

## **Sri Lanka's Presidential Election 2019: India, Sri Lanka and the Politics of Proximity**

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*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 relationships 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 and 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, make 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 is, 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 late November 2019.

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 1990s, the political fall-out continued for well into the 21<sup>st</sup> 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 the 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 its own in the summer of 2014, Modi recognised the political need to address both the Tamil question and the China factor in the bilateral 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 community 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 fisheries dispute and 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, a charge that Delhi denied, of playing a role in defeating Mahinda Rajapaksa in the 2015 presidential elections. In the last few years, the Modi and the Rajapaksas appeared to arrive at a new modus vivendi of exploring the possibilities of working with each other. Prospect 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 a 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. 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 address 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 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.

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