



# Sri Lanka: Where about?

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As Sri Lanka was recovering from the socio-economic destruction caused by the Easter Sunday attacks, the country was hit hard by the Corona pandemic. Different sectors of its economy, ranging from tourism to retail and financial ones, stood standstill. A developing state with an import-oriented economy, Sri Lanka is over dependent on many other states, while the state's exports to the key markets, such as the US, the UK, Italy and Germany. Under the circumstance, the financial impact of the lockdowns, national and global, imposed due to the pandemic was devastating.

As Laurie Garrett says, the pandemic not only has a long-lasting economic impact, but it is to bring in a more fundamental change. Sri Lanka, apart from being exposed to debt trap, is in a financial peril, which finds expression in its being ranked 61 out of 66 countries, worse than other South Asian states.

The pandemic has truly exposed the failures of the existing system, and showed the importance of self-sufficiency particularly in the agricultural sector. In the midst of the pandemic, the government has promoted home-based gardening and distributed seeds for kitchen gardening and introduced national paddy buying programme through collecting harvests from small farmers.

However, with the current government in power, Sri Lanka has been able to manage the Covid-19 pandemic better than its South Asian neighbors through a 3T approach, namely Testing, Treating and Tracing. Sri Lanka was supported by many states, including India, China and Europe with test kits, PCR tests and Viral Transport Medium etc. The most prominent among them was mask diplomacy by China – another successful soft power display by China. Sri Lanka's relations with China remain economic while Colombo would not let anyone disrespect its sovereignty. Not surprisingly, political tension was created when a leader

of the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna, a major political party of the country, said that his party should be like Chinese Communist Party or India's BJP.

In Mike Pompeo's message to Sri Lanka, he requested us to choose a "more democratic path than a tyranny", referring to our relations with China. Reactions from the embassy of China became the most aggressive ever, resulting in its 'wolf warrior diplomacy'. It should be noted that the two visits by the Chinese delegation and one by US Secretary Pompeo in 2020 to Sri Lanka did not result in forging any alliance or alignment with either of the foreign states. Sri Lanka remains to be a

non-aligned and respects sovereignty, international law and rules-based order. Yet, a triple-sphere of influence by China, US and India prevails in Sri Lanka. Brewing tensions among the big powers over control and influence create grave impact on small states like Lanka.

It is unfortunate that multilateralism, such as

SAARC and BIMSTEC, has weakened when it is needed the most, when the world is facing trends of a bi-polar shift. Sri Lanka is unlikely to prefer hedging with one against another. India is Sri Lanka's 'big brother' and China is the financial partner. Yet, tensions in the region rise with revisiting Indo-Pacific against the BRI. Sri Lanka supports both strategies, but as advocates of Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace, would never stand for militarization of the oceans. Sri Lanka, therefore, faces geopolitical challenges by the triple spheres of influence. Today, multilateral forums should address bi-lateral matters such as this, if multilateralism is to prevail successfully. Geopolitical game should no more be viewed as a strategic competition, but more cooperation with prominence given to small players as well.



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