

## **Sri Lanka in 2021: Foreign Policy Prognosis**

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### **Summary**

*Sri Lanka began its interaction with the world in 2021 by welcoming India's Foreign Minister S Jaishankar from 5 to 7 January 2021. Around that time, Tamil diaspora organisations based in the United Kingdom demanded that the British government sponsor a resolution against Sri Lanka at the upcoming United Nations Human Rights Commission session. These two developments are indicative of the challenges that lay ahead for Colombo's foreign relations in 2021.*

### **In Retrospect**

The year 2020 saw a continuation of the newly-elected government's foreign policy agenda based on neutrality and of prioritising its economic and security interests. Following a concentric circle-based hierarchical approach, Colombo strengthened friendly relations amidst the challenges of a global pandemic. Significantly, there were attempts to reinvigorate ties with India and China.

Two significant aspects highlighted foreign relations in the year 2020: reinvigorating the economy and focusing on security and sovereignty. Hence, the ministerial portfolios of both the foreign minister and state minister of foreign affairs were given [explicit responsibilities](#). The foreign minister has a unique responsibility of reassessing existing bilateral agreements and investigating any clauses or articles detrimental to the country's local economy. In the past, Sri Lanka refused to implement bilateral agreements after committing to them, citing provisions and articles to be disadvantageous to it. Domestically, this led to uncertainties resulting in the public becoming suspicious and resisting bilateral agreements. Globally, the vacillation of incumbent Sri Lankan governments damaged Colombo's legitimacy as a trustworthy partner. The state minister of foreign affairs has now been given a special portfolio to enhance regional cooperation – strengthen partnership with the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation and Bay of Bengal Initiative Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). Never in the past was such a ministerial portfolio created for regional cooperation in Sri Lanka. Moreover, Sri Lanka's High Commissioners have also been encouraged to act as agents of economic and business promotion.

Among the key foreign policy decisions of the Rajapaksa Gotabaya government was the decision to withdraw from the co-sponsored United Nations Human Rights Commission (UNHRC) resolution. In February 2020, Foreign Minister Dinesh Gunawardena officially informed the council that it would withdraw from co-sponsorship of Resolution 40/1 on promoting reconciliation, accountability and human rights in Sri Lanka and would commit to achieving sustainable peace and reconciliation through a domestically designed and executed process. In the view of Rajapaksa's administration, the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe

government's decision to co-sponsor the UNHRC resolution was an act of inviting foreign intervention in domestic matters.

## **What to Expect in 2021**

Against this backdrop, 2021 is expected to be a challenging year for Sri Lanka's foreign relations. It is clear from the past year that the country's engagement with the rest of the world will focus on reviving its ailing economy. For this, it requires external finances and foreign direct investment.

Undoubtedly, the Gotabaya government sees a friend in Beijing which can bring in much-needed foreign currency to Colombo. However, having experienced repercussions of excessive tilting towards China during the past administration, Colombo may not want a repeat of the same. Moreover, it [wants more investments](#) in place of loans to avoid getting trapped in the vicious debt cycle and to uplift the economy. For this reason, it is looking at the possibility of diversifying its funding resources by courting multiple countries and aid agencies. Attracting foreign investment, however, will be a challenge. Multiple credit rating agencies have [downgraded](#) Sri Lanka, citing concerns about the island nation's debt-servicing capacity. In this context, it will not be surprising if Sri Lanka turns towards China once more for practical reasons.

Despite the visit by India's Foreign Minister S Jaishankar to Sri Lanka in early January 2021 and the revival of Sri Lanka-India relations under the new administration, there would be some crucial challenges in 2021. There are unresolved bilateral issues including the Indo-Sri Lanka fishing dispute that has been dragging on for a long while. The differing standpoints of New Delhi and Colombo on the full implementation of the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment to Sri Lanka's constitution as a means of resolving ethnic issues in the country will be a thorn on their sides as well. While President Gotabaya has made his [stand](#) clear on the inability to fully implement the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment as it is, India has been pushing for it, citing this to be [the way forward](#) to fulfil the expectations of the Tamil people for equality, justice, peace and dignity within a united Sri Lanka.

Most importantly, Colombo's relations with the United States (US) and the West may become complicated. Following the Gotabaya administration withdrawal from the UNHRC resolution, it is reported that the US and the West will propose a new resolution at the UNHRC session in March 2021. While Tamil diaspora organisations in the United Kingdom have [requested](#) the British government to sponsor a resolution to create an International Independent Investigative Mechanism (IIIM) to investigate and prosecute those responsible for the war crimes, crimes against humanity and the genocide in Sri Lanka, the Human Rights Watch 2021 World report claimed Colombo's [human rights situation](#) has seriously deteriorated since the Gotabaya administration came into power. These developments point to contentious relations between Sri Lanka and India.

There is, however, hope for Sri Lanka for a more active role in regionalism and multilateralism. Colombo's profile as an active maritime state in multiple multilateral and regional organisations such as Indian Ocean Rim Association and BIMSTEC has grown in recent years. This is also the final year of Sri Lanka's chairmanship of BIMSTEC. It is planning

to hold the BIMSTEC summit which was postponed in 2020. This will draw more attention to Colombo's role in the region.

The year 2021 will be a challenging one for Sri Lanka's foreign policy. Decisions made by the Rajapaksa government could define the future of Sri Lanka and its place in the international arena.

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