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India reasserting Indian Ocean role



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GEOPOLITICS: A reversal of policies by the new Sri Lanka government allows India to step in and play a greater role in its development and boost regional ties



Indian Prime Minister **Narendra Modi** (left) and Sri Lanka President **Maithripala Sirisena** During the former's first official visit to Sri Lanka. There is a **window of opportunity** for both nations to embark on a new level of cooperation. **Reuters pic**

THE recent visit by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Sri Lanka has been hailed as a breakthrough of sorts, not least for the simple reason that this was the first official visit by an Indian leader to Sri Lanka after 28 years. Crucially, it comes at a time when India feels the need to reassert its presence in the Indian Ocean, and to bolster ties with its regional neighbours while China has been making obvious overtures to the same group of countries. Additionally, the visit by Modi also came soon after Sri Lanka's elections - in January this year - which witnessed the election of the country's new president, Maithripala Sirisena, that led to a somewhat dramatic turn, as far as Sri Lanka-China ties are concerned.

Observers of Sri Lankan politics will note that during the previous administration of president Mahinda Rajapaksa, the country's ties with China were steadily growing, with China offering a swathe of economic development plans backed by the promise of investment. Notwithstanding the somewhat obvious fact that China seems to be on the other side of the world from a Sri Lankan perspective, and India is virtually next door, the ties between Sri Lanka and China

had warmed up during the Rajapaksa administration because of a range of internal and external variable factors: Sri Lanka had grown wary of its close geographical links with southern India, in particular, as a result of the long and draining conflict in the Jaffna peninsula, where the government had engaged in a long drawn-out struggle against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) movement, which shared common cultural-linguistic-religious links with fellow Tamils in neighbouring Tamil Nadu. Though there were several attempts to secure and contain the conflict, Colombo had noted several times that there was the lingering concern that the LTTE was receiving support from other Tamil movements across the sea.

China, on the other hand, has been trying to establish a presence in and across the Indian Ocean over the past few decades, as part of its desire to have a maritime presence that extends all the way to the east coast of Africa. Those who have been to countries like Tanzania and Kenya will note that there is a visible Chinese presence in the form of developers, businesses, trading companies and shipping firms plying the waters of the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean.

The earlier attempts by China to cosy up to Sri Lanka were a crucial part of this chain of inter-connected maritime allies that would be essential for China to protect its shipping in foreign waters and to extend its market potential as well.

The sudden change of administration in Sri Lanka, however, has thrown a spanner into the works, and due in part to the manner in which politics and foreign affairs in so many Asian states are in the hands of state elites, a radical reversal of Sri Lanka's stand towards China is now manifest: Sirisena has announced that many of the deals and projects agreed upon by Rajapaksa and his Chinese counterpart have been put on hold, and that some may be stopped altogether on the grounds of corruption and administrative irregularities. (This also comes at a time when the new Sirisena administration seems poised to embark on a house-cleaning process at the governmental-administrative level, which may lead to other policy reversals or temporary halts of projects that were agreed upon.)

From a strictly realist point of view, none of this is surprising, as it seems to be the norm across Asia that new political administrations would halt and even reverse the policies of previous administrations.

But it also tells us something about how the state apparatus in Asia remains pyramidal in structure and its chain of command, and how new administrations often dismantle the policy structures of previous governments and create new political opportunity structures instead.

The larger picture, however, is more interesting, as it has the potential of halting China's advance in its tracks, and allows India to tap into the goodwill and new opportunities being offered as a result of administrative change and reform in Sri Lanka.

Though the policy reversals we see in Colombo at the moment are fundamentally the result of domestic political calculations and the rearranging of priorities by the new Sirisena government, it has opened up a new - and much-anticipated and wanted - window of opportunity for India to step back in and assume its role in the Indian Ocean. Realist geopolitics remains the operative norm of the day, and the Indian Ocean is poised to resume its status as the stage of great power politics as it did during the era of Asian inter-connectivity in the past.

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