

Analysis

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Anura Dissanayake's Presidency in Sri Lanka: Navigating Geopolitical Crossroads

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The election of Anura Kumara Dissanayake as the President of Sri Lanka on 21 September, 2024, has sparked questions about the country's future foreign policy. Given his left-wing party's historical ties to China and cautious stance towards India, both regional powers are closely watching his next moves. This analysis explores the implications of Dissanayake's victory for Indo-Lankan relations, with a focus on balancing between India and China.



Sri Lanka is a strategically located country at the crossroads of shipping routes in the Indo-Pacific region; it is near the southern tip of India and north of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). In February 2022, Sri Lanka experienced a massive economic crisis, caused by COVID-19 pandemic that exaggerated the problems, economic mismanagement, depletion in foreign reserves, and increasing foreign debt. This led to political instability in the country; President Gotabaya Rajapaksa had to flee the country. Later, Ranil Wickremesinghe, the former Prime Minister, became acting president, took charge of the country, and governed for two more years until August 2024.

On 21st September 2024, Sri Lanka held Presidential elections; there were four main contenders; Sajit Premadasa from Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), Ranil Wickremesinghe from IND16, Namal Rajapaksa from Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), and Anura Kumara Disanayake (AKD) from National People's Power (NPP). In election results, Mr. Anura Kumara Disanayake received 42.31, maximum percentage of the vote share and emerged victorious as President, followed by Sajit Premadasa with 32.76 percent, and Ranil Wickremesinghe with 17.27 percent (Election Commission of Sri Lanka, 2024).

Historical Relations and Ideological Tensions with India

Disanayake is a leader of the NPP, an alliance, and of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), a Marxist political party that waged armed insurrections in the 1970s and 1980s to capture power through social revolution. Post AKD victory, challenges have arisen in Indian strategic circles, regarding the foreign policy outlook of the NPP, about how the NPP will conduct its foreign policy, especially the anti-India stance of JVP throughout its history and its close ideological association with China; will it be closer to China? or what its implications would be on Indo-Lankan ties? This article is an assessment of the victory of AKD and its potential foreign policy outlook.



First, the JVP, a political party, traditionally has been anti-India, additionally their Marxist and Sinhala nationalism ideological mix is known. However, in recent times, all political parties and leadership in Sri Lanka have also realised that one cannot ignore the logic of geography in international relations and diplomacy. A popular saying, originally used by India's former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and later frequently quoted in strategic circles, states: "You can change your friends, but you cannot change your neighbours". Therefore, logic of geography plays a significant role in foreign policy.

Second, Sri Lankan leaders and people have been found to be impressed and appreciate India for its support during the 2022 financial crisis in Sri Lanka; India's financial assistance helped Sri Lanka bring economic stability and the security of daily life of Sri Lankans. Therefore, there is a deep sense of gratitude and understanding among the Sri Lankan leadership that they cannot avoid or antagonise India.

Third, considering Sri Lanka's current situation, no political party or incumbent government can afford to take sides or oppose other country. Sri Lanka and Sri Lankans need cooperation and friendly relations with every country; they need the support of all great powers for a favourable outcome from the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Fourth, before the elections, India engaged with all parties in Sri Lanka. In fact, India invited JVP leaders to visit New Delhi, India; JVP leaders paid a visit to New Delhi and both parties extended words to cooperate for regional security, and enhancing bilateral ties, considered as a successful meeting (Colombo Gazette, 2024; Srinivasan, 2024)¹. Furthermore, JVP also mentioned in their 2024 election manifesto that they will pursue a neutral foreign policy, will not take the side of neither China nor India, and will not allow Sri Lankan territory to any country or institution that can threaten the strategic interests and national security of neighbours, including India (Jathika Jana Balawegaya (NPP), 2024, p. 123) JVP is unlikely to change its original stance; however contemporary geopolitical and economic situation of Sri Lanka does not allow them to react in a certain

¹ JVP leaders met India's foreign minister and national security advisor in New Delhi; reports suggest that it was a successful visit because both parties, JVP and Indian government extended words to cooperate for regional security and growth of bilateral ties. See (Srinivasan, 2024).



way which can have a negative implication for Sri Lanka's national interest. Therefore, the incumbent government is likely to maintain good relations with India.

Other hand, on the Indian side, India has become pragmatic to a large extent, India's stance is to manage and cooperate with anyone and everyone in the neighbourhood². It has been seen previously when the Taliban took over Kabul in August 2021, India did not condemn the Taliban nor cut off ties with Afghanistan considering India's investment in infrastructure development projects and the future of Afghan civilians; similarly, after military coup in Myanmar in February 2021, New Delhi has engaged with Junta, and the Taliban in Afghanistan. Despite having a communist leadership in Nepal, India is managing its ties with the country. Similarly, with Bangladesh in August 2024, the moment Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina had to leave the country and then Prof. Mohammed Yunus formed an interim government, the Indian PM Narendra Modi gave a statement that 'reiterated India's support for a democratic, stable, peaceful and progressive Bangladesh'(Modi, 2024)³. So, India has recognised that it is important to engage with neighbours, least it create a vacuum for other extra-regional powers to fill in. Therefore, India will continue to be flexible with all parties in the neighbourhood, including the incumbent Marxist government in Sri Lanka, provided that India's strategic interests are not affected.

Lastly, it is pertinent to know what Chinese sources are saying. According to global times, Chinese experts have expected to improvement in Sino-Lankan ties, because Dissanayake's JVP party shares several ideological similarities with China; and values

² Despite of this policy, New Delhi is largely disengaged with Islamabad, Pakistan; because of Pakistan sponsored terrorism in Kashmir. India has a policy which states that terrorism and talks cannot go hand in hand, therefore, India is largely disengaged since past 10 years.

³ On 5th August 2024, the Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina resigned and fled the country due to the anti-government protest against her government. Protests against her were led by the students across the country over the controversial Quota system in government job. However, there are other theories as well that say that it was a regime change operation by prominent intelligence agencies.



closer Sino-Lankan ties (Global Times, 2024)⁴. Despite the JVP's position on a non-aligned foreign policy approach, India cannot completely ignore the possibility of closer Sri Lankan engagement with China (LNW, 2024; Rawat, 2024). China likely to put maximum efforts in having deeper ties with JVP and NPP. Therefore, India will have to expand its comprehensive and sustainable engagement with Sri Lanka in all sectors and its constructive engagement with NPP⁵.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In a nutshell, Anura Dissanayake's victory is neither positive nor negative for India. It is a neutral phenomenon for now; yet, things are unfolding and to be seen in the coming time. Both countries can constructively engage with each other considering their current financial situation and regional geopolitical dynamics.

Our **recommendations** for cordial Indo-Lankan ties include:

⁴ Whether ideological similarity helps in forming alliances with like-minded countries is an issue of debate in international relations. There is a hypothesis which argues that ideological similarities helps in forming alliances; however, results are contrary to it and say that state leaders are tend to prioritize national commitments over ideology. Therefore, ideological affiliations often do not work. For more details, see (Walt, 1985). In the case of Sri Lanka, it is a leftist/Marxist political party that won the elections in a 'democratic' political setting through the ballot box; showing that it is not a full-fledged communist/socialist set-up nor capitalist or liberal democratic at its core; it is a mixture of all. Therefore, the ideological affiliation of Sri Lanka (under JVP) with China is unlikely in such a diverse political and cultural set-up.

⁵ Harini Amarasuriye, a newly elected Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, has a connection with India. She studied Bachelors in Sociology from 1991-1994 in the esteemed Hindu College of Delhi University, India (Jayakumar, 2024). She became the first woman to lead the government in 24 years. India can leverage its goodwill to improve relations with the NPP government. However, such things do not matter in realpolitik, but can play a small role.



1. India should continue to expand bilateral ties by launching and delivering development projects in Sri Lanka ⁶. The economic cooperation and access to Indian market for Sri Lankan goods must be promoted.
2. Sri Lanka is economically dependent on China, due to China's large investments in Sri Lanka and the importance of China in the negotiations with the IMF. Therefore, Sri Lanka is expected to maintain cordial ties with China. Against this backdrop, Indian media should avoid being overtly critical on Dissanayake's involvement with China in the coming years.
3. The NPP, on the other hand, should maintain neutrality between India and China and strictly adhere to the foreign policy commitments outlined in the 2024 JVP election manifesto ⁷. The NPP should enhance transparency in international bids for infrastructure development contracts ⁸. It will help to maintain neutrality, transparency and get a sustainable deal for Sri Lanka's economic growth. The NPP must also ensure that it actively supports the completion of India's development initiatives in Sri Lanka.
4. Lastly, considering the political, religious, cultural and multi-ethnic diversity in both countries, it is advisable to avoid commenting on each other's internal politics.

⁶ Since human development, economic progress is the primary priority of the incumbent government; India should continue to deliver development projects constructively on time. It will balance the Indo-Lankan bilateral ties under the NPP government.

⁷ The NPP should avoid getting closer to any country, and be cautious when making remarks by its leaders and parliamentarians, diplomatic visits, and its engagement with the People's Liberation Army (PLA). The NPP should not let Sri Lanka's territory be used for the ships from People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) and the docking and replenishment of submarines.

⁸ It has been argued that during the presidency of Mahinda Rajapaksa, there was little transparency in international bids. Most of the major contracts were given to China.

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