delhi and some concern in Washington.

If China’s star in Sri Lanka was on the rise during the Rajapaksa years, New Delhi’s problems with Colombo turned intractable. As Rajapaksa rode a wave of Sinhala nationalism and stepped up and won the war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, India’s emphasis on the Tamil minority rights in Lanka was not welcome in Colombo. When he lost the presidency, Rajapaksa blamed New Delhi for his rout in the elections. Yet, as the political crisis mounted in the last few months, Rajapaksa travelled to Delhi in September to seek support for his plans to reclaim power. New Delhi too is fully conscious of Rajapaksa’s considerable weight in domestic politics.

India, then, had good reasons to react more cautiously and slowly than China to the developments in Colombo. In a [cryptic statement](#), the Indian Ministry of External Affairs said, “India is closely following the recent political developments in Sri Lanka. As a democracy and a close friendly neighbour, we hope that democratic values and the constitutional process will be respected.” India’s emphasis on the legality and due democratic process was, of course, welcome for Wickremesinghe.

India’s diplomatic position was echoed by the European Union and the US. Brussels insisted on “[due institutional process](#)” and [Washington declared](#) that “it’s up to the Parliament to decide who the prime minister is.” While this mounts some pressure on Sirisena and Rajapaksa, they hope Beijing’s support will turn the tide in their favour.

It would be unwise, however, to frame the political struggle in Colombo as a zero-sum game between New Delhi and Beijing. The weight of geography and history will continue to make India relevant to whatever happens in Sri Lanka. China’s enormous economic power and its growing stakes in the Indian Ocean make it a player to reckon with in Colombo.

In the end, it is important to remember that external players may have some influence on the margins but do not have the power to manipulate the political outcomes in Sri Lanka. Colombo’s political elite is quite conscious of Sri Lanka’s growing strategic significance in the Indo-Pacific. Its competing factions are equally adept at mobilising external support for their own particular internal goals.

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