

Sri Lanka's Ties with India and China: Appraising the Need for a 'Balanced' Foreign Policy

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Introduction

As China's power in the Indian Ocean Region grows in preponderance, Indian anxieties have concomitantly intensified. Faced with finite choices as an island in the Indian Ocean, it is intrinsically in Sri Lanka's interest to balance both powers. This study gauges the escalating strategic competition between India and China in Sri Lanka and unpacks the contours of their activities and their linkages with the island. The article also assesses the dexterity of the Sirisena administration to actualize a balanced foreign policy and outlines a policy formulation which would support the government in its endeavor. The article also contributes to the foreign policy strategizing literature by configuring 4 conceivable external dynamics Sri Lanka may face in future.

Research Problem and Objectives

The research problem of this paper relates to the prospects of the island adopting a 'balanced' foreign policy in relation to India and China. Based on the existing scholarly consensus on the need to 'balance' both states, the paper assesses the necessity and likelihood of formulating a balanced foreign policy in relation to the rising Civilization states of Asia.

The focus of the paper is to also understand the inter-linkage between the tripartite nexus of China-India- Sri Lanka and the impact this may have in forming a foreign policy for the island. The paper evaluates the foreign policy under President Maithripala Sirisena and assesses the geostrategic competition between India and China to obtaining a foothold in the island. It also questions the possible options Sri Lanka can adopt in devising its ties with India and China. The paper builds 4 possible scenarios that Sri Lankan policy makers must take into consideration in framing the islands foreign policy.

Methodology

This paper applies an objective and interpretative methodology, an empiricist epistemology along with a Descriptive and analytical approach. In essence this research is a qualitative study. The paper engages with primary and secondary source material in addressing the research questions.

Discussion

The paper begins by analyzing the present-day foreign policy of the island and its key decision makers. Utilizing Keohane and Nye's *theory of complex interdependence* the paper proves that the foreign policy agenda of the island has moved on from a

concentration on security in the traditional Realist sense of the term. “Complex interdependence refers to a situation among a number of countries in which multiple channels of contact connect societies (that is, states do not monopolize these contacts); there is no hierarchy of issues; and military force is not used by governments toward one another” (Keohane & Nye, 2012, pp.265). By corroborating the existence of complex interdependence in Sri Lanka’s ties with both India and China; the paper portrays the complexity of articulating a foreign policy for the island.

The next section builds on the existing scholarly consensus for a ‘balanced’ foreign policy. Whilst some scholars and policy makers advocate for a ‘friendship with all foreign policy’ (De Silva, 2016; Karunanayake, 2017a; Ockersz, 2017, para. 8; Sirisena, 2016) others stress that the present leadership wishes to maintain an ‘Asia centric middle path’ (Senadhira, 2017). During his brief tenure as foreign minister Mr. Karunanayake (2017b) also stood for commercial diplomacy to bring about ‘win-win’ situations for the island. Commenting on Colombo’s external relations Political scientist Uyangoda claims that ‘Avoiding an ideological identity in its foreign policy strategies seems to be a key defining feature of the Maithripala Sirisena- Ranil Wikremasinghe administration at present’ (2016, para. 2). On the other hand Panditaratne (2017, para. 10) claims that ‘Sri Lanka aims to forge a dual identity, as the centre of the Indian Ocean and an economic entry point to the Indian subcontinent’. These diverse views on the present-day foreign policy must also be put in context to Sri Lanka’s plans to become ‘an Indian Ocean hub’ (Samaraweera, 2017).

What emerges from this cursory scrutiny is the observation that the present administration of President Sirisena has endeavored to forge ties with India and China. The next section examines the strategic competition between China and India in South Asia and the potential trajectory of their bi lateral relations in the changing geopolitical environment of the 21st century. This section details the ties between India and China; highlighting the flux in their bi lateral relations as well as the reasons behind the prevailing tensions between the two states.

The paper then contrasts the foreign policy of former President Rajapakse and his successor Maithripala Sirisena in terms of their ties with New Delhi and Beijing as well as the degree to which both India’s and China’s strategic, economic and military concerns were taken into account when formulating the foreign policy of the island.

The next section explores the feasibility of a balancing foreign policy for the island and the ability of President Sirisena to continue this course in the near future given the constraints his administration faces. The author concludes that a balanced foreign policy has been implemented by President Sirisena but outlines 4 main scenarios the island may face in future; three of which are direct impediments to the continuance of a balanced foreign policy. While I stress that these are not the only plausible situations that Sri Lanka may have to face, these appear to be the most likely cases in future. By exploring these 4 scenarios I point to the importance of implementing a multi actor perspective to

1. Better analyze the implications of expanding ties with both states and

2. Explore the varied implications and possible issues or causes of conflict that may arise in Sri Lanka's relationship with India and China.

Recommendations

Based on the complexities involved in navigating between the two giants of Asia, the paper argues that in order to ensure the security and economic interests of Sri Lanka, a multi actor approach should be implemented by the Sirisena administration. Given the present administration's desire to continue a balanced foreign policy in relation to India and China it is imperative that the foreign policy decision making apparatus combines authoritative figures in academia and other institutions to navigate the islands external relations amidst the tense geopolitical environment in Asia.

A multi-actor approach focuses attention on 'the legitimacy of multiple actors in a specific context, instead of assuming an all-encompassing legitimacy for one actor in all contexts' (Gjørsv, 2012, pp.13). Such a multi actor approach would be able to pool together resources in University establishments, Non-Governmental agencies focused on human rights and reconciliation as well as other International Relations institutes based in the country such as the Bandaranaike Center for International Studies, Regional Center for Strategic Studies, Institute of National Security Studies of Sri Lanka and Institute of Policy Studies etc. While the primary focus in terms of this multi actor approach is based on institutions and academia in governmental and non-governmental agencies; further steps can be taken to expand this to the level of a regional basis if the need arises.

Utilizing such a multi actor approach enables foreign policy decision makers to determine the parameters or boundaries of what is, or is not, a part of the security dynamic at a particular time. It also enables us to utilize multi-dimensional perspectives in academic and institutional networks on the positive and negative implications and externalities of pursuing a particular course of action. This foresight allows for a better judged decision which will have greater chances to benefit the country in the short and long term.

A multi actor perspective would be able to pool together resources to analyze the possible options and implications of following different foreign policy options on a contextual basis. This would enable policy makers to look at a particular case from different lenses and weigh the cost and benefit from a political, economic and social perspective. This is why Sri Lanka would do best if it were to adopt such a policy given President Sirisena's continued desire to operationalize a balanced foreign policy between two rising powers - who are increasingly prone to engage in conflicts and confrontations on many fronts in the years ahead.

Keywords: Balanced Foreign Policy; China - India; Sri Lanka; South Asia

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