



New Sri Lanka Leadership

 drishtiias.com/current-affairs-news-analysis-editorials/news-editorials/19-11-2019/print

This article is based on **“Towards a Colombo Reset”** which was published in Indian Express on 19/11/2019. It talks about the implications of new Sri Lankan leadership, on India.

Recently, **Gotabaya Rajapaksa** is elected as new President of Sri Lanka. This election was based on security issues that emerged after a suicide bombing attack (claimed by Islamic State) on Easter Sunday this year.

Rajapaksa's win signals the return to power for the controversial family, that is known for its pro-China tilt and also infamously remembered for its brutal acts against Tamil minorities in pursuit of ending the **Sri Lankan civil war** in 2009.

Rajapaksa Factor

- Recent elections in Sri Lanka mark the return of the Rajapaksa brothers to power.
- Sri Lanka witnessed an authoritarian family rule **under former president Mahinda Rajapaksa between 2005 and 2015.**
- Gotabaya Rajapaksa (brother of Mahinda Rajapaksa), a former defence secretary and intelligence officer, accused of committing human rights violations, hailed by many for ending the civil war.
- Also, India's relations with Sri Lanka went through a troubled patch during the Mahinda Rajapaksa presidency due to his proximity with China.

Implications for India

On the issue of Pro-China tilt

Geopolitical significance of Sri Lanka

- Sri Lanka's location in the Indian Ocean region as an island State has been of strategic geopolitical relevance to several major powers.

- Sri Lanka's location can serve both commercial purposes and be used as a military base.
- Citing these geopolitical advantages China made massive investments during the Mahinda Rajapaksa tenure.

String of Pearls

- China is building state of the art gigantic modern ports all along the Indian Ocean and to the south of it, in Gwadar (Pakistan), Chittagong (Bangladesh, Kyauk Phru (Myanmar) and **Hambantota (Sri Lanka)**.
- The string of pearls is a strategic threat to India, as it aims to encircle India to establish Chinese dominance in the Indian Ocean.
- With the new Sri Lankan President, the narrative about Sri Lanka's renewed tilt towards China has become an issue of concern for India.
- Sri Lanka sits at the heart of the Indian Ocean and holds one of the pearls of that String of Pearls (Hambantota).
 - China's interest in maritime silk route and continuous energy flow to the country has resulted in a "String of Pearls" across the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).
 - China's **debt-trap diplomacy** has led it towards grabbing a 99-year lease on the Hambantota port.
- However, labelling governments in **Sri Lanka as "pro-China" or "pro-India" is irrelevant.**
 - China's economic and strategic salience in the subcontinent is not tied to the regime leadership.
 - Previous Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena (considered as pro-India) came to power criticising the Chinese projects in Sri Lanka, but within two years into power, it extended full backing to the Chinese projects.
 - To add insult to injury, the so called "pro-India" government stalled key projects (housing projects in Sri Lanka) to India.

On the issue of Tamils minorities

History of Civil War

- Sri Lanka has been mired in ethnic conflict since the country, formerly known as Ceylon, became independent from British rule in 1948.
- In the years following independence, the Sinhalese (Buddhist-majority community), who resented British favouritism toward Tamils (a minority community) during the colonial period, disenfranchised Tamil migrant plantation workers and made Sinhala the official language.
- In 1972, the Sinhalese changed the country's name from Ceylon to Sri Lanka and made Buddhism nation's primary religion.

- In reaction to this, the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) was formed (in 1976) under the leadership of Velupillai Prabhakaran, and it began to campaign for a Tamil homeland in northern and eastern Sri Lanka, where most of the island's Tamils reside.
- By 1983, this ethnic clash between Sinhalese and Tamilians became a civil war which ended in 2009.
- Tamil issue is no longer a bilateral issue between India and Sri Lanka. The Western countries have expressed deep concerns about the war crimes in the military campaign against the LTTE.
- India's concern is that any additional international pressure on Sri Lanka will automatically increase China's leverage in Sri Lanka.

Way Forward

- In the era of globalisation, India can't expect its neighbouring countries to shut down economic and commercial engagement with China.
 - However, India and Sri Lanka need a clear **understanding of mutual red lines** relating to national security and a political comfort level.
 - This should help prevent the recurrence of the controversy over Chinese submarines in Colombo port that generated so much bad blood between the two nations in 2014.
 - India is having a stable government at the centre which is not bound by the compulsions of coalition politics. This stability in the Indian government should find synergy with new Sri Lankan president policy which includes **"neutrality" and "non-alignment" between major powers.**
 - India needs to invest some political capital in resolving problems such as the long-standing dispute over fisheries and Katchatheevu island dispute.
 - India in partnership with like-minded countries like Japan should offer sustainable terms for developing infrastructure, defence and counter-terror capabilities in Sri Lanka.
- Katchatheevu is an uninhabited islet in the Palk Strait.
 - Ownership of the island was controversial up until 1974 as during British rule the island was administered by both countries.
 - India recognized Sri Lanka's equal ownership. However, the legality of the transfer was challenged in the Indian Supreme Court since the recognizing was not ratified by the Indian parliament.
 - Due to this some sections of Indian society (mainly from Tamil Nadu) claims India's sovereignty over it.

Asian powers particularly India and China must ensure that Asia should not enter the age of great power rivalries, as Asia in the rivalry will hold us back and Asia in cooperation will shape the century.

Drishti Mains Question

Examine India Sri Lanka relations in perspective of changing geopolitics of South Asian region.