

Sri Lanka's Presidential Election 2019: Gotabaya's World

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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 keeping strategic underpinnings of Chinese projects away so as not to offend sensitivities of 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 with a positive note on 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 implementation of 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 the Western friends on issues like post-2009 war human rights and domestic freedom.

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 (that 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 creep in if Sirisena had been one of the contestants. However, that was not to be.

Absence of Foreign Policy in Campaign

The domestic focus of the campaign was in sharp contrast to the previous presidential election of 2014. Then, in addition to the ruthless authoritarian governance, Sri Lanka's flourishing economic relations with China and the growing Chinese strategic presence in Sri Lankan economy, encouraged and smoothly navigated by the Mahinda Rajapaksa regime, was the major bone of contention. There are therefore, questions if 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, would play out?

Gotabaya has projected himself as a pragmatic leader, sensitive to security and strategic issues impinging 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 in the Indian Ocean region. Recall 1974 when Sri Lanka had sponsored a United Nations (UN) resolution on keeping the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace, free from great power rivalries and arms build-up. In the 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, 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 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 majors 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 the close Gotabaya advisers' claimed during the campaign that, when elected, relations with China will be restored to level "where it was". This had a reference to the outgoing Sirisena's hold on some of the Chinese projects like the 'Lotus Tower' – Asia's tallest tower. Gotabaya team believes that such actions were done to please the rival powers and attract their investments which never came. Obviously then, the held-up Chinese projects may have to be cleared. And for good reasons, because China is the largest investor in Sri Lanka today with nearly US\$11 billion (S\$15 billion), of which US\$8 billion

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.

² Gotabaya confessed this to an Indian Think-Tank (Kalinga Foundation) Delegation that papers were got signed by him by junior officials mixing submarine with a war ship. The author was a member of this delegation and had talked to Gotabaya. Colombo October 03 2018.

(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? It may be the Chinese who, on their own, could cut down on their investments as President Xi Jinping is regularly monitoring the BRI trends and cutting down its redundancies. If that happens, China may even be asked to enhance its commitments, and why not, because Sirisena had also asked China at some stage to enhance their annual investments by 30-35 per cent.⁴

An expanding economic foot 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 the BRI projects. There are radio stations blurring Chinese propaganda and 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 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 of the Chinese projects that are strategically sensitive. For instance, the Rajapaksas have been criticising the Sirisena government for granting 99 years 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, on the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) concept keeping in mind the Chinese

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

⁴ The projects and sector 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/>.

sensitivities on the military dimensions of the FOIP. The best way 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 harmonious engagement with India would be a less formidable challenge. The post-2015 bickering between India and the Rajapaksas started getting gradually dissolved by 2017, as both side started mapping out each other’s strengths in their respective scheme of things in the context of strains within the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe coalition regime. Mahinda Rajapaksa withdrew his allegations on India of 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, if, at all, 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 on 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 (with the Maldives) security agreements with 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 left out of 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. Gotabaya would not hesitate, in informal conversations, to echo his brother, Mahinda Rajapaksa’s sentiments in 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

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.

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 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 the international and UN moves on fixing responsibility for human rights violation allegations against 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 In standing up to 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 fast changing 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 informal summitries as 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 the 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.

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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 *The Hindu*, (New Delhi), 16 October 2019. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/will-not-honour-un-deal-on-accountability-says-gotabaya/article29693188.ece>.