



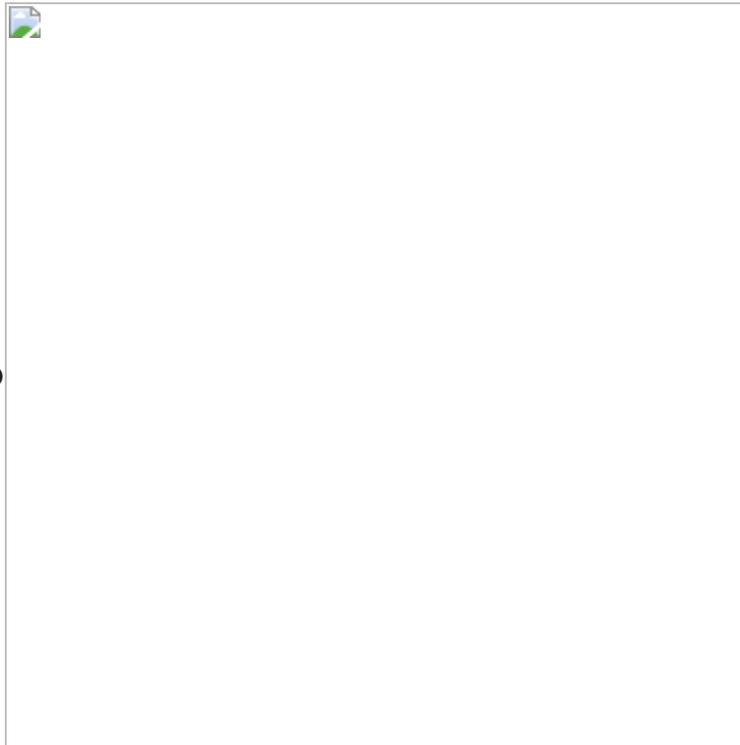
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Sri Lanka's Constitutional Crisis

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(The editorial is based on the article “Sri Lanka’s Constitutional Crisis” which appeared in The Diplomat. It analyses the India-Sri Lanka relationship.)

Sri Lanka appears to be on the path of even greater strategic significance for India. This time via a big internal crisis. The events over the last few days in Sri Lanka had caught many around the world in a surprise, especially India because the island nation not only sits literally in its backyard but is also deemed very crucial to peace in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). What is important is that this is not a surprise that India is going to like.



Current Scenario

- The President of Sri Lanka, Maithripala Sirisena (erstwhile party member of Rajapaksa), sacked Ranil Wickremesinghe as Prime Minister of Sri Lanka in September 2018. The United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA; a political alliance in Sri Lanka founded by former Sri Lankan president Chandrika Kumaratunga in 2004; Chairperson: Maithripala Sirisena) withdrew its support to the National Unity Government of Sri Lanka which has been in power since 2015.
- In a surprise move, President Sirisena appointed the former President Mahinda Rajapaksa as Prime Minister by using his powers based on the Article 42 (4) of the country's Constitution. Also, the President has suspended the Parliament till November 16.
- Appointment of Mr. Rajapaksa even before the voting out of Mr. Wickremesinghe on the floor of Parliament is against Sri Lanka's parliamentary process and democracy.
- The crisis comes at a time when social challenges still persist from the three-decade-long civil war, and when the economy is fragile with a plummeting rupee, soaring unemployment, and rising living costs.
- Despite arguments and counter-arguments about the constitutional validity of appointing Rajapaksa as Prime Minister, internal developments indicate that Sri Lanka could once again plunge into a political crisis that can threaten the relative peace and stability the country has witnessed in the recent years.

Effects on India

- Wickremesinghe's official visit to India in October seemed to convey and reassure India that it will remain as an important trade and development partner for Sri Lanka, despite the turbulent internal politics. Now, however, in the shifting political scenario, it remains to be seen how the bilateral engagement between India and Sri Lanka will evolve, especially in the future if Rajapaksa succeeds to remain in power through constitutional means.
- The clash between Sirisena (pro-China; Rajapaksa is also pro-China) and Wickramasinghe (pro-India; pro-West) over handing over to India the development of the East Terminal of the Colombo port had become a major bone of contention between the President and the Prime Minister respectively. This led to a delay in implementing joint projects agreed upon between Sri Lanka and India. The future of this project could now be in jeopardy.
- Reports also surfaced about the differences between Sirisena and Wickremesinghe concerning India's investments in various economic projects in Sri Lanka (eg. Mattala project).
- Both the Sri Lankan Tamils and the Tamils of recent Indian origin have strong linguistic, cultural, and kinship bonds with their ethnic kin in India. The crisis can, therefore, affect the Indian diaspora in the country.

- **Rajapaksa is known to have closer ties with China.** Despite the fears of Sri Lanka sinking deeper into a “debt trap”, Rajapaksa could again turn to China for renewed funding for major projects.
- The growing ties with China can affect India’s relation with respect to investment, trade, diaspora, and defense.
- The persisting internal political instability can also greatly affect general trade and commerce between the two countries.

Read More: [Mattala Project With India is On: Sri Lanka](#)

India and Sri Lankan Relations

- Both countries have a legacy of intellectual, cultural, religious and linguistic interaction.
- In recent years, the relationship has been marked by close contacts at all levels. Trade and investment have grown and there is cooperation in the fields of development, education, culture, and defence.
- Political relations with Sri Lanka is more about developmental cooperation. In the recent years, significant progress in the implementation of development assistance projects for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and disadvantaged sections of the population in Sri Lanka has helped cement further the bonds of friendship between the two countries.
- Commercial relations with Sri Lanka has long been about the country is a priority destination for direct investment from India. Sri Lanka is one of India’s largest trading partner in SAARC. India, in turn, is Sri Lanka’s largest trade partner globally. Trade between the two countries grew rapidly, particularly after the entry into force of the India-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement in March 2000.
- Importantly, education is an important area of cooperation between the two countries as India offers significant scholarships to Sri Lankan students.
- In cultural relations, The Indian Cultural Centre in Colombo actively promotes awareness of Indian culture by offering classes in Indian music, dance, Hindi and Yoga.
- Tourism also forms an important link between India and Sri Lanka. The government of India had formally launched the e-Tourist Visa (eTV) scheme for Sri Lankan tourists since 2015.

Read More: [Indian High Commissioner hails ties with Sri Lanka](#)

Colombo Plan

- The Colombo Plan for Cooperative Economic and Social Development in Asia and the Pacific was conceived at the Commonwealth Conference on Foreign Affairs held in Colombo, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) in January 1950 and was launched on 1 July 1951 as a cooperative venture for the economic and social advancement of the peoples of South and Southeast Asia.

- The Colombo Plan was instituted as a regional intergovernmental organisation for the furtherance of economic and social development of the region's nations. It is based on the partnership concept for self-help and mutual help in the development process with the focal areas being human resource development and south-south cooperation.

Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC)

Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) Programme was instituted by a decision of the Indian Cabinet on 15 September 1964 as a bilateral programme of assistance of the Government of India. The decision regarding setting up the ITEC programme was predicated on the underlying belief that "it was necessary to establish relations of mutual concern and inter-dependence based not only on commonly held ideals and aspirations, but also on solid economic foundations. Technical and economic cooperation was considered to be one of the essential functions of an integrated and imaginative foreign policy.

Way Forward

- Going forward, it has to be borne in mind that the internal power politics of the island nation, is to a large extent going to decide the future of peace and stability in this part of the IOR. The geopolitical tug-of-war between India, China and Sri Lanka could have devastating effects on not only trade and commerce but also in India's foreign policy in the IOR.
- Political stability in Sri Lanka is very important for India because it has to deal with myriad issues ranging from fishing and fishermen problems to diaspora problems viz the Sri Lankan Tamils.
- If India wants to preserve peace in Sri Lanka and the IOR it can do so by supporting the people of Sri Lanka, by pushing for democracy and stability, and by helping the country get on the path of development.

