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(This article is an elaboration of answer given to an international news agency's question on President Sirisena's visit to China on March 25, 2015.)

Question

President Maithripala Sirisena's Chinese visit is starting later today (March 25, 2015). This visit comes after his government's willingness to strengthen ties with neighbour India with leaders of the both countries visiting each other's nation within a month and the suspension of Chinese aided Colombo port city reclamation project.

How do you see this visit and do you think China would be ready for any renegotiations on its Port city projects or any debt finance?

The present government says Chinese government is clean, but its companies are involved in corrupt deals under the former President Mahinda Rajapaksa. The government says it wants to eliminate the corruption similar to what Chinese leaders are doing in their country. Appreciate your comment.

Answer

There are two parts to this question. The one relating to Sri Lanka-India relations will be viewed by China as a multilateral international issue,

while the other relating to suspension of Chinese aided projects will be treated by both countries as a bilateral one.

China under President Xi Jinping is promoting the revival of the Silk Route as well as the 21st Century Maritime Road in a big way as a part of its strategic westward reach. It involves reaching out to South Asian countries as well as the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). India by its size, soft power and economic clout dominates both the subcontinent and the Indian Ocean neighbourhood.

If we go by his performance so far, President Xi has emerged as a pragmatist who does not lose sight of his end goals as long as his “core interests” are not threatened. China’s media comments after Prime Minister Modi’s three-nation visit in the IOR indicate a better appreciation in Beijing of India’s role in IOR. Perhaps President Xi having factored Modi’s assertive leadership style understood that wishing away India in this region would not be easy and it would not benefit China. So Beijing seems to be in a mood to cooperate and coordinate (if possible) its activities with India in this region.

This could be related to the international strategic environment as well as China’s desire to take advantage of India’s growth story which is being rewritten under Modi’s leadership. Of course, China objections to Prime Minister Modi’s February 2015 -visit to Arunachal Pradesh showed that despite all the cooing comments Beijing would not compromise upon its core interest.

India’s experience in dealing with China holds an important lesson for Sri Lanka leadership – there will be no mixing of metaphors when it comes to China’s national interest. We can expect President Sirisena to face the moment of truth when he talks with President Xi. So the Sri Lankan argument about cleaning up corruption in all projects including the Chinese ones just as China is doing, may not cut much ice except sympathetic nods.

China will be attaching importance to the Sri Lankan leader's visit because of the not so friendly impression he and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe had created in the run up to the election. They decried Chinese-promoted mega projects as extravagant and suspected the opaque processes adopted to promote them as the source of corruption to benefit Rajapaksa clan. They had also accused Mahinda Rajapaksa of being partial to China at the cost of Sri Lanka’s cordial relations with India. Chinese normally do not forget such comments easily.

Even before the visit China had been relentlessly pursuing action through local media (as well as using some political connections if w by an NGO’s statement in the court) to clear its association with any criminal or corrupt activity. China is conscious of its emergence as a global power and reacts strongly when small countries make accusations against China.

Chinese leaders would mince no words about their unhappiness at such remarks in one-to-one talks. (Probably they would have done this when Foreign Minister Samaraweera visited China earlier (preparatory to Sirisena’s visit).

Sri Lanka is perhaps the most important among the Indian Ocean islands to promote China's present strategic objectives. This is further increased due to the geo-strategic advantage India already enjoys in Sri Lanka. So China's first priority would be to consolidate its existing goodwill and protect the economic assets it had created during the Rajapaksa days. So we can expect China to make serious efforts to show Sri Lanka the tangible economic advantages Sri Lanka in kick starting the stalled projects are resumed. Some of them like the rural water supply project are really value-added ones.

Among the projects Colombo port reclamation is most prestigious and strategically important for China both from maritime security and commercial points of view. Already Sri Lanka appears to have tacitly agreed not to cancel the project as indicated by Sri Lanka Prime Minister. Sri Lanka government has also agreed for the construction of breakwater that would help the Project. But Chinese are tough negotiators with immense patience; so Sri Lanka would probably end up giving in more than gaining much.

However, to save faces on both sides we can expect Chinese to provide access to books to show their hands are clean. They would make some concessions on financial terms by some deferred repayment and probably loosen some clause relating to Chinese control of "sovereign" rights parts ceded to them as a part of the project. We can also expect easier terms for fresh loans.

Of course, we can expect China to beef up the existing strategic security partnership pact between the two countries. Sri Lanka has strong appetite for improving its naval platforms and aircraft for surveillance and protection of its near ocean waters. To meet this need the existing joint committee on coastal security could be activated with offer of coastal naval craft and speedy delivery of those in pipeline. We can also expect China to try and free Sri Lanka from Indian navy's monopoly in training the island nation's naval forces. But this is more easily said than done.

Lastly, China seems to be interested in promoting China-Sri Lanka-India trilateral cooperation as a win-win strategy for "peace and prosperity" of the three countries. Though Foreign Minister Wang Yi had spoken about it, it does not appear to within the realms of probability in near term. While we can expect to hear more about this after Modi's visit to Beijing, President Xi might bring up the idea in his talks with President Sirise as he would probably welcome such an initiative.

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