

Political Crisis in Sri Lanka: China and the Maritime Dimension

Author: Jabin T. Jacob*

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In late October 2018, Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena set off a constitutional crisis by sacking Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and replacing him by Sirisena's predecessor Mahinda Rajapaksa.ⁱ With Sirisena later dissolving Parliament, even members of the Sri Lankan Election Commission declared the President's action illegalⁱⁱ before the country's Supreme Court finally overturned the President's decision.ⁱⁱⁱ Subsequent attempts to have a vote of confidence settle matters in Parliament failed amidst acrimony and violence,^{iv} before the political crisis was finally resolved with Wickremesinghe being reinstated as Prime Minister in mid-December.^v

Sirisena's actions were particularly galling for ordinary Sri Lankans who voted for him in the 2015 presidential elections based on his promise of reducing presidential powers that Rajapaksa had accumulated and of restoring democratic order and functioning to the country.^{vi} Sirisena had, of course, broken ranks with Rajapaksa within their own political party, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and joined hands with Wickremesinghe's United National Party to oust the strongman in 2015. Following the dissolution of parliament Rajapaksa carried with him dozens of members of the SLFP to formally join the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP, Sri Lanka People's Front) created by his supporters^{vii} – his brother Basil had joined the party as early as November 2016.^{viii} The SLPP had done best among all parties in the local elections in February with nearly 45 per cent of the vote,^{ix} which suggests that Rajapaksa must fancy his chances whenever general elections are held.

China, the ‘friendly neighbor’?

The internal dynamics in Sri Lanka is considerably more familiar to New Delhi, which has a long history of involvement in the internal affairs of that country. During Rajapaksa’s time at the helm, however, the Chinese also begin to gradually involve themselves in Sri Lankan politics if mostly on the side of the ruling dispensation as is their wont. Besides supplying arms to the Sri Lankan armed forces in the civil war against the LTTE, the Chinese were involved in financial transactions directly to Rajapaksa’s family and cronies in exchange for swinging major infrastructure deals China’s way.^x Therefore, when Rajapaksa lost power, it was widely perceived as China also having lost their man in power.

Nevertheless, the degree of Chinese involvement in Sri Lanka was such that despite concerns raised during the elections about the Colombo Port City project helmed by the Chinese – the largest foreign investment in the country – it continued on track even under Sirisena. Therefore, the current shake-up in the Sri Lankan system is unlikely to ruffle the Chinese too much. If anything, it possibly helps take attention away from such pressure points for China in Sri Lanka as its controversial 99-year lease on Hambantota port.^{xi}

In the short term, there can be no doubt that the Chinese will be able to recover some lost ground as Sri Lanka’s politicians slug it out. Across the board, no matter what their personal views on China, Sri Lanka’s politicians have learnt to do business with Beijing. Sirisena has called China’s support ‘indispensable’ for his country’s development,^{xii} while Wickremesinghe himself has been quick to deny Hambantota would be used as Chinese military base and supported the various Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects in Sri Lanka.^{xiii} It is, therefore, no surprise that the Chinese ambassador was quick to meet with both Wickremesinghe and Rajapaksa following the onset of the crisis.^{xiv}

However, it is also a sign of the times and of China’s increasing presence that allegations quickly surfaced of China funding certain parliamentarians amidst the political crisis^{xv}. *Xinhua*, China’s state news agency reported the Chinese embassy in Colombo as saying that the allegations were ‘groundless and irresponsible’. The embassy reiterated that China was ‘a friendly neighbor’ of Sri Lanka’s and also its principle of non-

interference declaring, ‘We believe that the Sri Lankan government, parties and people have the wits [sic] and ways needed to deal with the current situation’.^{xvi}

The interesting part is not the patronising note about the Sri Lankans being able to manage their own affairs but the declaration that China was ‘a friendly neighbor’. One, of course, China is geographically nowhere near Sri Lanka to be calling itself a ‘neighbor’ but it gives a sense of the thinking in Beijing that sees South Asia as part of China’s near neighbourhood and an area of interest and important activity. Two, to say that it was a ‘friendly’ neighbour is to imply that Sri Lanka has unfriendly neighbours, which, of course, can only be a reference to India. In this, Beijing might be reflecting an important point of view on the island nation but also adds fuel to the fire.

However, in other ways, the Chinese Embassy statement also reflects the reality of an increasingly close economic and military relationship between Sri Lanka and China. Trade between the two countries according to China’s Department of Commerce, increased by three percent from US\$ 4.47 billion in 2016 to US\$ 4.6 billion in 2017. Given that Sri Lanka is still largely a developing country with a large agricultural sector, the visit and declaration in early October by the China National Agriculture Wholesale Market Association delegation to Sri Lanka that there is ‘a huge export opportunity for the Sri Lankan agriculture and fresh produce sector’ is significant.^{xvii}

To take another example, India remains the top source of tourists to Sri Lanka but the growth of Chinese arrivals has been faster and could eventually change the situation.^{xviii} Notably, Sri Lanka’s first private airline, with funding from American and Chinese investors, is expected to start operations in February 2019 with five daily direct flights to destinations in China.^{xix} This can be expected to increase the flow of Chinese tourists to Sri Lanka.

A Maritime Research Centre of Note

While Sino-Sri Lankan economic engagement in these cases do not come at the expense of India, its growth will eventually change the incentive structure for Colombo in its dealings with New Delhi. However, there are other issues that should concern India in China’s outreach to Sri Lanka.

Among the growing number of Chinese projects in Sri Lanka, one research initiative with a somewhat greater strategic import than most is the rather innocuously named China-Sri Lanka Joint Centre for Education and Research (CSL-CER) at the University of Ruhuna in southern Sri Lanka in collaboration with the South China Sea Institute of Oceanology of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS). Late September 2018 saw the inauguration of a new building for the Centre. This is first overseas research center on marine sciences of the CAS and the result of a 2014 MoU signed during Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Sri Lanka in September that year.^{xx}

The full gamut of activities under additional MoUs between the Sri Lankan university and the Chinese entity includes academic staff and student exchange, the establishment of a fully-automated weather station, and a joint observatory for wave and tidal measurements.^{xxi} Prof. Wang Dongxiao (王东晓)^{xxii} of the South China Sea Institute of Oceanology (SCSIO, 中国科学院南海海洋研究所) under CAS^{xxiii} was appointed as an Adjunct Professor of the Department of Oceanography and Marine Geology of the Faculty of Fisheries and Marine Sciences and Technology.^{xxiv} The SCSIO is one of China's top institutions in the field drawing on funds and projects under China's famed National Basic Research Program of China also known as the '973' Programme and the National High-Tech Development Program of China or the '863' Programme.^{xxv}

While all of this looks ostensibly above board, there are several interesting aspects about the SCSIO, which are highlighted only in the Chinese version of the introduction to the Institute^{xxvi} and not in the English version.^{xxvii} For instance, the Chinese version also highlights its focus on 'national defense safety construction projects'. The introduction also notes that the environmental protection of island and reef engineering projects are among the SCSIO's strategic focus areas (*zhanlüe zhuti* 战略主题) a reference obviously to the massive Chinese reclamation projects on disputed features in the South China Sea. Indeed, the Institute maintains what it calls Deep Sea Marine Environment Observation and Research Stations (*shenhai haiyang huanjing guance yanjiuzhan* 深海海洋环境观测研究站) in both the Paracels (Xisha in Chinese 西沙) and Spratlys (Nansha 南沙).

The presence of the extension of such a Chinese research institute and its personnel in India's near neighbourhood must raise questions about their overall objectives. While there are any number of subjects that the Institute covers that should interest India's naval planners, it might also be worth noting that the Maldives had in July 2015, under the tenure of then President Abdulla Yameen, the Maldives had passed a

constitutional amendment making it legal for foreigners to buy land. Among the stipulations under the new amendment was that those who wished to purchase land had to invest over US\$ 1 billion and that 70 per cent of the land should be reclaimed from the sea.^{xxviii}

While the Maldives was well within its rights to pass such a law in the interests of its national development, what was interesting was how this development fit very well with capabilities that China was at the time showcasing in its illegal reclamation activities in the South China Sea and over which much of the world was crying foul. Indeed, Fu Xiaoqiang (傅小强), an expert on South Asia and terrorism at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations in Beijing was quoted specifically as noting that Chinese investors and construction companies could benefit from the Maldivian law, ‘given China’s advanced technology in land reclamation’. Even as Fu referred to the issue as one ‘about business’, he also pointed out India would ‘have to get used to [Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean], as it will become normal with more and more Chinese enterprises going abroad’.^{xxix}

In this context, another reason why the University of Ruhuna’s Chinese collaboration should be of interest is because the SCSIO’s introduction in Chinese also talks about ‘national defense safety construction projects’ (*guofang anquan jianshe gongcheng* 国防安全建设工程) as being among its aims as also the fact that its international scientific collaborations are aimed at developing China’s marine economy and ‘safeguarding its maritime rights and interests’ (*weihu haiyang quan yi* 维护海洋权益). It should be no surprise then that the SCSIO has won the commendation of not just the PRC State Council and the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China but also the Central Military Commission in 2018.^{xxx}

All of this suggests how closely linked China’s research institutions are to national security and military objectives and institutions. Indeed, a late 2018 *Financial Times* (London) report that Chinese PLA researchers are accessing Western universities and research facilities in civilian garb to work on potential dual-use projects,^{xxxi} should put this particular development in Sri Lanka in context.

Taken together with the Chinese construction and/or takeover of ports and terminals, visits by its submarines,^{xxxii} increased military exchanges including the gifting of a naval frigate,^{xxxiii} not just in the case of Sri Lanka but other countries in the region,

China's desire to play 'a bigger role in the international cooperation on marine sciences and education in the Indian Ocean region' through the Centre in the University of Ruhuna as the *Xinhua* reported^{xxxiv} has wider implications for India.

BRI and China's Increasing Political Attention

The fact that the current Chinese ambassador in Sri Lanka, Cheng Xueyuan (程学源), appointed in January 2018 is not a career diplomat from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs but a Party apparatchik whose previous stint was as head of a United Front Work Department (UFWD 中共中央统一战线工作部) outfit, the Province Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese (广东省侨联)^{xxxv} is noteworthy. The UFWD is practically a foreign ministry of sorts within the Party responsible among other things for the CPC's interactions with influential elites and interest groups outside China and Cheng's appointment suggests a degree of serious attention and importance now being accorded to Sri Lanka by the Chinese.

Much of this interest will be in solidifying Sri Lanka's position as part of China's 21st Century Maritime Silk Road under the BRI. In his opening speech as Ambassador to Sri Lanka, Cheng talked about 'jointly constructing through mutual consultations, the 'one belt, one road' in order to achieve tangible benefits for the two countries and the two peoples' (*tongguo gongshang, gongjian "yidai yilu" gei liang guo he liang guo renmin dailai qieshi liyi* 通过共商、共建“一带一路”给两国和两国人民带来切实利益)^{xxxvi} while the SCSIO's Chinese introduction also talks about strengthening exchanges with countries along the BRI and specifically mentions, the CSL-CER at the University of Ruhuna in this context.^{xxxvii}

Another development of note in the context of the emphasis on the BRI in China-Sri Lanka ties is the archaeological excavations being carried out in Allaippidy and Kayts Fort in the Jaffna peninsula by the Shanghai Museum. The Chinese media reports the archaeologists as having carried out a 'comprehensive survey of the harbor city of Jaffna and its surroundings' and of having discovered ancient ceramic pieces at the Allaippidy site, the majority of which appear to be of Chinese origin and to have traveled along the 'ancient maritime Silk Road'.^{xxxviii} In other words, history and archaeology are being used to strengthen China's presence and access to India's maritime neighbourhood.

Conclusion

While it would be incorrect to paint a picture of the Chinese government or the CPC as always working according to a grand plan or to assume that their agencies work in coordination or well together, it is nevertheless, a good rule of thumb to expect that there is no Chinese foreign policy, economic or cultural initiative or project whether in South Asia or elsewhere that will not have more than the publicly declared objectives. The Chinese record since the ascension of Xi Jinping to power is particularly stark in this regard. This includes the opening of the so-called ‘logistics support base’ in Djibouti in 2016^{xxxix} despite Chinese interlocutors previously having consistently declared that China would not set up military bases abroad and the militarization of Chinese-occupied features in the South China Sea^{xl} after Xi had specifically promised then US President Barack Obama that China would not militarize them.^{xli} It stands to reason, therefore, that Chinese activities in Sri Lanka are designed with multiple intentions and that New Delhi must watch more closely developments in Sri Lanka and the wider neighbourhood beyond just the high-profile military sales or PLA Navy port calls.

At the same time, India would do well to not dismiss the ability of its neighbours to upset Beijing’s calculations and drum out pro-China rulers in defence of their own national interests as evident in general election results in 2018 in Pakistan and the Maldives. Even as it raises concerns over its security and commercial interests, New Delhi must learn to deal with its neighbours with a gentler hand and combine talk of providing alternatives to China with actual action and results on the ground, consistently and in a sustained manner. While it might not be possible to keep China out of South Asia or India’s maritime neighbourhood, it will be the nature of India’s relations with its neighbours that will determine the extent and success of Chinese activities in the region.

**Jabin T. Jacob is Adjunct Research Fellow at the NMF and Associate Professor in the Department of International Relations and Governance Studies, Shiv Nadar University. The views expressed here are his own and do not reflect the position of the NMF. He may be reached at adjunctrfellow.nmf@gmail.com and jabinjacob@gmail.com*

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