

Two Asian powers and an island

Unlike China, India has not accomplished much in Sri Lanka in the Sirisena years



T. RAMAKRISHNAN

The imposing Lotus Tower in Colombo, which was opened to the public recently, is considered to be the latest symbol of Sri Lanka-China ties. An agreement to build this structure, which is to serve as a multi-functional telecommunication tower, was signed by the two countries in 2012.

It may look ironical that much of the project's execution took place under a regime which came into office at a time when there was a "strong anti-China mood". In the run-up to the 2015 presidential election, Ranil Wickremesinghe, who was backing Maithripala Sirisena, had assured people that another Chinese project, the \$1.4 billion Colombo Port City, would be scrapped. Soon after Mr. Sirisena became the President, work on the Port City came to a grinding halt. Then, there was also uncertainty over the fate of the Hambantota port, the development of which was originally offered to India by Mahinda Rajapaksa on becoming Sri Lankan President in November 2005. (India was said to have examined Hambantota purely from the point of view of economics, overlooking the strategic angle.)

Two different records

However, all of this is now history, as Colombo-Beijing ties have stood the test of time. China has been able to resolve all the controversies over these projects. The Port City's execution is underway without any major hitch. When it becomes a reality, it will stand beside the Colombo port, which serves as a major transshipment hub for India. A Chinese company has got Hambantota on lease for 99 years along with associated land of 15,000 acres. More importantly, Sri Lanka is a member-country of the Belt and Road Initiative.

Notwithstanding an argument by some international experts that economic ties with China are driving Sri Lanka into a "debt trap", the bilateral relationship on the economic front is only becoming stronger. According to the 2018 annual report of the Cen-



A Chinese construction worker stands on land that was reclaimed from the Indian Ocean for the Colombo Port City project. ■ AP

tral Bank of Sri Lanka, imports from China accounted for 18.5%, just a little less than the 19% from India.

On the other hand, India cannot claim to have accomplished much in the Sirisena years, despite its "neighbourhood first" policy since May 2014. Apart from clinching a joint venture deal in May with Japan and Sri Lanka to develop the East Container Terminal at the Colombo Port, India cannot boast of having taken up any major infrastructure project in Sri Lanka. Not much is known about the status of a project to renovate the Kankesanthurai harbour in the Northern Province, for which India provided over \$45 million in early 2018. There seems to be little progress in India's proposals to develop the Palaly airport in the North, (where commercial flight services in a limited way are expected to be launched shortly) and acquire a controlling stake in the Mattala Rajapaksa International Airport. And for all practical purposes, the Economic and Technical Cooperation Agreement, an improved version of the existing bilateral Free Trade Agreement, has been shelved.

In recent years, only a couple of social sector projects of the Indian government - building 60,000 homes for Tamils of the civil war-torn Northern and Eastern Provinces as well as those in the hill country region, and the provision of ambulance services all over the island - gathered momentum. Both these are being carried out using grants of the Indian government. In July, an agreement was signed to upgrade a

key railway segment, connecting the north and the south, at \$91 million.

However, given its potential and willingness to do more in development cooperation, India cannot remain satisfied with such a modest track record. When Mr. Wickremesinghe visited New Delhi about a year ago, Prime Minister Narendra Modi expressed concern over delays in projects proposed by India. The joint development of an oil storage facility in Trincomalee is one such project which has been discussed for years. What can be a matter of consolation for New Delhi is that Colombo, about a year ago, reversed a decision to award a \$300-million housing project, meant for the North, to Beijing.

Stronger ties

China-funded infrastructure projects in Sri Lanka may look great, but India-Sri Lanka ties are deeper and more complex. As Mr. Modi said, "In good times and bad, India has been and will always be the first responder for Sri Lanka." India's assistance during the 2004 tsunami and Mr. Modi's visit to Colombo in June (the first foreign dignitary to do so) in the aftermath of the Easter Sunday attacks show India's sincerity of approach.

Despite these deep ties, it is true that India and Sri Lanka have seen some unpleasantness in bilateral relations in contemporary times. The anti-Tamil pogrom of 1983 dragged India into the Sri Lankan Tamil question. Events such as the withdrawal of the Indian Peace Keeping Force in March 1990 and the assassination of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi

in May 1991 made New Delhi adopt a "hands-off approach" towards Colombo till the final phase of the civil war. In the last five months of the war that ended in May 2009, India repeatedly conveyed to Sri Lanka that the rights and welfare of the civilian population should not get enmeshed in hostilities against the LTTE. But this was not considered sufficient by protagonists of the proscribed organisation and some others who have been accusing the Indian government of having played a role in the LTTE's defeat.

However, with all their shortcomings, the Rajiv Gandhi-Jayawardene Accord of 1987 and the 13th Amendment to the Sri Lankan Constitution, envisaging devolution of powers for provinces, still provide a solid framework to address the ethnic question. Apart from a political settlement, the Northern and Eastern provinces, which account for less than 10% of Sri Lanka's GDP, require economic development as there are signs of the youth there getting distracted from the pursuit of greener pastures. The Indian government is willing to walk the extra mile in this area, but what is wanting is a proper response from the Tamil political leadership.

When Sri Lanka gets a new President in two months, India must sit with that leader not just to get expeditious approvals for all the pending infrastructure projects but also contribute to a holistic development of Sri Lanka's youth. Also, New Delhi should sustain its interest on developmental issues concerning the hill country Tamils, regarded as the most backward in Sri Lanka. It will also be worth making one more attempt to encourage the voluntary repatriation of nearly 95,000 refugees who live in Tamil Nadu back to Sri Lanka. As a step towards this direction, the authorities should resume ferry services between Talaimannar and Rameswaram at the earliest.

As once stated by the High Commissioner of India to Sri Lanka, Taranjit Singh Sandhu, "Our aid is not to raid or invade". A benign and comprehensive approach, backed by the sincerity of purpose, will not only earn India greater respect of Sri Lankans, but also send a message to other international players about the strength of its ties with Sri Lanka.

ramakrishnan.t@thehindu.co.in

FROM THE READERS' EDITOR

Breaking silos, regaining trust

With propaganda growing on social media, it is time for people to come out of their comfort zones and talk to one another



A.S. PANNEERSELVAM

Researchers from the Oxford Internet Institute, a multidisciplinary research and teaching department of the University of Oxford, have been monitoring the digital space over the last three years to study the organised manipulation of social media. Their latest findings, published in a study titled "The Global Disinformation Order", is very disturbing. The study shows evidence of organised social media manipulation campaigns that have taken place in 70 countries, up from 48 countries in 2018 and 28 countries in 2017. In each country, there is at least one political party or government agency using social media to shape public attitudes domestically.

The findings further state that social media has been co-opted by many authoritarian regimes. In 26 countries, computational propaganda is being used as a tool of information control in three distinct ways: to suppress fundamental human rights, discredit political opponents, and drown out dissenting opinions. The study explains how a handful of sophisticated state actors use computational propaganda for foreign influence operations. Facebook and Twitter attributed foreign influence operations to seven countries. It is important to remember that India is among the seven countries. The others are China, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia and Venezuela. The study is particularly damning of Facebook. It reads: "Despite there being more social networking platforms than ever, Facebook remains the platform of choice for social media manipulation. In 56 countries, we found evidence of formally organised computational propaganda campaigns on Facebook."

Good information

Former editor of *The Guardian* Alan Rusbridger's reflection on the current Brexit mess in the U.K. seems not only to endorse the study but also points out a new lurking danger. He wrote: "Most foot soldiers in journalism do the job because they absolutely believe in the role of good information in good democracies. Something is stopping them: and the sooner we can fix that the better." Rusbridger has a simple proposition: "good democracy relies on good informa-

tion." He defines good information as the one "that is not only true but also believed". His short article, "End front-page falsehoods and regain the public's trust", explains how we stopped trusting: "We're no longer very willing to believe almost anybody. Most surveys of trust find very little faith in what government or politicians say us. But there are also extraordinarily low levels of trust in most media. Nearly two-thirds of people say they can no longer tell good journalism from rumour or falsehoods."

I became a journalist in an era of certainty. Everyone in the profession loved to quote the famous playwright Arthur Miller: "A good newspaper, I suppose, is a nation talking to itself." Digital disruption has created many silos in our public discourse. Instead of dialogue we have been reduced to becoming recipients of the noise generated by echo chambers. They have become so powerful that they deny the space to even give the other person the benefit of the doubt.

Initiating dialogue

The time has come to break out of these silos. There is a need to talk to people outside our comfort zones and initiate dialogues. Prime-time television debates have no dialogue; they may be best termed as concurrent monologues. The Readers' Editor, as an interlocutor between the newspaper and its readers, has a moral obligation to support initiatives that bring back the spirit of the "nation talking to itself" not just among journalists but also among citizens.

In the U.S., the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) and the SPJ Foundation launched a project in Casper, Wyoming, because it wanted to get "a deep understanding of the reasons so many people distrust news organisations and their reporting." The SPJ made it clear that its fundamental assumption was that journalism plays an important role in a democracy, so it is of concern when citizens don't trust the media's news coverage, particularly reporting that holds elected officials accountable for actions that can impact the public. For six months, a small group of residents in Casper, Wyoming, set aside two hours every few Tuesdays to discuss the press. Though the study was not a scientific one, there was tremendous value in hearing participants honestly and it paved the way for a mutual exchange of ideas.

Next week, I will share some of the initiatives at *The Hindu* aimed at strengthening trust.

readerseditor@thehindu.co.in

The doyen of a diplomatic dynasty

A tribute to former Foreign Secretary K.P.S. Menon (Jr.)

T.P. SREENIVASAN

A diplomatic dynasty which dominated Indian diplomacy for three generations, not by birth, but by stiff competition, lost its doyen when K.P.S. Menon (Jr.) passed away on September 28. As the Indian envoy to China, Japan, Bangladesh, Egypt and Hungary, KPS (Jr.) built a reputation for diplomatic finesse, extreme courtesy, sharp intellect, warm hospitality and good humour. He left Delhi the day he retired to Thiruvananthapuram, to live in his wife's home, as every Nair does. He was active in various circles till very recently, visiting Chennai every year to enjoy music and dance. He rarely visited Delhi as though he wanted his successors to make their own mistakes rather than follow his advice.

The stars had foretold many years ago that K.P.S. (Jr.) would be Foreign Secretary one day. It was written in the horoscope of his father, K.P.S. Menon (Sr.), that his son and grandson would occupy the same position that he occupied in the government.



ments with Rajiv Gandhi's policies, but he soldiered on as a disciplined diplomat. He was a pillar of support for me during the Fiji crisis, which led to my expulsion as the High Commissioner.

When I returned to Thiruvananthapuram, the city was called "a three ambassador city" as only two other retired diplomats, K.P.S. and Thomas Abraham had settled down here. Most others from Kerala remained in Delhi or moved to Bengaluru or Chennai. The three of us got together to establish a think tank, the Kerala International Centre. Both of

them were not only highly inspirational, but also active trustees giving me directions to run the Centre. Both of them came to our meetings regularly and created an international study culture in the city. K.P.S. often surprised us with his unconventional views, such as his opposition to nuclear weapons and his conviction that government service was not a desirable vocation. He would not advise youngsters even to join the IFS. But we learnt much from him and he was also keen to learn more about international affairs. With both of them gone, I feel orphaned.

It was sad to see K.P.S. Menon (Jr.) lose his memory, but his devoted wife, Lalitha, helped him to jog his memory and keep him interested in various things. The wife of K.P.S. (Sr.) also used to support him in the evening of his life, even reminding him of his favourite jokes and laughing when he haltingly repeated them. K.P.S. Menon (Jr.) had a full and fruitful life, which must be celebrated.

The mantle of this exceptional dynasty now falls on Shivshankar Menon, who also became Foreign Secretary and National Security Adviser and is now in great demand nationally and internationally as an exceptional analyst of past and current international affairs.

T.P. Sreenivasan is a former Ambassador of India and currently Director General, Kerala International Centre, Thiruvananthapuram



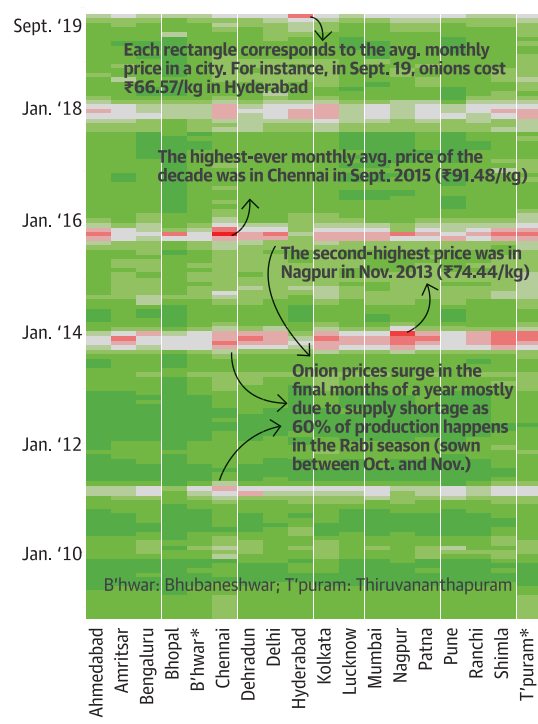
DATA POINT

Know your onions

After a gap of three years, onion prices are on the rise again. An analysis of retail prices shows that prices usually rise in the last few months of the year. The trend is mostly dependent on weather conditions, with floods and droughts contributing to price spikes. A month-wise, city-wise comparison of onion prices in this decade by Vignesh Radhakrishnan

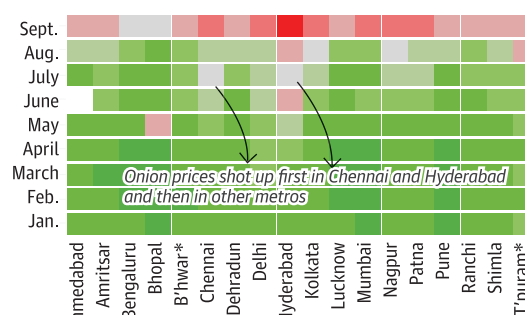
Largely seasonal

The graph shows the average retail price of onions every month in the last decade across 18 cities. The deeper the shade of green, the cheaper the onion. The deeper the shade of red, the costlier. Grey shades show moderate prices (in all graphs)



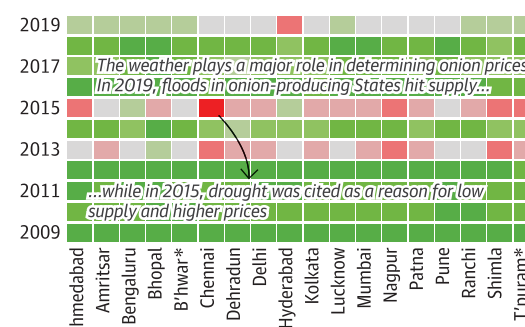
High in September

The graph shows the average monthly retail price of onions in 2019. The prices were highest in Hyderabad, followed by Delhi and Kolkata



Weather-related aberrations

The graph depicts the retail price of onions in the month of September in the last decade. Prices rose exponentially only in three years - 2013, 2015 and 2019



The Hindu

FROM THE ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO SEPTEMBER 30, 1969

Foreign Ministry: An ivory tower

In spite of the humiliation it has brought to India, the Rabat rebuff could serve as a valuable experience in the art of diplomacy if only the policy-makers in Delhi are prepared to treat it as a case study for determining what has really gone wrong with India's foreign policy in recent years. Such a study would help the Government to identify the basic gaps in the present system of policy-making and implementation by the External Affairs Ministry. According to some critics, one of the great deservices done by Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru was to build up the present External Affairs Ministry into an ivory tower - as a natural successor to the old Foreign and Political Department - which tended to function under him as a Government within a Government, taking public opinion for granted and making no effort at all to educate the people about the fundamentals of the country's foreign policy or the philosophy behind it. It became a charmed circle manned by a superior service drawing its inspiration directly from an omniscient Prime Minister and answerable only to him.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO SEPT. 30, 1919.

Smoking.

(Letter to the Editor: An Excerpt)

Sir, - Now a days smoking has become a practice among youth irrespective of caste or creed. The various articles of smoking are (1) Cigars (2) Cigarettes and (3) Beedies. The last two are in great prominence throughout India. There are a number of factories manufacturing beedies throughout India in all important towns and a large quantity of cigarettes also is imported from foreign countries. So much so it can be said that there is not even a single shandy or village or railway station where these cigarettes and beedies are not sold.

The Cigarette companies even go to the length of encouraging smoking by making a free distribution of cigarettes as samples to the public especially to youngsters. It is only in the youth the character building of our boys takes place. If a boy is trained in good ways up to his 18th year he leads a happy life throughout his life. Similarly if he is allowed to go astray as he pleases up to his 18th year he turns up into a vagabond and leads a miserable life throughout his life although he repents for the mistakes committed by him in his youth.

T.N. Umapathi Aiyar, Chittoor.