

SOUTH ASIA DISCUSSION PAPERS



PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION 2019

SRI LANKA UNDER GOTABAYA RAJAPAKSA

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South Asia Discussion Papers

Presidential Election 2019: Sri Lanka under Gotabaya Rajapaksa

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**Presidential Election 2019:
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Gotabaya Rajapaksa**

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INTRODUCTION

Gotabaya Rajapaksa became the eighth president of Sri Lanka following his decisive and clear victory at the presidential polls in November 2019. This election was arguably the most dynamic, competitive and hard-fought with a record number of 35 candidates who contested for the top position. Despite the long list of candidates, the presidential election was primarily a two-man contest between Gotabaya and Sajith Premadasa.

The Institute of South Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore has prepared a series of post-election papers examining major issues and political, economic and social challenges relating to Gotabaya's presidency. These include his foreign policy imperatives, relationship with India and China, economic priorities and policies, engagement with the minority communities and the likely impact of his government on social cohesion and development in the country.

Foreign policy considerations were left out of the election. While domestic issues were raised during the polls, national security and economic development dominated the agenda. National security became a source of concern following the devastating Easter Sunday bombings earlier in the year that killed more than 250 people. The island state's economic growth has also been consistently declining in the last few years. The poor performance of the previous coalition government certainly helped to swing the pendulum in favour of Gotabaya.

The new government faces several key challenges. On the economic front, it must address the country's high foreign debt, low gross domestic product and falling savings while also encouraging foreign investors to place their stakes in its economy. Gotabaya also has the difficult task of managing the highly sensitive issues of race, religion and identity among the different groups in the country. Externally, Colombo is being closely watched by its neighbouring states. Both India and China have welcomed Gotabaya's presidency and would work diligently to ensure that the respective relationships are strengthened. Amid the great power rivalry unfolding in the Indian Ocean, the new administration is likely to navigate a neutral, balanced foreign policy.

A NEW PRESIDENT AND THE POLITICS OF BALANCES

**Asanga
Abeyagoonasekera**

Summary

The recent Sri Lankan election witnessed the Rajapaksa brothers – Gotabaya and Mahinda – coming to power. Gotabaya, former secretary of defence and a technocrat with little political experience, was elected president, while Mahinda, former two-time president who ended the protracted civil war during his term 10 years ago, was sworn in as prime minister. The new president faces the twin internal challenges of balancing nationalist and liberal values and introducing a new political culture with emphasis on meritocracy and technocracy. On external relations, past Sri Lankan leaders have leaned towards a single power for economic support, and this emphasis superseded everything else. It will be interesting to see if Gotabaya’s foreign policy will be different from that of his brother and the other leaders, and if he will be able to balance the triple spheres of influence – India, China and the United States – with his ‘neutral’ foreign policy focus.

Introduction

“We have not lost in this election. In a way we have won the Southern vote; we just did not receive the votes from North-East and the upcountry... I will ensure I will look after all of you.” These were the departing words of Mahinda Rajapaksa after his presidential loss in 2015. The president who left office came back to power after four years, this time appointed as prime minister by his brother – Gotabaya Rajapaksa – a historical,

political incident where two brothers share the Executive and the premiership.

In 2015, votes from the ethnic Tamil-dominated former war zone in the north of the country and Muslim-dominated areas played a key role in President Maithripala Sirisena's victory. It took four years for a Rajapaksa to seize back the top seat by winning a significant percentage of the Sinhalese voter base. The new president, Gotabaya, secured 52.25 per cent of the votes with a 1.3 million lead – a historic victory without many votes from the North-East. As articulated by the newly elected president, "I won from the Sinhalese votes; I expected more votes from the Tamil and Muslim community which I did not receive. I want them to join now." He has appealed to them to be a part of his grand vision to create a prosperous nation with a new political culture, with meritocracy and technocracy emblazoned at the helm.

Reasons for Gotabaya's Victory

There are three distinct reasons for Gotabaya's victory. First, the Sri Lankan economy has been badly managed and the direct effect of rising costs was felt by the entire country. Second, the flaws in the bipartisan model introduced in 2015, which gradually evolved into a complete loss of mutual trust between the Executive and prime minister. The third was the national security threat that arose from the terror attack on Easter Sunday earlier this year.

Following the attack, the people's trust in the government eroded significantly and reached its lowest ebb in October 2019 when a Parliamentary Select Committee¹ highlighted serious intelligence gaps and administration flaws in the government.

In the 2019 presidential election, Sri Lanka was at a crossroads, pitting the neo-liberals against the nationalists. As a symbolic gesture, the colour of the new presidential flag depicts dark brown, signifying the rich soil of the nation. The values stem from the deep South – the scarf was the symbol the Rajapaksas used to depict their closeness to the soil, and this had much more strength than any other political slogans wielded by their opponents. "I am from a southern Sinhalese Buddhist family and I was educated at a Buddhist school 'Ananda College'. I will ensure principles of Buddhist values will be at the forefront [of] my presidency", said the newly-elected president at his inauguration at the Ruwanwelisaya Buddhist shrine. This was the place where the ancient Southern Sinhalese Buddhist King Dutugamunu, who united the nation, left a magnificent edifice to the entire country.

Adopting Global Best Practices

While embracing history is significant, it is also important to explore whether history has punished societies that have not evolved. Alexis de Tocqueville came from another nation to praise America's embodiment of progressive political ideals. Nations should

1 PSC Full Report. <https://www.parliament.lk/uploads/comreports/sc-april-attacks-report-en.pdf>

adapt best practices and embrace the values of progressive development in other nations. Leaders should be quick to adapt these best practices and values from them.² Many politicians in Sri Lanka's recent past spoke about bringing inspiration from the Singapore model, but their words ended up only as empty promises.

The newly-elected president could enact this change. Perhaps, as a reflection of this change, Gotabaya, within his first week in office, reduced the number of cabinet portfolios and established a committee for future appointments at all government institutional levels.

Sri Lanka's economic geography matters as much as its political geography. Most past leaders failed to capitalise on the nation's economic and political geographic significance due to their narrow political principles and their belief in protectionist measures, thereby missing the opportunity to leap forward and be part of the global economy and its value chains. Even Singapore defines her geography by international connectivity.

The balance between national and liberal values is clearly visible in the Singaporean context. Sri Lanka should develop its capacity to concentrate and harness the flows of goods, services, resources, money, technology, information and talent which will make it grow gravitationally into a large

nation, just like Singapore. For this, Sri Lanka has to go beyond the ultra-nationalist spirit to embrace what is out there in the world.

The strategy of the new president comes during the significant time of the 4th Industrial Revolution. The author was present in Davos when Professor Klaus Schwab, Chairman of the World Economic Forum, released his book, *The Fourth Industrial Revolution*,³ in 2016, during which time Sri Lanka's gross domestic product growth rate was at 4.5 per cent. The economy is expected to grow at its lowest rate of 2.7 per cent in 2019. Political instability, followed by a weak security environment, was a significant factor that has pulled the entire country down. When compared to nations such as Bangladesh in the South Asian region, which has managed to stabilise its economy with an eight per cent annual growth rate, the Sri Lankan economy would need a quick recovery, with a particular increase in foreign direct investment inflows.

Value of Democracy and Technocracy

Will Gotabaya be able to manage the delicate balance between ultra-nationalist and liberal economic values? Seen as an efficient administrative technocrat with little experience in politics, will he embrace the values of the rich school of democracy in his government? How will he embrace his brother's pro-China foreign policy? And will

2 Marty Linsky, Harvard Kennedy School, *Practice of Adaptive Leadership*, Harvard Business Press; 1 edition, 18 May 2009.

3 Klaus Schwab, *The Fourth Industrial Revolution*. <https://www.weforum.org/about/the-fourth-industrial-revolution-by-klaus-schwab>

he be able to create a balance between the triple spheres of influence of India, China and the United States? These are some questions the new leadership will face, and Gotabaya will need to use all his statecraft to answer them in the coming months.

One significant internal value the new leader may wish to follow is technocracy. Sri Lankans are in search of a better government that could balance democracy and technocracy – an area in which the previous regime failed miserably. The gap was clearly identified by Gotabaya and he has promised a government with values of technocracy and meritocracy under his leadership. In both his election manifesto and at his inaugural speech, these values were re-emphasised by the president.

Technocracy is the model and policy prescription that was put forward as a solution for modern democracies by Parag Khanna, a professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy in Singapore – he published a book on the same subject.⁴ He explained that there is a lack of technical experts to solve complex government problems in a democracy. Technocracy, as a form of leading governing practice to efficiently govern a polis (the ideal city), was introduced by the Greek philosopher Plato as the most preferred form of government, which should be led by a committee of public-spirited ‘guardians’. In such a system, the most qualified technical experts are chosen based on merit to govern the nation.

This is a model adopted by progressive nations such as Singapore. According to Parag, “Technocratic government is built around expert analysis and long-term planning, rather than narrow-minded and short-term populist whims... Real technocracy has the virtues of being both utilitarian (inclusively seeking the broadest societal benefit) and meritocratic (with the most qualified and non-corrupt leaders). Instead of ad hoc and reactive politics, technocracies are where political science starts to look like something worthy of the term: a rigorous approach to policy.”⁵ What Sri Lanka clearly needs is to steer in this direction. Indeed, the island state’s new leadership has already recognised the importance of this model. Accordingly, the ‘public-spirited guardians’ will be chosen to address key complex issues not adequately addressed before.

Foreign Policy Management

Gotabaya is the second leader after Sirimavo Bandaranaike who managed to become the head of state without much political experience. While Sirimavo’s domestic policies had limitations, leading to an erosion of the economy, her foreign policy imperatives were excellent.

On foreign policy, the newly-elected president spelt out his policy in his election manifesto to “maintain friendly relations with other countries from a standpoint of equality”, and to “adopt a non-aligned policy in all his foreign dealings and work

4 Parag Khanna, *Technocracy in America*. <https://www.amazon.com/Technocracy-America-Info-State-Parag-Khanna-ebook/dp/B01LX46FXZ>

5 Ibid.

with all friendly nations on equal terms”.⁶ His clear position was that, “We will not be part of any big power rivalry; we will take a neutral position.” Even before his maiden visit to India, Constantino Xavier, a foreign policy fellow at Brookings India in New Delhi, explained that “Gota will play the China card, but Beijing is now less inclined to repeat the large financial investments it did five or 10 years ago, due to growing domestic opposition and international scrutiny.” Further looking at Indo-Lanka foreign policy in the context of the greater global strategy at play in the Indo-Pacific, Xavier stated, “Prime Minister [Narendra] Modi’s ambition to shape the Indo-Pacific great game will fail unless he gets Gotabaya to play ball and keep China at bay.”⁷ It would be wise for India not to use its closest neighbour in the manner described by Xavier, since a strong and deep Sino-Lanka relationship is also an essential element in Sri Lanka’s foreign policy.

China’s deep economic and infrastructure-driven diplomacy on the island state cannot be discounted. From South Asia, Sri Lanka was an initial partner of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – a strategic step taken by Mahinda during his presidency. China’s goals were explained by President Xi Jinping in his congratulatory letter to the newly-elected president: “[T]o deepen our practical cooperation within the

framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, to start a new chapter of China-Sri Lanka Strategic Cooperative Partnership and to bring more tangible benefits to our two peoples.” During his visit to India from 28 to 30 November 2019, Gotabaya bluntly and rightly expressed the importance of the strategic asset of the Hambantota port leased out to China during his interview: “[The] Sri Lankan government must have control of all strategically important projects.”⁸ Viewing the lease of the Hambantota port as an unfruitful exercise, he elaborated on its long-lasting strategic implications “...these 99-year lease agreements [that the previous government signed] will have an impact on our future.” The Hambantota port and Chinese infrastructure diplomacy have had many concerned that Beijing was indulging in ‘debt diplomacy’. Gotabaya has, however, rejected the claim of a ‘debt trap’ in this same interview – “It is also wrong to say there was a debt trap” – and that the Hambantota port was leased out due to the government’s inability to finance the borrowings from the Chinese.

The total Chinese loan percentage is much less than the sovereign bonds and the debt issue is more of a ‘middle-income trap’ rather than a ‘Chinese debt trap’. The country has advanced from a low-income to middle-income status,⁹ and no longer qualifies

6 Gotabaya’s election manifesto. <https://gota.lk/sri-lanka-podujana-peramuna-manifesto-english.pdf>

7 “How India should deal with Gotabaya’s Sri Lanka by Xavier”, *Hindustan Times*, 19 November 2019. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/analysis/how-india-should-deal-with-gotabaya-s-sri-lanka/story-GkOygsIgsitytFjvF3QKaJ.html>

8 “Gotabaya interview with Suhasini Haidar”, *The Hindu*, 30 November 2019. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/need-more-coordination-between-delhi-colombo-says-gotabaya-rajapaksa/article30125809.ece>

9 Samaranayake N, April 2019, China’s Engagement with Smaller South Asian Countries, USIP special report.

for concessional loans from international institutions. Andrew Small, Transatlantic Fellow at the German Marshall Fund's Asia Program and a renowned China expert, analysed the Sri Lankan debt trap as a "data point rather than a trend", stating that the "perception that China plans to build military bases through debt-diplomacy is inaccurate".¹⁰

Having said that, the new president will have to astutely exercise his 'neutral' foreign policy posture at a time of geopolitical significance in Sri Lanka's surrounding environment, especially in the Indian Ocean, where neutrality has its own complexity. Sri Lanka should not accept binary choices when it comes to the Indo-Pacific or the BRI. It should be part of both strategies and it should reap the maximum benefits of both for its people.

Conclusion

Gotabaya is seen by the general public as a leader who is capable of delivering on his promises. During his term, Gotabaya will be faced with the challenge of balancing competing priorities. He needs to introduce technocracy and meritocracy into the country, but he also needs to balance this by carefully making deep changes to the existing system. He will need to balance nationalist and liberal policies, adopt best practices that will connect Sri Lanka to the world and make the small island gravitationally a large nation. For this, Gotabaya will need to balance his

'neutral' policy stance with regional and global geopolitical dynamics.

10 "Asia's new geopolitics", *Business Recorder*. <https://fp.brecorder.com/2018/06/20180611380847/>

MANAGING EXTERNAL DEBT A TOP PRIORITY

Amitendu Palit

Summary

The new government of Gotabaya Rajapaksa in Sri Lanka must address serious macroeconomic problems. These include high external debt, mounting debt service obligations, low gross domestic product growth and falling savings. Increasing foreign direct investment, discouraging easy corporate access to external borrowing and enhancing exports should be the immediate priorities.

The conclusion of the Presidential elections in Sri Lanka and the entry of a new President, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, in office draw attention to the economic challenges the new government would have to handle. Foremost among these are macroeconomic difficulties.

Sri Lanka has often been cited as an example of an economy whose progress in social and human development has not been accompanied by sustained macroeconomic stability. The current economic conditions reflect the dichotomy. Sri Lanka has had 'twin deficits' for several years. These include deficits arising from an excess of domestic expenditure over revenue, which, in turn, forced borrowings, primarily from external sources, leading to excess of external liabilities over earnings from abroad. For Sri Lanka, both deficits have acquired serious proportions requiring immediate attention.

The External Debt Hole

Government debt, as a proportion of the gross domestic product (GDP), had declined from 86 per cent in 2009 to a record low of 69 per cent in 2012. The trend, however, could not be maintained. The ratio increased to 77 per cent in 2015 and further to 83 per cent in 2018.¹ The rapid rise in overall government debt has been accompanied by a sharp increase in external debt. Unlike several other countries, where government debt is primarily internal, in Sri Lanka, external debt is prominent in total debt. As a proportion of the GDP, external debt is currently 66.2 per cent. From a share of 52 per cent of GDP in 2011, the external debt has steadily increased. The rate of rise was particularly high in 2018, during which there was a year-on-year increase of almost eight per cent.

Why has the external debt increased so much? Several quarters hold the view that it is a result of the large debt-financed infrastructure funds that Sri Lanka has received from China through the Hambantota port and other projects. The real reason is different. China held nine per cent of Sri Lanka's total external debt at the end of 2017. A much larger 33 per cent of external debt were loans raised through external sovereign bonds and foreign currency term financing facilities.²

Much of Sri Lanka's high external indebtedness is due to the liberal policy of allowing corporates and state-owned enterprises (SOEs) to raise resources directly from external markets. Loans raised by the SOEs were also backed by government guarantees, leading to a sharp increase in external borrowings.

The ostensible reason behind such encouragement, since 2015, was to reduce the dependence of the SOEs on fiscal support from the Central government. The unfortunate outcome has been a rapid accumulation of external debt, leading to a concomitant rise in debt-service obligations. The borrowing profligacy has also resulted in a rising share of non-concessional loans in total debt entailing a greater interest repayment burden and stress on government finances going forward.

Unavoidable Actions

The task of the new government is cut out, with the immediate priorities being managing external debt and restoring fiscal discipline. On the first, the government has limited room for policy intervention. Debt-service obligations, which are likely to be high for the next couple of years, are fixed and cannot be renegotiated. The only possible policy intervention could be protecting the exchange rate. Further depreciation of the Sri Lankan currency will increase the nominal debt service burden.

1 CEIC Data, "Sri Lanka External Debt: % of GDP". <https://www.ceicdata.com/en/indicator/sri-lanka/external-debt--of-nominal-gdp>

2 Dushni Weerakoon, "Managing Sri Lanka-hina Economic Relations: BRI, Debt, and Diplomacy", *Talking Economics*, 22 January 2019. <http://www.ips.lk/talkingeconomics/2019/01/22/managing-sri-lanka-china-economic-relations-bri-debt-and-diplomacy/>

Ideally, the government would be hoping for a steady increase in non-debt creating capital flows, such as foreign direct investment (FDI) and foreign portfolio investment over the next couple of years. These flows would increase the stock of capital in the economy, reduce reliance on external borrowings and steadily appreciate the local currency. However, the prospects of receiving such flows are uncertain. It might require the government announcing big-ticket private greenfield investment projects, as well as the sale of government equity in some SOEs.

The other priority for the government is reviving GDP growth, along with increase in domestic savings. A quick uptick in GDP growth, facilitated by government investments in some key sectors, is the best way to revive investor sentiments to attract long-term FDI.

Equally important is curtailing domestic expenditure. Encouraging SOEs to directly access external borrowing sources has inflicted serious downsides on the economy. The policy needs to be reversed with the eventual goal of taking hard decisions like shutting down some perpetually loss-making SOEs.

Finally, for a more robust balance of payments and healthier macroeconomic conditions, Sri Lanka must go back to strongly encouraging exports. Under current circumstances, there appears to be little option of doing so other than a proactive

policy of engaging in bilateral free trade agreements (FTAs) to get deep market access. Capitalising on the opportunities from the FTA with Singapore and finalising the comprehensive trade agreements with China and India are necessary steps.

STRUCTURAL REFORMS KEY TO HIGHER ECONOMIC GROWTH

Amitendu Palit

Summary

Sri Lanka's economic prospects are unlikely to improve till it is able to raise its rate of gross domestic product growth from the current low of 3.2 per cent. This calls for deep structural reforms. Completing reforms under the International Monetary Fund's ongoing Extended Fund Facility might help in significantly improving long-term prospects.

The Sri Lankan economy is yet to 'take off' in the conventional sense of settling down in a high growth trajectory. Such a take-off was widely expected after the end of the civil war a decade ago. The years that followed did witness a rapid increase in the gross domestic product (GDP) growth. From 3.5 per cent in 2009, the GDP growth accelerated to 9.1 per cent in 2012. However, the increase was short-lived. In 2013, the GDP growth declined to 3.4 per cent. The highest growth, since then, has been a rather modest five per cent in 2015. The current GDP growth is as low as 3.2 per cent, which is lower than the rate of 3.5 per cent a decade earlier.

For the new government, reviving the rate of economic growth is a top priority. Sri Lanka's growth is among the lowest in South Asia now. Staging a recovery from here would not be easy.

In Search of Foreign Direct Investment

The rapid rise in the GDP growth after the end of the civil conflict was due to the upsurge in economic activity driven by reconstruction. The space for such efforts in building new infrastructure has to be identified afresh. The biggest challenge will be mobilising investments to induce growth.

Since July 2018, when foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows into Sri Lanka were recorded at just over US\$900 million (S\$1.23 billion), the inflows have been declining. During the second quarter of the current year (April-July 2019), FDI inflows were US\$230 million (S\$314.1 million). The political uncertainty before the presidential elections and the Easter Sunday terrorist strikes earlier in the year affected long-term investment plans. However, unless FDI inflows recover, the economy will encounter two major challenges. There will not be sufficient resources to kick-start growth. There would also be difficulties in managing the rising volume of external debt.

Sri Lanka's external debt is at 66 per cent of its GDP. The high debt has much to do with the liberal policy of allowing corporates, including state-owned enterprises (SOEs), to borrow directly from overseas credit markets, often backed by government guarantees. The ostensible reason behind the policy was to reduce the dependence of the SOEs on financial support from the Treasury.

However, the net result has been to augment the external debt liabilities, leading to a significant rise in debt-service obligations.

There is little the government can do to reduce the current obligations. In the medium-term, however, it must increase the economy's reliance on non-debt creating capital, that is, FDI, as the main source of external finance.

Structural Reforms

In the absence of immediate recovery in FDI and domestic private investments, the onus is on the government to stimulate investment for growth. The challenge for the government here is obvious: mobilising sufficient revenues, over and above expenditure, to channelise into investments for new projects. More than raising revenues, the harder task is to reduce expenditure.

Sri Lanka has been running a current account deficit in its balance of payments. The deficit was US\$672.6 million (S\$918.4 million) in the quarter ending June 2019, reflecting the excess of domestic expenditure over saving, and the need to mobilise external resources for bridging the gap.

The government does not have a magic wand to raise domestic savings and investment. Nor does it have a quick fix for cutting expenditure. Turning around the Sri Lankan economy at this juncture requires major structural policy decisions.

A Good Finish in Extended Finance Facility

Sri Lanka availed of an Extended Finance Facility (EFF) from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in June 2016 for three years. The Facility, entailing total financial support of US\$1.5 billion (S\$2.05 billion), has been extended till June 2020. So far, around US\$1.3 billion (S\$1.76 billion) has been disbursed.¹

Sri Lanka's ability to address the major structural problems facing its economy – rising public debt, shortfall in revenues, stagnant exports and ineffective governance – through the EFF might help it in securing two major goals. The first is implementing much-needed 'hard' decisions. These include reforms of the SOEs, including privatisation, wherever necessary; cutting inessential government expenditure; increasing flexibility in managing exchange rate; and moving to a more liberal external trade regime by cutting tariffs and incentivising exports. The second goal is the possibility of approaching the IMF again for a new round of support after a 'good finish' of the current EFF.

However, more IMF help might not be immediately forthcoming. A distinguished performance under the EFF, on the other hand, particularly implementation of structural reforms, would improve Sri Lanka's credibility among the international donor and investment communities. A stronger and

better image as a performer would enhance prospects of attracting long-term FDI, enabling the much-awaited 'take off' in GDP growth.

¹ International Monetary Fund, "IMF Executive Board Completes the Sixth Review of Sri Lanka's Extended Arrangement under the Extended Fund Facility", Press Release No. 19/390, 1 November 2019. <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2019/11/01/pr19390-sri-lanka-imf-executive-board-completes-6th-review-extended-arrangement-eff>

GOTABAYA RAJAPAKSA'S WORLD

S D Muni

Summary

Gotabaya Rajapaksa has won the Sri Lankan presidency by raising domestic issues of internal security governance. Foreign policy was generally left out of the electoral contest, except for stray references that he would restore normal relations with China. Nonetheless, the new president faces a difficult challenge of harmoniously balancing the intensely competing stakeholders in the Indo-Pacific region where Sri Lanka is strategically located. The Rajapaksas have enjoyed very close relations with China, and Gotabaya would continue to keep China in good humour by encouraging growing Chinese investments in Sri Lanka. However, he needs to take care in eschewing the strategic underpinnings of Chinese projects so as not to offend the other stakeholders in the region, like India and the United States (US). Restraining China strategically may not be easy, because China will insist on its pound of strategic flesh for the huge investments made. India has begun on a positive note with Gotabaya and the bilateral mutual understanding will flourish following his first foreign state visit to New Delhi this month. India is also expected to go more than half the way in accommodating the new Colombo regime by dropping issues like the implementation of the 13th Amendment. Gotabaya, has deep bonds with the US and would be responsive to its strategic concerns in the region, though he may not oblige Western friends on issues like post-2009 war human rights and domestic freedoms.

Gotabaya Rajapaksa has won Sri Lanka's presidential election with a clear and decisive majority. This election was contested on domestic issues of malgovernance; the failure of the previous coalition government, which had promised ethnic justice, political freedom and a truly democratic, inclusive constitution; and internal security. Gotabaya's campaign, besides other issues, had been mainly anchored on the promise to secure Sri Lanka against terrorism, be it Islamic or Tamil. There were no major foreign policy issues in the electoral campaign. The amateurishly alleged Indian supported assassination attempt on then-President Sirisena could perhaps have crept in if Sirisena had been one of the contestants. However, that was not to be.

Absence of Foreign Policy in the Campaign

The domestic focus of the campaign was in sharp contrast to the previous presidential election of 2014. Then, in addition to ruthless authoritarian governance, Sri Lanka's flourishing economic relations with China and China's growing strategic presence in the Sri Lankan economy (encouraged and smoothly navigated by the Mahinda Rajapaksa regime) was the major bone of contention. There are, therefore, questions about whether the China-Sri Lanka warmth of the previous Rajapaksa regime will re-emerge under the new Gotabaya presidency. And if this happens, how will the great power rivalry in

Sri Lanka – between China on the one hand, and India, the United States (US) and its allies on the other – play out?

Gotabaya has projected himself as a pragmatic leader, sensitive to security and strategic issues that impinge on Sri Lanka. He knows that Sri Lanka's greatest strategic asset is its location in the Indian Ocean, as much as its economy also depends upon peace and freedom of navigation in the Indian Ocean region. There is a strong legacy in Sri Lanka to remain committed to peace and stability there. Recall in 1974 when Sri Lanka had sponsored a United Nations (UN) resolution on keeping the Indian Ocean a Zone of Peace, free from great power rivalries and arms build-up. In recent years, the now retiring Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe has also been pursuing the argument of peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region, which has been pushed into uncertainty and turbulence as a result of China's growing expansion and the consequent great power rivalry.¹ Gotabaya had personally contributed to pushing Sri Lanka into this rivalry when he allowed the docking of Chinese submarines and warships in Colombo port in his capacity as the Defence Minister, under his brother Mahinda Rajapaksa's presidency. This had led to strong resentment by India and other countries, including Japan and the US. As a result, Sri Lanka has subsequently denied such favours to China so far, mainly under the outgoing presidency. Even Gotabaya,

1 See the text of Ranil Wickremesinghe's address at the International Conference on Indian Ocean held at Male (Maldives), on 3 September 2019. The author was present in the audience.

months before his election, had brushed the incident aside as an inadvertent slip not to be repeated.²

While assuming the office of President on 18 November 2019, Gotabaya described his foreign policy as being of “friendship with all and remain[ing] neutral with international powers so as to stay out of conflicts”. This is plain rhetoric. Translating it in specific and concrete policy initiatives would mean keeping a harmonious engagement, without playing one against the other for short-term political advantages and financial gains, with the major Indo-Pacific players – namely, India, China and the US and its allies. This will be easier said than done. Conveniently, Gotabaya can carry out the previous Rajapaksa regime’s foreign policy under the new ‘friendship with all’ and ‘neutrality’ campaign rhetoric. However, there may be consequences of such a deception difficult for him to cope with. Foreign policy proved to be a polarising phenomenon for the outgoing presidency as well. Avoiding that course and evolving a balanced engagement with the Indo-Pacific major powers amidst their fiercely competing and assertive interests will call for huge political and diplomatic investment on Gotabaya’s part.

Keeping China in Good Humour and Restrained

Working out a proper equation with China is at the heart of Gotabaya’s new strategic approach. Some of his close advisers claimed during the campaign that, when elected, the relationship with China will be restored to the level “where it was”. This included a reference to the outgoing Sirisena’s hold on some of the Chinese projects like the ‘Lotus Tower’ – Asia’s tallest tower. Gotabaya’s team believes that such actions were done to please the rival powers and attract investments that never came. Obviously, then, the held-up Chinese projects would have to be cleared. And for good reason, because China is the largest investor in Sri Lanka today, with nearly US\$11 billion (S\$15 billion), of which US\$8 billion (S\$10.9 billion) to US\$9 billion (S\$12.3 billion) are committed to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects. China’s projects are touching almost every sector of Sri Lanka’s economy and social life, creating jobs and opening new economic opportunities.³ Where, then, is the reason for any government to ask them to slow down? The slowdown could come from the side of the Chinese, who could reduce their investments, as President Xi Jinping is regularly monitoring the BRI trends and slashing its redundancies. If that happens, China may even be asked to enhance its commitments. And why not? After all, Sirisena had also asked

2 Gotabaya confessed this to an Indian think-tank (Kalinga Foundation) delegation that papers were signed by him by junior officials mixing a submarine with a war ship. The author was a member of this delegation and had talked to Gotabaya. Colombo 3 October 2018.

3 Shihar Aneez and Sanjeev Miglani, “A hospital and clean water: China on the charmed offensive in Sri Lanka”, *Reuters*, 20 November 2019.

China at some point to enhance its annual investments by 30 to 35 per cent.⁴

An expanding economic footprint of China in Sri Lanka will have both domestic and external consequences. Domestically, the question of a debt trap has been debated extensively. Besides economic dependency, China is also spreading its cultural presence through BRI projects. There are radio stations blurring Chinese propaganda and the Chinese language is being taught freely. There is a casino culture and massage parlours that had been objected to by the Buddhist diehards in Sri Lanka. There are also protests on environmental counts against some of the mega projects like the Colombo port city. Under its Port-Park-City model, China is planning also to develop Hambantota town, and is working on a 15,000 hectare special economic zone, for which they were granted lease rights for 99 years by the Sirisena government. Externally, India and the US would have serious questions for China's burgeoning economic presence and its strategic impact under the current situation, reflected in issues like the docking of submarines. China is stretching its strategic outreach in the Indian Ocean through the People's Liberation Army-Navy, and would insist on Sri Lanka for easy access and requisite facilities in return for huge economic investments.

The challenge before Gotabaya is to keep India, the US and the international community happy without alienating China. Gotabaya may perhaps seek restraint on some Chinese projects that are strategically sensitive. For instance, the Rajapaksas have been criticising the Sirisena government for granting a 99-year lease to the Chinese in Hambantota, and had promised to renegotiate this deal when in power. Gotabaya's presidential election manifesto said:

“[The] Hambantota port is a national asset and was defined as a strategic asset by us previously, and the intention was never to sell or lease the port for 99 years... We will make it a priority to revisit the already signed agreement with the Chinese government and explore ways as to how best we could bring about a win-win for the two countries.”⁵

The manifesto also said that he would not sign any treaties harmful to Sri Lanka's national interests.⁶ Gotabaya may start working on this promise. He will carefully navigate, like his predecessors, the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) concept, keeping in mind the Chinese sensitivities to the military dimensions of the FOIP. The best path

4 The projects and sectors covered under the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, see Zhao Ying, “Belt and Road friend in need: China and Sri Lanka”, *Daily Financial Times* (Colombo), 28 March 2019.

5 Election manifesto of the Rajapaksas' party, Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), page 58.

6 Ankit Panda, “Will Gotabaya Revisit Sri Lanka's Hambantota Debt Trap”, *The Diplomat*, 19 November 2019. <https://thediplomat.com/2019/11/will-gotabaya-revisit-sri-lankas-hambantota-debt-trap-with-china/>.

forward for Gotabaya would be to encourage other interested countries such as India, the US, Japan, South Korea and Australia to expand their respective economic presence in Sri Lanka. China will have to be kept in good humour because, besides being a ready source of infrastructure support to Sri Lanka, China has been obliging the Rajapaksas politically and in many other ways.

India: 'A Relative'

Building a harmonious engagement with India would be a less formidable challenge. The post-2015 bickering between India and the Rajapaksas started to gradually dissolve by 2017, as both sides started mapping out each other's strengths against their own respective backdrops in the context of strains within the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe coalition regime. Mahinda Rajapaksa withdrew his allegations of India defeating him and met Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his privately-crafted visit to India in September 2018. Modi again met him in Colombo in June 2019. India maintained a stance of complete neutrality when Sirisena precipitated a constitutional crisis and appointed Mahinda Rajapaksa as the Prime Minister in October 2019. India carefully refrained from indicating any preference in the recently held presidential polls. Soon after Gotabaya's victory, India took the first step to invite him to visit India to build a "partnership for shared peace, prosperity and security".⁷ The invitation has been accepted

and the visit is scheduled to take place on 29 November 2019.

In building this new partnership, India will drop its insistence on the implementation of Sri Lanka's 13th Amendment to address the alienation of the Tamils. This insistence started fading out as the previous government proposed a new and equitable Constitution. India has also gradually started working on development projects in much neglected Sinhala areas. This will be stepped up. India has to make sure that its chronic delivery deficit on development projects is redressed. India is also expected to refrain from gingering Sri Lanka's sensitivities towards the international pressures on human rights issues. India's approach is most likely to remain security driven, aiming at expanding on the existing mutual bilateral and trilateral security agreements with the Maldives and Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean and ensuring that China is not allowed to carve out any undue security space in the region. India would also not like to be excluded from contributing to Sri Lanka's development dynamics.

Gotabaya may not have much difficulty on playing along with India on these lines. He has repeatedly been denying that he had any anti-India proclivities, citing repeated examples informally of how he smoothly worked with the former Indian National Security Adviser Shivshankar Menon to resolve difficulties in India-Sri Lanka relations.

⁷ This was tweeted by Dr S Jaishankar, India's foreign minister, who flew in to Colombo to invite the new President on behalf of Prime Minister Modi. For the text of the tweet, see *The Times of India*, New Delhi, 19 November 2019.

Gotabaya would not hesitate, in informal conversations, to echo his brother Mahinda Rajapaksa's sentiments, regarding which the latter said:

"India is our closest relation, I would say, and our neighbour. And China has been a long-standing friend. In all our dealings with China, we never forgot about the interests of India. We had a very good understanding with the Indian government and we always told them that we would never allow our territory to be used for any activity against our neighbour."⁸

Caution on the International Community

If Gotabaya could meet India's concerns on his approach towards China, he would have met the US concerns in this respect as well. An interesting aspect of Gotabaya's gestures towards the US would be his response to the pending US proposed agreements, like on the Status of Forces and the Millennium Challenge Corporation compact.⁹ He is expected to be supportive of the proposals of the country of his hitherto citizenship. He may also be open to new US proposals under its recently adopted Asia Reassurance Initiative Act that aims at supporting Indo-Pacific countries on a number of issues,

ranging from democracy, human rights, and good governance to cyber security and combating terrorism. This Act was signed by President Donald Trump on 19 December 2018 to reassert US hegemony through soft power in the Indo-Pacific region in the face of the Chinese challenge. Gotabaya would, however, not cooperate with international and UN moves to fix responsibility for human rights violation allegations on the Sri Lankan security forces, then led by him, while militarily decimating the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in 2009. Even during his campaign, he had said, "I can't recognise what UN has signed with past governments." He has made it very clear that his government will not honour commitments to the UN Human Rights Council on the questions of accountability and reconciliation.¹⁰ To carry through on this promise, Gotabaya will need to find ways and means to ensure that Europe, the US and the United Kingdom do not subject Sri Lanka to trade and garment market pressures.

Gotabaya's way ahead on foreign policy is difficult and challenging. However, he does not have the constraints of a civil war in Sri Lanka and is endowed with a wider and more rapidly adaptive vision of the world than his elder brother. The primacy in his external engagements will continue to be claimed by India and China, which, in their own ways, are seeking to cope with each other, including

8 Mahinda Rajapaksa's Interview by Suhasini Haider and Amit Barua, *The Hindu*, (New Delhi), 12 September 2018.

9 Sudha Ramachandran, "Sri Lanka's Rajapaksas are Back in Power", *The Diplomat*, 18 November 2019. <https://thediplomat.com/2019/11/sri-lankas-rajapaksas-are-back-in-power/>

10 "Will Not Honour UN Deal on Accountability Says Gotabaya", *The Hindu*, (New Delhi), 16 October 2019. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/will-not-honour-un-deal-on-accountability-says-gotabaya/article29693188.ece>

through informal summits such as those in Wuhan and Chennai. With caution, prudence and resilience, Gotabaya's Sri Lanka may find some space to swim around in the turbulent waters of the Indian Ocean. To a great extent, his domestic approach towards the Tamil question and issues of democracy and freedom, as well as the nature of his warmth towards a tested friend, China, will define the ways in which the rest of the world would deal with him.

INDIA, SRI LANKA AND THE POLITICS OF PROXIMITY

C Raja Mohan

Summary

The international discourse on the election of Gotabaya Rajapaksa as president of Sri Lanka has focused too narrowly on the deepening Sino-Indian rivalry in the Subcontinent and the Indian Ocean. That perspective, however, misreads the power dynamic involving Beijing, Delhi and Colombo. It also ignores the fact that the relationship of the two Asian giants with the island nation is not symmetric.

As a giant neighbour physically so proximate, India has a very complex relationship with Sri Lanka which is very different from that between Beijing and Colombo. That there is an ethnic overlay of the Tamil-speaking people across the Palk Straits, which divide peninsular India and Sri Lanka, makes Colombo's ties with Delhi unique. The Tamil question has, in fact, been a key driver of the relationship between India and Sri Lanka all these decades. Sri Lanka's deep ties with China in recent years are, arguably, a consequence of how the Tamil question played out between Colombo and Delhi.

The Narendra Modi government is eager to reset the relationship with Colombo after the election of Gotabaya as the president with a strong mandate. India's external affairs minister, S Jaishankar, made a quick dash to Colombo to meet the new president with the promise of renewing the relationship on a new sustainable basis. Gotabaya, in turn, appears to have reciprocated the sentiment

and accepted Modi's invitation to visit Delhi in late November 2019.¹

The National Democratic Alliance government, led by Modi, appears to have the political will as well as the space to reset the ties with Sri Lanka. There is an expectation that Gotabaya too will be pragmatic in addressing the challenges facing Sri Lanka. His party has also signalled that it has learnt from the political mistakes made during the decade-long rule (2005-15) of Gotabaya's brother, Mahinda Rajapaksa. However, many uncertainties will test the prospects for a genuine restructuring of India-Sri Lanka relations.

In India, Modi certainly seems to have learnt many valuable lessons from the negative impact of India's involvement in the conflict between the Sinhala majority and the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka and the resulting deterioration of bilateral relations from the early 1980s to the mid-2010s. Although the Indian military intervention in the Sri Lankan civil war ended disastrously in the 1990s, the political fall-out continued for well into the 21st century.

As the civil war simmered in Sri Lanka and inflamed the sentiments in the neighbouring Indian province of Tamil Nadu, Delhi was trapped between assuaging the concerns of Tamil Nadu while encouraging the majority Sinhalese to resolve the issues peacefully.

Successive coalition governments in Delhi from 1989 to 2014, which were dependent on the support from Tamil parties, struggled to balance the pulls and pressures from Chennai, the capital of Tamil Nadu, and Colombo.

Needless to say, Delhi fell between the two stools. Its intervention deeply angered the majority Sinhala community. And the sense of threat from India nudged Lanka to turn to China and Pakistan to balance against its northern neighbour. Although India had strongly supported the unity of Sri Lanka, its support to federalism in the island nation was not acceptable to the majority community.

Delhi's quiet assistance to Colombo in defeating the Tamil insurgency during 2008-09 was significant, but the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government seemed unable to break out of its deference to Chennai in pursuing a much needed restructuring of ties with Lanka. The UPA years, meanwhile, saw the rapid rise in China's economic influence and the growth of its security profile in Sri Lanka, and generated growing concerns in Delhi.

When he took charge as the head of the first government in three decades with a parliamentary majority of his own in the summer of 2014, Modi recognised the political need to address both the Tamil question and the China factor in the bilateral

1 The Wire Staff, "Jaishankar Rushes to Colombo, India Announces Dates of New Sri Lankan President's Visit", *The Wire*, 19 November 2019. <https://thewire.in/external-affairs/jaishankar-gotabaya-rajapaksa-sri-lanka>

relations with Sri Lanka. The strong mandate in 2014 had given Modi greater room to manage the competing imperatives on the Lanka policy. For one, Modi brought greater balance in India's engagement with the majority and minority communities in Sri Lanka. Unlike his predecessor, Modi had no problem visiting Sri Lanka and reaching out to all sections of the Sinhala society. He also seemed eager to resolve some long-standing problems like the fisheries dispute and to offer economic cooperation and investments that would provide some alternatives to Colombo's exclusive reliance on Beijing. The Modi government also objected to the docking of Chinese submarines in Colombo port.

India was also accused of playing a role in defeating Mahinda Rajapaksa in the 2015 presidential elections, a charge that Delhi denied. In the last few years, Modi and the Rajapaksas appeared to arrive at a new *modus vivendi* of exploring the possibilities of working with each other. Prospects for the reset in ties will depend on how they address the Tamil question and China. On its part, Delhi could be helpful to Colombo in facilitating reconciliation with the Tamil minority. Although skepticism abounds on the possibilities for reconciliation, given the deeply polarised verdict, Delhi has every reason to make an effort.² For Gotabaya, whose candidature was rejected overwhelmingly by the Tamil voters, a sincere outreach to the Tamil community would

be critical in shaping a different narrative about Sri Lanka's future and addressing the multitude of challenges facing the government.

However, Delhi is acutely conscious that, as the world's second largest economy, China's role in Sri Lanka cannot be wished away. Along with its Western partners, India could offer attractive alternatives to Chinese investments in infrastructure. Delhi could also offer new avenues for cooperation within Lanka as well as through cross-straits engagement with the business communities of peninsular India. India could also help limit the pressures from the United States and Europe that share India's concerns about China's growing weight in Sri Lanka on human rights issues. On the security front, the key lies in a mutual understanding between Delhi and Colombo on the red lines regarding China's military role in Sri Lanka. If Delhi can reassure Colombo that it does not pose a threat to its security, Sri Lanka will have no reason to balance against India.

2 Jayadeva Uyangoda, "An elusive reconciliation in Sri Lanka", *The Hindu*, 19 November 2019. <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/an-elusive-reconciliation-in-sri-lanka/article30009308.ece>

HOW INDIA CAN WORK WITH GOTABAYA RAJAPAKSA

S Narayan

Summary

Gotabaya Rajapaksa's victory in the recent presidential election in Sri Lanka has been welcomed cautiously in India. As the person responsible for the elimination of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, Gotabaya has won on the strong plank of the Sinhala vote, without conceding to any of the requests of the minority Tamils or Muslims. There is also concern about the pro-China tilt of the earlier Mahindra Rajapaksa regime. Indian and Tamil Nadu politicians need to deal with Gotabaya and suggest ways in which there can be better integration among the groups in Sri Lanka. More importantly, India can play a role in the economic revival in Sri Lanka.

There have been rapid developments after the victory of Gotabaya Rajapaksa in the recently held presidential elections in Sri Lanka. He was quick to comment that, though the minorities did not vote for him, he was president for all of Sri Lanka, a clear indication of his tilt towards the Sinhalese majority population which had overwhelmingly supported him. The swearing-in ceremony took place at Anuradhapura, considered sacred to the Buddhists, again a clear indication of allegiance to the Sinhalese voters who had overwhelmingly supported him.

There has also not been any indication of reaching out to the minorities. The Rajapaksa brothers are back in power, with his brother,

Mahinda, as Prime Minister. There was news that he was planning to appoint Muthiah Muraleedaran, a cricket star hailing from an upcountry plantation Tamil family, as Governor of Jaffna, which would certainly not be welcomed, as the Jaffna Tamils look down on the plantation Tamils. There has been no specific statement about reaching out to the minorities or any healing touch that has to be offered.

India was cautious prior to the elections, and immediately after the results, congratulated Gotabaya. The worry for India is the Rajapaksa brothers' earlier proximity to China and Chinese investments. However, India has also seen that the Maithripala Sirisena government, on which it had hopes, actually dithered on Indian projects such as the railway to Jaffna and the Jaffna port project, while going ahead with several new Chinese projects, including the Colombo port area development project. The Indians have reached out to Gotabaya and he will be in Delhi on 29 November 2019 to meet with India's Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, and External Affairs Minister, S Jaishankar.

The Tamil Nadu political parties have not welcomed this victory. For them, Gotabaya, and indeed the Rajapaksa brothers as a whole, represent the violent hand of the state that crushed the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Eelam movement. Gotabaya, in particular, is associated in their minds with the last days of the war against LTTE, when a large number of civilians were

killed. Therefore, Thol. Thirumavalavan of the Viduthalai Siruthaikal party, Vaiko from Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and M K Stalin from Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam have given statements that this victory is a dark day for the Tamils. There is little cheer in Tamil Nadu over the change of events. The Sri Lankan Tamil parties, which have banked on support from Tamil Nadu, are also in a dilemma, as their efforts in backing Sajith Premadasa have backfired. The Muslims too are uncertain about what the new government would mean for them. Gotabaya has expressed very strong view against Islamic terrorism, and the Muslims are anxious to know what this would mean for them.

Going forward, India is pinning its hopes on a few steps that Gotabaya's government could take.

The first is the China card. India was very hopeful of strong support from the Sirisena government in encouraging investments from India, clearing Indian projects and the like. In the years of Sirisena and Ranil Wickremesinghe's rule, this did not happen. On the contrary, these leaders, who promised so much, could not deliver, and Chinese influence continued to grow.

There would definitely be expectations in New Delhi that the new government would adopt a more balanced approach in encouraging investments from India as much as it does from China. It does appear that the

Rajapaksas will be around for some time and that there is no coherence in the opposition. As such, India would be determined to work hard with this dispensation to ensure that relationship is strengthened. At a time when economic growth in Sri Lanka is sub four per cent, Sri Lanka needs trade with and assistance from India to get its economy back on an even keel.

Second, it would be obvious to the Gotabaya government that alienating the minorities, including the Tamils and the Muslims, would be a short-sighted policy. Indian would certainly expect some rapprochement signals. It is unlikely that the kind of federal structure that the Tamils had earlier demanded will come to pass, nor would there be any significant efforts at looking into what the Tamils call 'war crimes'. However, there is certainly an opportunity to put the past behind and open up opportunities for greater integration of the society. For this, Gotabaya would have to reach out to his own supporters, the Sinhala voters, to assure them that societal integration would be in their own interest. This is another conversation that India would need to have with Gotabaya, for it is unlikely that he would get any advice on dealing with minorities from his Chinese friends.

Third, it is important that there be some way forward in economic development initiatives. Project performance from India is definitely far slower than that from China, but India needs to promise and perform more. This

is an assurance that Gotabaya could extract during the forthcoming meeting.

Finally, India needs to take a nuanced position between the different minority constituencies. The Jaffna Tamils are the closest to the Tamil diaspora and the Tamil Nadu political parties. As such, they are the most vociferous and influential group. The plantation Tamils have less of a voice in Tamil Nadu but need support and development assistance much more than the others. The Muslims, on the other hand, need reassurance that there would be no victimisation on the pretext of religion. India has to use all its diplomatic skills to ensure that the relationship continues to be a smooth one.

A CHINESE PERSPECTIVE ON THE IMPACT OF THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION ON CHINA-SRI LANKA RELATIONS

Ren Yuanzhe

Summary

Following his election victory, much is expected of the new Sri Lankan president, Gotabaya Rajapaksa. While domestic issues will feature significantly on his reform agenda, his foreign policy orientation, particularly Colombo's relations with Beijing, will also come under close scrutiny. This paper examines Sri Lanka-China ties.

Introduction

In the recent Sri Lankan presidential election, Gotabaya Rajapaksa from the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna party won 52.3 per cent of the votes, becoming the eighth president of the island state. His victory was largely due to the Sinhalese majority, most of whom are Buddhists. The minority Tamil Hindus and Muslims voted mainly for his opponent, Sajith Premadasa, from the United National Party, who won 41.99 per cent of the votes.

Open and Non-aligned Foreign Policy

Gotabaya is not likely to make drastic changes in Sri Lanka's foreign policy orientation. He will pursue a friendly and non-aligned policy. He will maintain equal relations with the major powers and develop friendly partnerships in pursuance of Sri Lanka's interests. In his speech, Gotabaya stated that his administration will "remain neutral in foreign relations and stay out of any conflict of world powers." Many South Asia watchers,

particularly scholars from India, worry about the possible shift towards China under the new regime in Sri Lanka. The Rajapaksas are known to be close to China, but past Sri Lankan governments have also considered China a reliable friend and partner.

In recent years, especially after the inauguration of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, China has been strengthening its engagement with the small states in the Indian Ocean region. When President Xi Jinping visited Sri Lanka in 2014, the two governments signed an agreement, the “Action Plan of the People’s Republic of China and the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka on Deepening Strategic and Cooperative Partnership”. Under the framework of the BRI, Sri Lanka is witnessing the construction of the mega Port City in Colombo and the development of the Hambantota Port and Industrial Park in southern Sri Lanka.

The Economy is the Priority

Gotabaya’s biggest challenge is the economy. The economy is expected to grow by less than three per cent this year, way below the six-plus per cent average in recent years and possibly the lowest level in nearly 20 years. Gotabaya must find ways of making repayments of the country’s foreign debt, which totals nearly US\$6 billion (S\$8.2 billion).

China will certainly play a critical role in Gotabaya’s economic agenda. The country

is expected to continue to attract massive investment from China to upgrade its infrastructure and reform its economic policies.

However, there is still some degree of unpredictability and risk in the development of China’s major projects in Sri Lanka. It is a known fact that a new government in Sri Lanka often criticises agreements reached between China and a previous government, so as to pander to domestic nationalist sentiment. During the 2015 presidential election, Sirisena, then an opposition candidate, criticised the Colombo Port City Project (a China Harbor Engineer project) which Mahinda, then-president, strongly supported. After assuming office, Sirisena suspended the project, citing a problem with the project’s environmental impact assessment. While the Rajapaksas are seen to be close to China, some projects (for example, the Hambantota port, leased to China for 99 years by the previous government) will come under scrutiny. During an interview with *The Hindu* during his visit to India from 28 to 30 November 2018, Gotabaya stated that he would like to renegotiate the agreement with China on the Hambantota port.

Geopolitical Considerations

India is likely to feature significantly in the Sino-Lanka relationship. While China and India have made progress in building up strategic trust through informal summits between their two leaders, India will continue

to keep a close eye on China's movements in its neighbourhood. For India, Sri Lanka is an important part of its Indian Ocean security landscape. Also, it has a stake in the political settlement of the Tamil issue in the island state. Indian media and experts have regarded the China-Sri Lanka cooperation and the BRI as fundamental elements of the Chinese "String of Pearls" strategy of trying to encircle India. On its part, Beijing has never recognised or accepted this strategy.

It is likely that any Chinese effort to build ties with the new Sri Lankan government might meet with Indian suspicion or even a response. At the same time, the United States (US) has been paying close attention to Sri Lanka and has been gradually elevating its bilateral relations, given Colombo's strategic importance, especially in the context of the Indo-Pacific. In the context of increasing strategic competition between China and the US, it is likely that the US, India and even Japan could work jointly in Sri Lanka to counter China's growing influence in the country.

In spite of domestic pressures and geopolitical considerations, China will continue to be an important partner for Sri Lanka. Gotabaya will pursue a foreign policy that will reap maximum benefits for his country, and China will certainly feature in that policy.

SINGAPORE-SRI LANKA RELATIONS UNDER GOTABAYA RAJAPAKSA

Roshni Kapur and
Chulanee Attanayake

Summary

Since their independence, Singapore and Sri Lanka have enjoyed cordial socio-economic and diplomatic relations. However, their ties have been put to the test in the last two years, particularly following the stalling of their free trade agreement. This paper looks at the possibility of a revival of the agreement under Sri Lanka's new president, Gotabaya Rajapaksa.

Introduction

The growing bilateral trade and economic relations between the island states of Sri Lanka and Singapore led to the signing of the Sri Lanka-Singapore Free Trade Agreement in January 2018. Both have traditionally enjoyed cordial relations with each other. Unfortunately, the agreement fell victim to the political contestation between then-President Maithripala Sirisena and then-Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe. It has since been put on the back-burner.

Singapore-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement

Singapore's imports from Sri Lanka currently stand at S\$178 million while Singapore's exports to Sri Lanka are worth S\$2.5 billion.¹ Bilateral trade between Singapore and Sri Lanka grew at an average rate of seven per cent annually from 2005 to 2015.² In

1 Lianne Chia, "Singapore and Sri Lanka sign free trade agreement", *CNA*, 23 January 2018. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/singapore-and-sri-lanka-sign-free-trade-agreement-9886990>

2 Deeparghya Mukherjee, "Singapore-Sri Lanka Trade: A Brief Overview", *ISAS Briefs*, 2 June 2016. <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/433-singapore-sri-lanka-trade-a-brief-overview/>

an attempt to deepen economic relations, Singapore and Colombo signed the Sri Lanka-Singapore Free Trade Agreement (SLSFTA) on 23 January 2018. Among others, the agreement was expected to provide greater access for Singapore companies to the Sri Lankan market.³

The signing of the SLSFTA demonstrated Singapore's recognition of Sri Lanka's potential to be a major trading hub in the region, and its interest in searching for new partners. For Sri Lanka, the agreement was reflective of its post-civil war trade policies, which included boosting trade relations with Southeast Asia. However, the implementation of the agreement has been halted due to public opposition in Sri Lanka. The Sri Lanka parliament held a debate on the SLSFTA in July 2018, which met with stiff resistance from the joint opposition who questioned the legitimacy of the agreement.⁴ Some professional bodies in Sri Lanka also criticised the government for signing the agreement without consulting them.⁵ After appointing a Presidential Committee to study the agreement and its impact on Sri Lanka, Sirisena claimed the "...agreement has been rushed without consent of stakeholder

institutions", stating that it required revision.⁶ While Sri Lanka's position on the FTA highlights the deep divisions domestically, the saga has also adversely affected the Singapore business community's confidence in Sri Lanka.

Possibility for Moving Forward

Gotabaya's election as president may offer some hope for Singapore to revive the agreement and take the relationship forward.

The Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna Party, which Gotabaya represents, is ideologically centred on nationalism and protectionism and is inward-oriented, compared to its predecessor, the United National Party. However, Gotabaya has positioned himself to follow a policy of harnessing new technologies to increase value additions in exports and manufacturing, a knowledge-based and technology-based economy, development of the private sector and small-medium enterprises as well as encouraging greater investments.⁷

In his election manifesto, Gotabaya stated that his government will strive to develop trade relations with multiple Southeast Asian

3 Elgin Toh, "Singapore to sign free trade agreement with Sri Lanka", *The Straits Times*, 22 January 2018. <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/spore-to-sign-free-trade-agreement-with-sri-lanka>

4 "Singapore FTA is unconstitutional – Joint Opposition", *News 1st*, 18 July 2018. <https://www.newsfirst.lk/2018/07/18/singapore-fta-is-unconstitutional-joint-opposition/>

5 Skandha Gunasekara, "GMOA to strike against S'pore FTA", *Daily FT*, 17 May 2018. <http://www.ft.lk/news/GMOA-to-strike-against-S-pore-FTA/56-655311>

6 "Sri Lanka-Singapore FTA signed without proper consent: President", *Colombo Page*, 10 December 2018. http://www.colombopage.com/archive_18B/Dec10_1544454906CH.php. Also see "FTA has weaknesses, President tells Singapore PM", *Daily FT*, 26 January 2019. <http://www.ft.lk/front-page/FTA-has-weaknesses-President-tells-Singapore-PM/44-671706>

7 D.B.S. Jeyaraj, "Gotabaya Rajapaksa's Economic Vision and Political Mission", *Daily Mirror*, 19 May 2018. <http://www.dailymirror.lk/dbs-jeyaraj-column/Gotabaya-Rajapaksa-s-Economic-Vision-and-Political-Mission/192-150146>

countries, including Singapore.⁸ During his visit to India at the end of November 2019, Gotabaya made the call for investments from Singapore, among others, when he was interviewed by *The Hindu*, in relation to Sri Lanka's over-reliance on China's Belt and Road Initiative:

"I want to tell India, Japan, Singapore, Australia and other countries to also come and invest in us. They should tell their companies to invest in Sri Lanka and help us grow, because if they do not, then not only Sri Lanka, but countries all over Asia will have the same [problem]. The Chinese will take the Belt and Road Initiative all over unless countries provide an alternative."⁹

While Gotabaya strongly believes that economic development is the solution to the economic woes of the country, he has also indicated that his government will "re-examine" all bilateral trade agreements signed in the past five years, and that if there are any provisions which are not favourable to Sri Lanka, they will be removed after talks with the respective countries. Moreover, he recently said that he wants to re-negotiate the Hambantota agreement with China and reach a better deal for Colombo.¹⁰ He could

hold a similar view on the agreement with Singapore.

Conclusion

The new government in Colombo is likely to take a measured approach to trade and economic relations with other states. While Gotabaya realises the importance of an open and welcoming posture in helping address his country's economic woes, he would be mindful of his electorate promises not to compromise on national sovereignty at the expense of "harmful agreements/treaties". At this point in time, the future of the SLSFTA remains uncertain. Much will depend on the Gotabaya government's own assessment of the mutual benefits of the agreement. It will also ultimately depend on Gotabaya's ability to convince the other stakeholders, including the joint opposition, of which he was a part, of the same.

8 "Gotabaya presents to you a Reconstructed Country with a Future: Vistas of Prosperity and Splendour". <https://gota.lk/sri-lanka-podujana-peramuna-manifesto-english.pdf>

9 Suhasini Haidar, "Will be frank with New Delhi to avoid misunderstandings: Gotabaya Rajapaksa", *The Hindu*, 30 November 2019. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/need-more-coordination-between-delhi-colombo-says-gotabaya-rajapaksa/article30125809.ece>

10 "President seeks to renegotiate Hambantota Port deal with China", *Colombo Gazette*, 25 November 2019. <https://colombogazette.com/2019/11/25/president-seeks-to-renegotiate-hambantota-port-deal-with-china/>

GOTABAYA RAJAPAKSA'S LIKELY IMPACT ON SOCIAL COHESION IN SRI LANKA

La Toya Waha

Summary

As the new president of Sri Lanka, Gotabaya Rajapaksa's policies will have a great impact on the development of the country. His figure, for many reasons, is a controversial one. Looking at his past and at his promises during the election campaign, the paper seeks to investigate the impact Gotabaya's presidency might have on the social cohesion in Sri Lanka.

Introduction

Gotabaya Rajapaksa was elected the eighth president of Sri Lanka for three key reasons. First, he credibly promised security and the absence of terrorism in the country. Second, he provided a feasible plan to improve Sri Lanka's economic performance. And third, he promised the implementation of the Buddhist unitary state, long demanded by the Buddhist Sinhalese majority. Gotabaya's clear vision for Sri Lanka has won him the election, but what impact will its implementation have on the social cohesion of the island state's conflict-ridden society?

Gotabaya is not only considered a hero by his Buddhist Sinhalese electorate for the military defeat of the seemingly invincible terror organisation, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), but he is also respected by his opponents for the successful pursuit of his plan – irrespective of their rejection of this plan in the first place. The reputation of successfully solving complex problems

and implementing his strategies against all odds has surely helped Gotabaya outpace his major opponent, Sajith Premadasa. The obviously more clearly defined and outlined – and more realistic – plan to improve the economic performance of the country and to increase the liveability of the Sri Lankan population likewise had its impact. The perception that Gotabaya knows what he is doing also made his claim to the unitary Buddhist state and the “righteous society” more credible than Sajith’s many exuberant promises of security, prosperity and equality.

When it comes to social cohesion, however, Gotabaya does not have such credible credentials in bridging the diverse rifts within Sri Lankan society. Feared for his uncompromising pursuit of defeating the LTTE, the allegations of war crimes as well as the repressive regime of his brother, former president Mahinda Rajapaksa, the liberal political strata’s and minorities’ trust in his willingness to create a safe state for all ethnic and religious communities is low. It is also for this reason that the regions, in which the ethnic and religious minorities are a majority, voted for Sajith instead of Gotabaya.

Trust in the State – Irrespective of Ethnicity and Religion

Gotabaya’s agenda for the actual implementation of the Buddhist unitary state, the policies directed at strengthening Buddhist institutions and thus his implicit rejection of the 13th amendment to the

constitution – the disputed amendment which gives more autonomy to the provinces – at first glance does not seem to point to the bridging of gaps between the diverse ethnic and religious communities within Sri Lankan society. Members of the Tamil community and, since the early 2000s, also the Muslim community, seek to shape the regions in which they are the majority according to their ends, independent from the island’s centre. The Tamil’s violent struggle, as well as the Muslims’ more recent politicisation, is linked to the demands for an autonomous place for them and the freedom from another community’s dominance. Gotabaya’s rejection of the 13th amendment, thus, is a major obstacle to their political ambitions.

However, the president taking a clear stance and showing a clear vision for the state might offer the opportunity to put an end to a decade-long dispute. The structure of the state has been contested based on identity claims and this contestation has frequently escalated into violence. If one looks particularly at the root causes for the different waves of radicalisation, the president’s clear vision might provide a ground for stability and the de-politicisation of identity. Setting the outlook of the state in a way acceptable to the majority of Sri Lankans and making it non-negotiable might allow for a shift in the focus of political contention to non-identity issues.

The requirements for the success of this strategy, however, are manifold. First of all, trust in the state beyond ethnic or religious affiliation needs to be built. Gotabaya already took one step in this direction in his inaugural speech. There, he had pointed out that he sought to be the president not only of those who voted for him but also for all Sri Lankans.¹ Moreover, in his election manifesto,² he addressed issues which had furthered the Tamil population's grievances since the end of the civil war. Acknowledging that "mistakes" were made during the final phase of the war, Gotabaya stated his willingness to correct them.³ Private land in the Northern region now under government control shall be given back to the people who own it. Housing shall be provided for families affected by the war.⁴ There are plans for a preferred recruitment for government jobs in the Northern and Eastern provinces, as well as a focus on Tamil language skills for the recruitment of police officers in the Northern and Eastern provinces.⁵ This strategy aims to make the minorities, in particular the Tamils, stakeholders in the state. Moreover, the strategy includes measures to assure the Tamil population of the state's respect and support for Tamil culture, among others, by sponsoring the construction of Tamil cultural centres.⁶

However, the major focus of Gotabaya's strategy is not based on identity and concessions to minority culture. His focus is on economic and agricultural development and the betterment of livelihoods. While this plan was pursued by former president Mahinda Rajapaksa as well, Gotabaya seems to have learned from his brother's mistakes. Economic development without the improvement of trust would not allow for the inclusion of the minorities and the construction of a stable state. Turning former rebels into stakeholders in the state seems to be a key factor to ensure potential success.

Building trust into the state after years of civil war and the rule of the LTTE in the North and East will not be easy. The focus of Gotabaya's strategy on the youth and women might offer an opportunity to build trust through an improved image of the state in the long run. Gotabaya's strategy is to provide the youth with special funds for their own businesses and to improve their education. The development of universities, vocational training centres and other educational institutions, in particular, in the country's North might improve the relationship between the youth and the state.⁷ Furthermore, the different loan schemes for female entrepreneurs, particularly those

1 See also his tweet from the 17.11.2019, "I am the President of not only those who voted for me but also those who voted against me and irrespective of which race or religion they belong to."

2 Gotabaya Rajapaksa. *Vistas of Prosperity and Splendour*. 2019. <https://gota.lk> (last accessed 15.11.2019).

3 Gotabaya Rajapaksa. *Vistas of Prosperity and Splendour*. 2019. p. 77.

4 Ibid.

5 Gotabaya Rajapaksa. *Vistas of Prosperity and Splendour*. 2019. p. 78.

6 Ibid.

7 Gotabaya Rajapaksa. *Vistas of Prosperity and Splendour*. 2019. p. 78.

troubled with micro-finance loans,⁸ might additionally help some to see the state as a supporter rather than oppressor of these people.

Addressing the Conservative Buddhist Strata

Gotabaya is also clearly focussed on addressing the political demands of the more conservative strata of the Buddhist community. In his manifesto and throughout the election campaign, Gotabaya made it clear that the Sinhalese Buddhist culture is at the core of his vision for the state and society. While this focus makes it more difficult for other members of the society, such as secularists and people with other religious or ethnic affiliations, to identify with the state, it might reassure the Buddhist Sinhalese community and therewith put an end to the expansion of radicalisation of the wider Buddhist society. The fear of losing a safe place and a perception of Buddhism under threat have exacerbated the support for radical groups within the Buddhist community. Taking up some of their more moderate demands might “take the wind out of the sails” of the radical Buddhist groups. Gotabaya’s plan to establish a central fund for Buddhist nuns, to uplift Pirivena education and to establish a programme called “Budu-puth Ma-piya Harasara”, which sets positive social incentives for families giving

a child to the Sangha,⁹ can be seen as such. Programmes like this, combined with the restructuring of the security apparatus¹⁰ and the trust in Gotabaya’s capability to provide national security, can rebuild the trust in the state among the detached members of the Buddhist Sinhalese community.

Including the Villagers

Besides the rift between ethnic and religious groups and the state, Gotabaya has promised to address the needs of people living in villages and cities. In addition to the development-centred approach, the security needs of the rural population were taken up in the election campaign. The villager, who has been of central concern in Buddhist Sinhalese political thought, has faced a series of threats and challenges. Environmental disasters like floods and landslides as well as clashes with wild elephants frequently destroy the livelihood of the villagers and lead to the death of a number of people. Gotabaya’s election manifesto included a long-term strategy to address these issues.¹¹ This included the development of an early warning system and the provision of permanent emergency shelter facilities. However, plans were proposed in the past. Gotabaya would need to ensure tangible improvements so as to convince the rural population that the state also takes an interest in their needs.

8 Gotabaya Rajapaksa. *Vistas of Prosperity and Splendour*. 2019. p. 77.

9 Compare these plans to the demands by Ven. Wimalajothi Thero, former head of the Bodu Bala Sena. See among others the transcription of an interview with him in Waha (2018) (<https://www.nomos-shop.de/infoPopup.aspx?product=39911&tab=3>).

10 Gotabaya Rajapaksa. *Vistas of Prosperity and Splendour*. 2019. p. 12-13ff.

11 Gotabaya Rajapaksa. *Vistas of Prosperity and Splendour*. 2019. p. 59.

Shadows of the Past

The end of the civil war, in which civilians as well as the LTTE leadership were killed, remains an open wound. Internationally and nationally, the Sri Lankan army has been condemned for alleged war crimes, while others have celebrated their victory against one of the most elaborate terror organisations.¹² The question of how to address potential wrong-doings by the soldiers, as well as the treatment and reintegration of former LTTE fighters, are highly emotional and contentious. While then-president Mahinda Rajapaksa was willing to develop the former LTTE-held areas economically, little was done for reappraise the past. Gotabaya was seen as a key figure in the military defeat of the LTTE. His presidency offers the opportunity for him to look into potential wrong-doings by members of the army and to address these without being regarded as 'smearing the war heroes'. However, he himself is alleged to be responsible for potential war crimes perpetrated by members of the army. In addition, reprocessing the crimes and human rights violations by the LTTE needs to be made part of a successful reappraisal. For the Muslim community in the East and the Tamil victims of the LTTE in Sri Lanka and abroad, accounting for the LTTE past is essential.

Memories and the Transnational Dimension to Lacking Social Cohesion

While Gotabaya might increase trust in the state, which is a necessary requirement for improving the social cohesion of the country, he cannot solve the problem of a lack of inter-communal trust alone. Despite all the hopes put into the president to improve the overall situation in the country, one has to admit that no president can do it all. The conflict between the Tamils and the Muslims, the Buddhists and the Muslims, the Sinhalese and the Tamils, and others, are deeply ingrained in their respective collective memory. Atrocities on all sides will not be forgotten soon.

Exclusivist political demands by members of the minorities and the majority alike have gained support from the wider respective communities. The question of the particularly religious contestation of the public sphere and potential boundaries therein remain. Issues like the halal certification and the Arabianised dresses of certain Muslim groups now lie at the heart of the problem and, after the Islamist attacks and the subsequent communal clashes, have gained in salience. While the clarification of these boundaries and the implementation of policies can be dealt with by the government under the president's guidance, it requires public support and a willingness to back potential compromises. A community's

12 The US, Canada, member states of the European Union and India, among others, label the LTTE a terror organisation.

clear dissociation from violent and extremist groups might be one first step to building the trust between communities needed to back compromises touching the most sensitive issue of identity.

Moreover, the transnational dimension of many of these conflicts continues to impact the developments in Sri Lanka. Members of the diaspora influence the political developments in the country from abroad. Some of them are still hailing the LTTE and the political aim of a separate state. At the same time, Islamist organisations seek to gain ground in South Asia and Southeast Asia and attempt to influence the Sri Lankan Muslim population to join their cause.

Finally, the influence of the great powers in the region and in Sri Lanka will challenge the trust of the people in the state and the president. The protest following the Chinese 99-year lease of the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka's south, in which many Buddhist monks were involved and took the lead, is a case in point. Gotabaya's support within the Buddhist community and the trust in him will also depend on the stance he takes towards Chinese influence in the country. At the same time, this is also partially true for Indian involvement in Sri Lankan policies, particularly those relating to the Tamil minority.

Conclusion

The strengths and weaknesses of Gotabaya have been fittingly summarised in a joke that came up in the presidential election. "Gota is a man with a plan and a van", it went. It referred to Gotabaya's clear vision for Sri Lanka, his ability to achieve his ends and uncompromisingly follow through with his plans, while on the other hand, it referred to the presidency of Gotabaya's brother, Mahinda Rajapaksa, in which Gotabaya had served, most notably, as the defence minister. During that period, people were claimed to have disappeared forever after they were taken away in a white van. The white van policy of the regime spread fear among the Tamil community, as well as members of the majority community and journalists who were critical of the government. While Gotabaya is not Mahinda Rajapaksa, there is a link which should not be forgotten.

Putting the joke aside, there is great potential in Gotabaya's presidency. This is also true of his ability to create social cohesion in the country. However, like a double-edged sword, there are several challenges for the people, the state and democracy. It is for Gotabaya, the eighth president of Sri Lanka, to decide which way he will take the country.

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In October 2014, the Centre of South East Asian and Pacific Studies, Shri Venkateshwera University, Tirupati (Andhra Pradesh, India) honoured him with the Life Time Achievement Award. He was invited to address the UN Special Committee on the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace at Sochi (Former Soviet Union) in 1985. At Jawaharlal Nehru University he held the prestigious Appadorai Chair of International Relations and Area Studies.

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