India-Sri Lanka Ties - New Government in Sri Lanka

Why in news?

Sri Lanka's former wartime defence minister Gotabaya Rajapaksa won the recent Presidential elections there.

How does the bilateral future look?

- India should not be carried away by the media narrative of Rajapaksas (Gotabaya and his brother Mahinda, President during 2005-15) being inherently "pro-China".
- The Rajapaksas had blamed India for their defeat in the 2015 elections.
- However, they have sought to mend ties with Delhi in recent years.
- Reportedly, Gotabaya Rajapaksas has said post-elections that China was a "trade partner" while India was a "close relative".
- The stage is thus ready for a reset in the bilateral relations between the two strong governments in Delhi and Colombo.
- Nevertheless, this necessitates addressing the structural factors that have complicated the relationship between Delhi and Colombo in the past.

What are the challenges to be addressed?

- **China** - A primary challenge is the China question.
- India is aware that China's economic and strategic dominance in the Indian Subcontinent will continue to grow.
- China's influence is not tied to the regime leadership in its neighbourhood.
- It is thus irrelevant to label governments in Colombo as "pro-China" or "pro-India".
- An example would be the approach of the coalition led by President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe in Sri Lanka.
- It came to power criticising the Chinese projects in Sri Lanka as financially unsustainable.
- Two years into power, the coalition extended full backing to the Chinese projects.
- It was this so-called "pro-India" regime that offered China a 99-year lease on the Hambantota project and stalled key projects of interest to Delhi.
- In any case, Delhi cannot expect its neighbours to shut down economic and commercial engagement with Beijing.

- **Tamils** - Another structural factor shaping India's relations with Sri Lanka is the Tamil question.
- India's involvement in Sri Lanka's tragic civil war has been far more consequential than the China factor in complicating the bilateral relations.
- Successive coalition governments in Delhi from 1989 to 2014 struggled to balance the competing interests in Chennai and Colombo.
- The strong mandate in 2014 had given Modi greater space to manage the competing imperatives on the Lanka policy.
- However, the Tamil question has not gone away.
- If the Gotabaya government can advance reconciliation with the Tamil minority, it will be easier for India to strengthen ties.
- But the Tamil issue is no longer a bilateral one between Delhi and Colombo.
- The Western powers have expressed deep concerns about the war crimes in the military campaign against the LTTE.

What should the approach be?

- Delhi will be right to ask Colombo not to take steps with Beijing that threaten India's security.
- Delhi and Colombo need a clear understanding of mutual red lines relating to national security.
- On the other hand, the world rediscovers the geopolitical value of Sri Lanka at the heart of the Indo-Pacific.
- Given this, Colombo has huge opportunities to leverage its location for national benefit.
- Delhi needs to invest some political capital in resolving problems such as the long-standing dispute over fisheries.
- Beyond its objection to China's BRI projects, Delhi should offer sustainable terms for infrastructure development.
- It also needs to contribute more to the development of Colombo's defence and counter-terror capabilities.
- In all, with a strong government in place in Sri Lanka, it is time for Delhi to rethink on its relationship with Colombo.

Source: Indian Express

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