



Sri Lanka occupied little thought throughout the West for much of the period since independence in 1948. In the last few years, however, Sri Lanka began to feature as a country of strategic relevance to great powers, particularly China and the United States. Sitting at the centre of the Indian Ocean, halfway between China and the key energy resources in the Middle East, Beijing has sought to influence politics on the island. But it has suffered blows this year, with Mahinda Rajapaksa (friendly to Chinese interests) losing the presidency in January and his party losing in recent parliamentary elections to the centre-right United National Party. Now, pro-Western Ranil Wickramasinghe holds the position of prime minister.

But Western policymakers should not take the island state for granted. The larger lesson of Colombo's shift to the West is that strategic small states like Sri Lanka now have more options and can easily switch sponsors.

NEW FOUND INTEREST

In May, John Kerry became the first secretary of state to visit Colombo in over a decade. There were reports in Sri Lankan media that President Barack Obama has also promised to visit, something more likely given Wickramasinghe's victory.

This newfound interest in the island is related to a "first-tier" security challenge for the United States: China. Rajapaksa's government fell out of favor with Western governments for its activities during the Sri Lankan civil war. Citing non-implementation of good governance regulations, the European Union removed preferential tariff rates for Sri Lanka's exports, causing thousands of garment factory workers to lose their jobs. Western countries supported war crimes investigations at the U.N. India, under pressure from Tamil Nadu state political parties, denied lethal weaponry to Colombo during the war and leaned on Sri Lanka to concede more legislative autonomy to Tamil-dominated provinces afterwards.

Unlike in previous decades, however, Colombo had an alternative great power to look to for military technology and investment. Beijing obliged, using its veto—alongside Russia—to defend Sri Lanka at the U.N. Sri Lanka was included as part of a chain of infrastructure projects along China's "One Belt, One Road" initiative.

The American and European stand sparked a strong anti-Western public reaction in Sri Lanka, underpinned by existing suspicions of Western support for the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and anti-colonial and Cold War sentiment.

In January 2015, however, Sri Lanka took a 180-degree foreign policy turn. The new president, Maithripala Sirisena, reached out to the West, began governance reforms and signalled an accommodating approach to Tamil interests. Sirisena's first foreign visit was to New Delhi and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi repaid the gesture.

STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE

Washington, Delhi, and Beijing have good reason to take an interest. Sri Lanka is at the heart of the world's busiest sea lanes (more than 80 percent of global seaborne oil trade transits through the Indian Ocean.) The island sits in a region that will form the centre of future world politics, strategy, and economics.

Middle Eastern governments have probably noticed Sri Lanka's maneuvering between China and the West. Given the recent steps by these states to diversify their security partners, they may learn from Sri Lanka's example of extracting the most from established and rising powers. Sri Lanka's own history of battling non-state actors may also provide lessons for Middle Eastern states facing similar challenges. Some of those states feel hamstrung by the West's lack of support for (or outright opposition to) their own conflicts with non-state actors. But Colombo accomplished something that no great power—nor any Middle Eastern country including Israel—was able to. It comprehensively defeated one of the world's most powerful terrorist armies.

THE SWINGING PENDULUM

The August 2015 parliamentary elections were more significant than previous ones because of the new powers bestowed on the prime minister. Rajapaksa, leading the centre-left United People's Freedom Alliance, lost by a small margin to the most

Colombo's biggest export markets are the United States and Europe, or that China will be an increasingly important investor. But they will have significant impacts on Colombo's geopolitical alignment. If a pro-Rajapaksa conglomeration wins in the next election, we may see matters revisited like the docking of Chinese submarines in Sri Lankan ports.

In that scenario, Beijing will have learned its lesson from Sri Lanka: that spending billions on investment in potential friends is sometimes less useful than spending millions, or even thousands, on gaining some insight and influence into the country's domestic politics. During Rajapaksa's decade in power, the Chinese made some strategic investments that would be difficult for any government to dislodge.

Even if the direct strategic benefits to China of having a pro-Beijing government in Colombo are minimal, the perception matters. Countries throughout Asia, the Middle East and Africa are re-evaluating their great power relationships. If states perceive Beijing's strategic reach to be increasing, it may tip their calculations toward acquiescing rather than resisting when it comes to Beijing's pressure on anything from economic and military relations to territorial claims. They may lose trust in the United

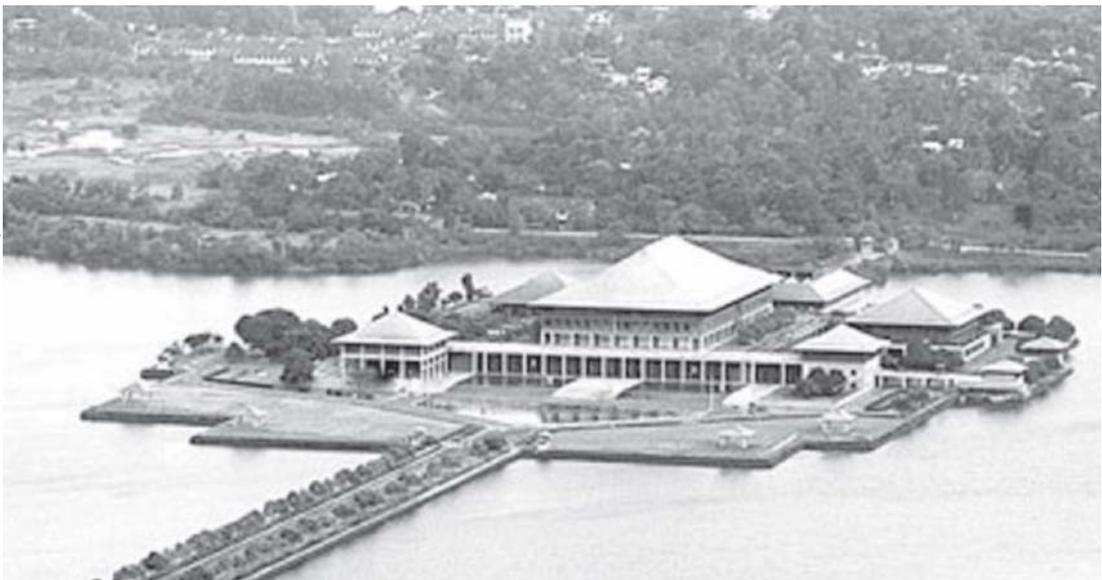
States' will and ability to commit to security in their regions.

can be rapidly altered. Sri Lankans' approval of America's world leadership fell from 36 percent at the end of the war in 2009 to just 14 percent in 2012. Anti-Western sentiment has made being pro-Western more of an electoral liability for politicians than an asset. Rajapaksa supporters evidently saw political gain in alleging that the U.S. CIA and British MI6 assisted his opponents.

The return of high stakes geopolitics means that the United States needs to work harder to win over small states, both governments and populations. This is particularly true for states which are geographically further from China and face little threat from it, those who feel the status quo has not served their security interests, and those with postcolonial sentiments. Sri Lanka fits all these categories, as do many Middle Eastern states.

Washington will need to dilute the influence of domestic lobbies (whether they be for foreign governments or specific interest groups), whose agendas are not always in line with U.S. national interest or values. There is also too much lag time between when intelligence and strategic analysts determine that a foreign country's is of particular strategic importance and when high-level policymakers really change their approach.

Why small states matter in International Politics: The case of Sri Lanka



pro-West, pro-free market politician the country has seen in the last two decades. Ranil Wickramasinghe's support for war crimes investigations against Rajapaksa had compounded his earlier unpopularity for concessions to the LTTE and Tamil majority areas. His party's recent success owes not to national security or foreign policy issues, but to a fear of corruption and abuse of power under Rajapaksa (who offered the same ministerial team as in his previous government).

The election results are not a cause for the West to again take Sri Lanka for granted. Major moves by Wickramasinghe, either toward neoliberal economic policies or an "appeasing" foreign policy may result in a swing back to the opposition at the next election.

Sri Lanka's changes of government will not overturn economic anchors like the fact that

Sri Lanka provides an important lesson for Washington policymakers. A small country's very symbolic switching of great power friends following changes of government is something not seen in the region since the Cold War.

THE RISKS OF UNFRIENDING

The "geopolitical vacation" of the post-Cold War era is over. Traditional spheres of influence of regional powers like India are no longer sacrosanct. In the future, small states, particularly with strategic relevance like those around the Indian Ocean and the Middle East, will have more options to switch between multiple poles. Great powers will have less leverage.

Furthermore, increasing access to information means countries' longstanding images

Sri Lanka's example provides a glimpse of small power-great power relations in a future multipolar world order. Obama's and Kerry's recent reassuring gestures to Colombo and other small states suggest that the current hegemon may now be recognizing the need to be more attentive to the interests of previously taken-for-granted countries, lest they fall into Beijing's waiting arms.

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