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CHANGING PARADIGMS OF POLITICAL CANVAS IN SRI LANKA

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The intransigent ethno-political emotional divide amongst the Sri Lankan society of 1980s manifested into a bloodiest insurgency with the Tamil separatists almost succeeding in carving out a separate Tamil Elam in the North and Eastern regions of the island nation. The political divide at that juncture was result of a racial cleavage between the Sinhala majority and oppressed Tamil minority which prompted the later to rebel in the face of socio-economic denials of all kinds.

It was India who came to rescue of the Sri Lankan government of the day in 1987 to ensure territorial integrity of the country even at the cost of negative political repercussions within India. The India had to pay the price of this political outreach to Sri Lanka with life of Rajiv Gandhi, the prime minister who went out of way to help them in their hour of crisis. The deeply indebted Sinhala dominated Sri Lanka of 80s seem to be chartering a different trajectory now with self serving opportunist afflictions due to inducements of easy money from extra regional players, especially China.

While encashing the apparent Chinese benevolence, the gullible Sri Lankan politicians seem to have ignored the basic dictum that 'there are no free lunches' in this world. And the slip is showing wherein the Sri Lankan political dispensation seems to have compromised on their territorial integrity by leasing out Habantota port and 15000 acres of land in lieu of repayment of Chinese loans. A precedence has been set for more such sovereign compromises in times to come for which India had fought a bloody battle against their own co ethnic insurgents.

The motive of the ongoing political drama appears to be focused on facilitating the Chinese cause even if it amounts to tempering with the constitutional jurisprudence. Indeed, there is a paradigm shift in political thinking with its doctrine of development through Chinese support which has obvious inherent centrifugal tendencies as against focus on internal economic consolidation. Instead of reclaiming the lost politico-economic ground to China post Habantota episode, a major part of Sri Lankan polity seem to be under compulsion to toe the Chinese lines due to debt diplomacy so cleverly orchestrated by the Chinese.

The close scrutiny of Sri Lankan political conduct in the past hinges on the non accommodation of rival ethnic, social or political groups within the Sri Lankan society which seem to continue even today in some form or other. Earlier it was based on ethnic rivalry between Sinhala and Tamils, and now it is intra Sinhala dispensation vying for more political and money power in a political set up with opportunist tendencies. Despite a vibrant democratic political dispensation to take care of well being of its subjects, the island nation has witnessed spells of changing political priorities and concomitant societal upheavals in the recent times. The military driven turbulent ethno-political complexion of 80s gave way to consolidation of socio-political synergies alongside resolving the internal security issues for almost three decades.

Subsequently, in the aftermath of subjugation of Tamil insurgency in 2009, the priorities changed to the much needed economic development of the nation. **However, the tourist predominant economy had woeful inadequacies of infrastructure and public conveniences to tap the potential of the nation at par with other international tourist destinations close by.** To do that, there was no money due to prolonged war effort which in turn prompted Sri Lankan polity to look outwards paving way for externally influenced politico-economic opportunism.

Chinese concept of BRI suited both China as well as the Sri Lanka as a mutually beneficial mechanism to take care of each other's interests. The BRI concept envisages development of communication and transportation net work, industrial and power corridors as part of Chinese grand game for their global economic expansion. As far as China is concerned all the countries in the Indian Ocean are important for Chinese geo political matrix as a response mechanism for the security of her economic interests. Chinese conduct when hyphenated with their "String of Pearls in the Indian Ocean", and their defiant politico-military stance in the South China Sea speaks of their seriousness and sensitivities of their interest in the Indo Pacific region. Sri Lanka happens to be in a pivotal position to serve the Chinese geo political interests.

In the given circumstances, close affiliation with the China is a win-win situation for Sri Lanka for their economic buoyancy and a politically strong anchor to stand by their side in the time of crisis. However, there are also apprehensions of negative fallouts of new found political bonhomie with an outsider with prospects of disturbing existing stable regional political equilibrium fully aligned with socio-cultural emotional bind of Indian legacy. **Accordingly, there is an emerging pattern of an internal political divide amongst Sri Lankan parties and individuals believing in encashing the pragmatic opportunism as against continuation of stability through India centric regional cohesiveness.**

The Mahindra Rajapaksha during his premiership was given loans worth \$ 6 billion for various infrastructural projects including Hambantota port. Later the debt trap diplomacy of China got highlighted in their demand of ownership of the port plus land adjacent to it. It, surely, has exposed the dubious ways of China which has prompted number of recipients of Chinese benevolence to revisit their commitments with them as regards to BRI scheme. Sri Lankan civil society is ceased with this Chinese conduct and there is a resistance to encouraging Chinese intrusion into Sri Lankan affairs beyond a point.

The opponent Ranil Wickremasinghe, is known to be a proponent of the Indian lobby who had, recently, cancelled housing project of more than 50,000 houses in North and Eastern Tamil areas given earlier to China in favour of Indian companies. The Rajapaksha was brought back as the prime minister by the president through an untenable political move leaving the country in a political chaos. The parliament was dissolved paving way for fresh elections. However, the Supreme Court ruled against this unconstitutional move by the

president. It was probably done as Rajapakshe, like his previous tenure, would facilitate better relationship with the China looking at their current political compulsions and national interests.

What is happening in the Sri Lankan political canvas seem to have imprints of pro India vs pro China lobbies. The fact that there is an outstanding loan of almost \$ 5 billion despite handing over the Hambantota port to them, China may be pulling the strings to bring in a political dispensation favourable to them to do their bidding. The way the democratic norms are being flouted do indicate a desperate situation precipitated by the looming economic catastrophe waiting to happen.

The military geography of Sri Lanka has bestowed her with a unique location to take care of the most vulnerable security concerns of China with 70% of trade and 90% of energy supplies passing through the Indian Ocean. Therefore, it is obvious that China is here to stay as a permanent feature and to do that they seem to have acquired a substantial political space in the Sri Lanka. Whereas, the Sri Lanka seem to have lost out on her autonomy to some extent as there is a probability of China dictating their terms when they find the policies are not in sync with Chinese interests.

The likely Chinese naval presence at Hambantota port barely few hundred miles from Indian shores is a security concern for India. The Chinese politico-military affluences in Sri Lanka is likely to prompt the western powers also to further enhance their military presence closer to the Indian shores. It, obviously, would impact the Indian security matrix with the extra regional players milling around in the areas of Indian influence all this time. **The new nomenclature of 'Indo Pacific ' referring to erstwhile IOR and Asia Pacific is manifestation new US maritime doctrine as a response mechanism to Chinese geo political expansion.** The increase in the US sponsored military diplomacy in the region and revival of Quad are all indicative of new global strategic grand games being unfolded closer to the Indian shores.

India has no choice but to upgrade her military capabilities to take care of the inimical developments around her periphery both on land as well as maritime domain. **It warrants looking beyond defensive doctrines and acquire offensive capabilities for optimum power projection in the areas of concern, besides defence of the island territories and international maritime obligations.** Given the distances from the main land and bottle necks for shipping, China would always be militarily vulnerable in the Indian Ocean. It

stands to an advantage for India which need to be factored in the design of the military doctrine and its political strategic outreach.

The Sri Lanka needs to recall that they stand integrated today due to unflinching support by India in their hour of crisis and sacrifices made by the Indian soldiers to hold their country together. They should also appreciate that the India continues to be the stabilizing factor for Sri Lanka and a friend in need. **China on other hand is here to exploit the Sri Lankan geographical space for their geo political motives sans any benevolent emotional connect.** In fact, China has already usurped their strategically located land through their manipulative ways. If the Sri Lankan polity has not understood their game plan then they should be prepared for more such disintegrating moves as part of their dubious debt diplomacy. The Sri Lanka is in economic crisis and stands vulnerable which is reflective in their recent political conduct. In that, there seem to be tell tale signs of Chinese complicity in the ongoing happenings in the Sri Lankan political space which is not a good news.

India, obviously, has not been pro active enough to sense the aspirations of her neighbours and propensity of China to exploit the political deficit on the strength of her deep pockets and liberal military outreach. The Sri Lanka has a great significance for Indian security and we need to take all the possible measures to neutralize the Chinese foot prints in the island nation. India fortunately has a large influence in the Sri Lankan society and reckonable political leverages which needs to be nurtured and exploited in our national interests. India as a responsible regional country need to go all out to extend a helping hand to Sri Lanka in her testing times as their political stability is essential to the Indian strategic interests.

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