

The Impact of Leader Images in Sri Lanka's Foreign Policy Making from 2005 to 2019

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Abstract— Any leader of a country, as its foreign policy executive (FPE), may perceive systemic stimuli with surgical precision, hence positioning his country in a foreign policy trajectory, which in turn facilitates the realization of its goals and aspirations. However, a nation state, since its inception in 1648, will encounter dire political repercussions if the said systemic signals are perceived with abject failure by the FPE thus plunging the country into a vortex of self – destruction. In this backdrop, this article attempts to examine whether Mahinda Rajapaksa (MR), between 2005 and 2015 as well as Maithripala Sirisena (MS) inconjunction with Ranil Wickremesinghe (RW), between 2015 and 2019, as FPEs, were successful in grasping systemic stimuli, hence exercising a pragmatic foreign policy. The authors shall further discuss the above with a particular emphasis on Sri Lanka's relations with the United States (US), China and India between 2005 and 2019 amidst their great power play in the theatre of the Indian Ocean. Furthermore, this research shall attempt to examine whether leader perceptions are the sole determining factors of a foreign policy which alternated between pro – China and pro – West. This is a qualitative case study which involves the deductive method. The authors will analyze both primary and secondary data in the adoption of a qualitative approach. The research will derive its propositions from Neo – Classical Realism in the discipline of international relations, particularly in analyzing the correlation between foreign policy and the domestic intervening variable of leader images in foreign policy making of Sri Lanka.

Keywords— Sri Lanka, Foreign Policy, Mahinda Rajapaksa.

Introduction

Ronald Reagan, welcoming J. R. Jayawardene (JR) in 1984 acknowledges the paramount importance of non – alignment for a buffer state like Sri Lanka. In proposing the toast at the State Dinner hosted for JR, Reagan opined that, “Mr. President, we understand Sri Lanka's choice, as a small developing country, to remain non – aligned in matters of foreign policy. We respect genuine non – alignment... Your visit has undoubtedly strengthened the bond between our two countries, and it's laid a basis for even closer, more cooperative relations between Sri Lanka and the United States in the future.... And finally, Mr. President, I'd like to thank you again for the elephant – [laughter].... The elephant happens to be the symbol of the President's political party and by coincidence – [laughter] – We happen to be all that smart [laughter].” (Reagan, 1984) He also jokes about the baby elephant, a gift from the people of Sri Lanka to the people of the US. The elephant is the symbol shared by both the Republican Party of the US and the United National Party (UNP). The latter is identified with a pro – West policy *vis-à-vis* pro – China policy of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). These contrasting foreign policy orientations of the two major political parties in Sri Lanka demonstrate the fact that strict adherence to either non – alignment or neutrality is literally impossible and may not coincide with the hopes, aspirations, and national interests of Sri Lanka. Albeit political leaders, through their election manifestos, indicate that their government, if elected will adopt a non – aligned policy, global political dynamics coupled with the perceptions of the FPE will

ultimately determine Sri Lanka's international relations.

Despite the lack of any major significance, this South Asian nation has been the cynosure of regional and international politics. From Wiki - leaks to Hillary Clinton's controversial emails, and from the controversial lotus tower in the heart of Colombo, to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), and from Panama Papers to the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP), Sri Lanka has surfaced and resurfaced multiple occasions for numerous reasons. Moreover, inroads are constantly being made by the US, China, and India into this strategic *entrépot*. In this backdrop it is credible to deduce the fact that the geostrategic importance of Sri Lanka outweighs its demographic and economic limitations.

In such a context, the head of state as the FPE of the country is entrusted with the duty of formulating a robust foreign policy while carefully calculating the country's trajectory through the murky waters of global politics amidst external pressures and stimuli. Hence the primary issue is whether the said FPE will successfully grasp such signals from external parties and engage in foreign policy making. It is of utmost importance for the FPE to carefully calibrate the tools of foreign policy where failures would expose the state to international and regional political threats. This research shall therefore focus primarily on whether the Rajapaksa administration between 2005 and 2015 and the Sirisena - Wickremesinghe administration between 2015 and 2019 were successful in comprehending external signals hence orchestrating a pro - China and a pro - West policy respectively.

This research is a qualitative case study which involves deductive method. In the adoption of a qualitative approach, this study will analyze primary data (primarily from archival sources, speeches of leaders, public reports, Treaties and other international agreements, and diplomatic reports) and also amalgamate facts from secondary sources (publications, records, research reports, journal articles, and newspaper reports). Neo - Classical Realism further facilitates this research for a structured focus comparison, which is in this

research, the primary focus will be on one policy response; pro - West *vis-à-vis* "China pivot" or "pro - China policy". This research will derive its propositions from the Neo - Classical Realist theory in the discipline of international relations, particularly in analyzing the correlation between foreign policy and domestic intervening variables in the foreign policy making of Sri Lanka. In applying Neo - Classical Realism, the study shall examine the relevancy of leader images out of the following four domestic intervening variables: leader images / leader perceptions; state - society relations; strategic culture; and domestic institutions (Ripsman, Taliaferro & Lobell, 2016) which shall facilitate in a critical analysis of Sri Lanka's foreign policy orientation between 2005 and 2019.

The Neo - Classical Realist theory has become more relevant in the light of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) inspired Easter Sunday attacks in Sri Lanka on 21st April 2019, and the 2019 Presidential election. Hence the paper will focus primarily on establishing a causal link between a society plagued by chaos or anarchy, with leader images in Neo - Classical Realist theory. In addition, this study shall further analyze the involvement of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the International Criminal Police Organization (Interpol), and other foreign intelligence services in Sri Lanka in the aftermath of the Easter Sunday attacks. In addition, this research may also assist in explaining how growing insecurity within the borders of Sri Lanka had given birth to a fear psychosis in the minds of ordinary Sri Lankan citizens which was reflected through the election of a war - time hero, Gotabhaya Rajapaksa (GR) as the President. Even Robert O. Blake Jr., one of the former US ambassadors to Sri Lanka and now the senior director (India and South Asia) of the McLarty Associates, delivering a speech at the Bandaranaike Memorial International Conference Hall (BMICH) on 08th May 2019 emphatically emphasized that "the incumbent government should establish a high - level group of technocrats similar to the one existed when Gotabhaya Rajapaksa was the defence secretary, to prevent terror attacks in the country". (Blake, 2019) Moreover these brutal attacks also shed light into the dilemma confronted by Sri Lanka as a buffer state in the

milieu of US – China competition for regional dominance. Peter Koenig in “*Sri Lanka: Candidate for a New NATO Base?*” discloses that the US may exploit the void created by the security deficit in Sri Lanka by establishing a NATO base in this strategic *entrépot*. (Koenig, 2019)

The period of 2005 – 2019 is of cardinal importance, particularly due to the security challenges confronted by Sri Lanka since the *dénouement* of the protracted conflict in 2009. The relevance of the time period of this research is further heightened due to the extensive use of hard power by the US and India in influencing the external strategy of post – conflict Sri Lanka.

Neo – Classical Realism

Neo – Classical Realism can be interpreted as, “an approach to foreign policy analysis that seeks to understand international politics by taking into account the nature of the international system – the political environment within which states interact. Taking Neo – Realism as their point of departure, Neo – Classical Realists argue that states respond in large part to the constraints and opportunities to the international system when they conduct their foreign and security policies, but that their responses are shaped by unit – level factors such as state – society relations, the nature of their domestic political regimes, strategic culture, and leader perceptions”. (Ripsman, 2011).

In addition, Fareed Zakaria in “*From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America’s World Role*”, in support of Neo – Classical Realism has pontificated that, “the systemic account of world politics provided by structural realism is incomplete. It needs to be supplemented with better accounts of unit level variables such as how power is perceived, and how leadership is exercised”. (Baylis, Smith & Owens, 2008) Zakaria has introduced the idea of state strength into his theory of state centered – realism where state strength is defined as “the ability of a state to mobilize and direct the resources at its disposal in the pursuit of particular interests”. (Ibid.) State strength therefore indicates of state power, which “is that portion of national power the

government can extract for its purposes and reflects the ease with which central decision – makers can achieve their ends... state centered realism, maintains the logic that capabilities shape intentions, but recognizes that state structure limits the availability of national power”. (Zakaria, 1999) With regard to intervening variables, Stephen Walt has remarked that the causal logic of Neo – Classical Realism “places domestic politics as an intervening variable between the distribution of power and foreign policy behaviour”. (Walt, 2002)

Leader Perceptions

Neo – Classical Realists recognize this variable to be of cardinal importance in foreign policy decision – making of a state. At the epicenter of this variable is the individual who is vested with the discretionary power of determining the foreign policy trajectory of his country. This may comprise of the President, Prime Minister, Foreign Minister, the cabinet of ministers, ministerial advisors, and diplomats who represent either the executive or the legislature hence positioning them strategically at the very heart of foreign policy making of the state. These FPEs are empowered by way of legal instruments such as the constitution or any other legislation to formulate and implement the foreign policy. FPEs are vital to this research due to the fact that their core values, cognition, attitude, beliefs, and images have a direct impact on their foreign relations. In addition, the FPE must be conscious and attentive to grasp signals of the international society in order to construct a coherent and a prudent foreign policy without constant fire – fighting. Moreover, this variable also gives insight into how the FPEs process information, what they put attention to, what they ignore, and how they understand signals, information and events. (Ripsman et al., 2016) Moreover “master beliefs” of the FPE also have a direct impact on the foreign policy making since according to Alexander George and Ole Holsti such beliefs are sacrosanct for the FPE which also form the bedrock for his foreign policy trajectory. These beliefs are intrinsically ingrained in the thick skull of the FPE and in most occasions will form the guiding principle for his decision despite expert advice to the

contrary. FPE's master beliefs involve three elements such as philosophical beliefs about politics, instrumental beliefs about the best strategies to achieve one's interest, and images of one's enemy on oneself. (Ibid.) For instance, MR as the Executive President in 2005 advocated a strict pro - China policy disregarding advice of his chief diplomat, Mangala Samaraweera, when the latter was MR's Foreign Minister during the first term. Samaraweera, regarded as an ardent supporter of a pro - West policy was consequently fired by Rajapaksa for insubordination. A parallel incident occurred during the Sirisena - Wickremesinghe administration in 2015, where RW as the Prime Minister, took independent foreign policy decisions according to his personal agenda, while keeping MS, who was the Executive President and the FPE, in the dark. RW is a liberal minded politician and therefore his clandestine moves were deliberate and concrete. Moreover, Jeffrey Taliaferro enunciates, that leaders do not accept losses of their state's relative power easily, and often invest more into failed foreign policies in an attempt to regain losses which can be militarily and diplomatically harmful to the country. (Ibid.) Hence the FPE may be influenced by the elements of power, the distribution of power, the mechanics of power, and prestige.

The leader image was the dominant variable during the Rajapaksa administration from 2005 to 2015. Recognized as a Sinhala Buddhist nationalist leader, MR won the hearts and minds of the Sinhala Buddhist majority consequent to his military victory over the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) in 2009. He also was born to a well - known political family in Sri Lanka of which his father and uncle were leading politicians. Rajapaksa was practicing law as an Attorney - at - Law prior to his career in politics, hence he is sensitive to the changes in the systemic milieu. MR's appearance in Sri Lanka's national dress with the earthy brown shawl was compelling attractiveness that inspired the devotion in the Sinhala Buddhists who elected him twice as the Executive President. Albeit Jeff Smith in his article "*Sri Lanka: a test case for the free and open Indo - Pacific Strategy*", characterizes the Rajapaksa

dynasty as, "far from Jeffersonian democrats, but neither are they totalitarian dictators. Nor are they mere Chinese puppets. Rather they are Sri Lankan nationalists. They would likely welcome - perhaps even prefer - billions of dollars in US investments too". (Smith, 2019) However MR perceived signals sent from Geneva and Washington as inimical to Sri Lanka's sovereignty and national interest. Machinations of the West in chastising the Rajapaksa administration on human rights and war crimes allegations consequent to the defeat of the LTTE in 2009, were grasped by MR in a negative sense hence prompting him to establish a strategic cooperative partnership with China. Beijing's unwavering support at the UNSC and the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) and continued financial and military assistance were also perceived by MR as indicative of signs of a concrete nexus. This empowered the Rajapaksa administration to practice a pro - China policy albeit non - alignment was advocated in his election manifesto and in his speeches. This intrinsic China tilt in MR's foreign policy even resulted in the dismissal of his first Foreign Minister, Mangala Samaraweera who encouraged more relations with the West. As the FPE, MR was the ultimate authority on foreign policy making and subsequent Foreign Ministers either performed their functions as mere advisors or as monitoring ministers of Sri Lanka's diplomacy. Rohitha Bogollagama and Professor G. L. Peiris enhanced diplomatic dexterity and the latter was the chief diplomat when Sri Lanka was confronted with the human rights issue. Professor Peiris was a distinguished Oxford scholar and a legal luminary whose legal knowledge was instrumental in deflecting such false allegations. Hence it is evident that MR harboured master beliefs and fixed China centric foreign policy solutions to foreign policy challenges encountered by Sri Lanka. He exercised a significant degree of autonomy on foreign policy making and was "The FPE". It must be noted that this period marked a significant milestone in Sri Lanka's foreign policy due to its strong connection with Beijing. In addition to MR, even Gotabaya and Basil Rajapaksa were also thought to have a direct involvement in foreign policy decision making. Therefore, the Temple Trees worked

in conjunction with the Ministry of External Affairs, the Ministry of Defence and Urban Development and the Ministry of Economic Reform.

The Sirisena – Wickremesinghe administration's foreign policy was as eccentric as was its administration of the country. The government was paralyzed with decision – making gridlocks as a result of a power struggle between the President and the Prime Minister. Sirisena's lack of experience in foreign policy making was reflected through his eccentric conduct in the said field. Albeit he was conscious of the domestic milieu given his experience as a farmer and a political career of more than 15 years, Sirisena was clueless with regard to foreign policy matters. According to the constitution of Sri Lanka he was the FPE but failed to advocate a robust foreign policy. Making the maximum use of this vacuum, RW as the Prime Minister and Mangala Samaraweera as his Foreign Minister conducted a pro – West foreign policy while marginalizing Sirisena. FPE in this context was undoubtedly RW and his Foreign Minister while the President was dormant with almost zero participation in foreign policy making except in certain instances where the latter vetoed certain foreign policy decisions of RW. Sri Lanka experienced a seismic shift in its foreign policy from pro – China to pro – West where RW's liberal ideology was very much in play. RW was a nephew of JR hence inherited the leadership of the UNP. Equipped with a law degree from the University of Colombo, RW intended to promote liberal ideals such as democracy, justice, equality, and human rights. He also had very close global connections with like – minded investors and politicians which included the billionaire investor George Soros. RW and Samaraweera made certain foreign policy decisions without the concurrence of the President and the cabinet of ministers. Such decisions were primarily aimed at extricating Sri Lanka from China's orbit while embracing Washington. Although his speeches recognized the rise of China in the contemporary context, RW as the FPE during the Sirisena administration, orchestrated a foreign policy which catered to the demands of the West which also had a detrimental effect on Sri Lanka's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Leader perceptions have had a profound impact on Sri Lanka's foreign policy trajectory between 2005 and 2015 as explained above. It is evident that the FPE plays a vital role in policy formulation and decision making. Attached to such inherent powers, which are ensured by the constitution of Sri Lanka, are charisma of the leader, master beliefs, ideological sensitivities, and the ability to grasp signals of the international society with surgical precision.

Rajapaksa's and Sirisena's Foreign Policies

Sri Lanka's foreign policy orientation has undergone dramatic and unprecedented transformation especially since the *dénouement* of the protracted conflict in 2009. It's ascendance in the international arena, as the shining example of a state which had successfully exercised military power in defeating the armed wing of a terrorist organization, not only made her the cynosure of Indian Ocean security and strategic studies, but also of south Asian foreign policy studies, consequently attracting the interest of the most powerful and influential states in the world. Sri Lanka's dependence on Chinese military and financial assistance during the latter stages of the conflict, and the continuing dependence on Chinese loans in a post war context have invited the attention of Harvard and Cambridge scholars in the discipline of international relations thus resulting in the production of a plethora of research and literature. Moreover, the gradual transition from a non – aligned country which maintained cordial relations with both the US and China, since the collapse of the Soviet Union (USSR), to a state, practicing a policy alternating between strict pro – China and pro – West, has further complicated the study of Sri Lanka's foreign policy. A new generation of international relations experts who study this tectonic shift in Sri Lanka's foreign relations reckon that the effect is not spontaneous and can be attributed to a multitude of reasons.

Jeff Smith in "*Sri Lanka: A Test Case for the Free and Open Indo – Pacific Strategy*" opined that "the Rajapaksas do not seem inherently anti – American – Basil and Gotabaya have homes in

the US... As president, Mahinda initially sought military aid and investments from America but was largely shunned and sanctioned over credible accusations of misconduct and gross human rights violations during the war with the Tamil Tigers". (Smith, 2019) This signal from the West was perceived by MR as inimical to national interests of Sri Lanka hence he tilted towards China's orbit seeking much needed financial assistance and political security at international fora. China has surpassed the US and Japan and other traditional donors to Sri Lanka while dwarfing the involvement of India, the Middle Eastern countries and the European Union (E.U.). China has also been unreservedly supporting Sri Lanka in confronting diplomatic challenges and has further been strengthening military and defence ties. "When the US ended direct military aid in 2007 over Sri Lanka's deteriorating human rights record, China leapt into the breach, increasing aid to nearly \$1 billion to become the island's biggest donor, giving tens of millions of dollars' worth of sophisticated weapons, and making a free gift of six F-7 fighter jets to the Sri Lanka Air Force. China encouraged its ally Pakistan to sell more arms and to train pilots to fly the new planes". (The Independent, 2010) In addition "government data show that in 2009 China was, in terms of commitments, Sri Lanka's biggest aid donor, with \$1.2 billion out of a total of \$2.2 billion offered – hardly a huge amount for China. The Board of Investment reveals it is the biggest investor, too. Chinese companies have been investing in electronics, infrastructure projects, garment – making, and much else". (The Economist, 2010) Moreover, Robert D. Kaplan in his book "*Monsoon*" reckoned, "one diplomat told me that the West should ostracize the Rajapaksa regime and not worry about it becoming a linchpin of Chinese great – power strategy. As he saw it, the hundreds of billions of dollars of Chinese money invested in the US economy was more central to American interests than one more Chinese – built port in the Indian Ocean which, in any case, was of greater concern to the Indian and Japanese navies than to America's. Furthermore, Sri Lanka's Burma – trending regime was simply too corrupt and too incompetent in other spheres to last, despite its battlefield successes". (Kaplan, 2010)

It is coherent to conclude further that the Rajapaksa administration's tilt towards China was primarily due to the war crimes path pursued by the US, Canada and the United Kingdom (U.K.). Albeit being the immediate neighbor and the big brother, Sri Lanka may also have many reservations in choosing India over China for economic and military assistance. India sponsoring and training the LTTE, and providing financial assistance to the banned terrorist organization, India's federal system and its impact on Central government's independent decision making capability, India playing a muted role during the latter stages of the conflict in 2009 which prompted Sri Lanka to seek Chinese and Pakistani military assistance, and the hostile role played by the South Asian Titan in the UNHRC in contravention to South Asian solidarity, have pushed Sri Lanka more towards China. Undoubtedly Sri Lanka's relations with the West were deteriorating rapidly under the Rajapaksa administration. Mahinda Rajapaksa's pro – China policy has fixed Sri Lanka's foreign policy in a uniformed direction. Canada protesting against Sri Lanka hosting the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in 2013, the U.K. calling for an international investigation into war crimes committed in the latter stages of the conflict, the US relentlessly pursuing a biased approach against Sri Lanka at the UNHRC, and the E.U. depriving Sri Lanka of the GSP+ are tangible evidence to suggest that Sri Lanka's relations with the West were at a low ebb during the Rajapaksa administration.

Since the fall of Rajapaksa in 2015, the Sirisena – Wickremesinghe administration made rapid progression in recalibrating MR's pro – China policy to a pro – America foreign policy with the ulterior motive of alienating Sri Lanka from China's sphere of influence. Priority given to such an eccentric move was reflected through Sirisena's foreign policy commitments during his first 100 days in office. "The Sirisena administration has shown no hesitation in changing the pro – China policy of Rajapaksa while also looking to repair the damage done to Colombo's ties with the United States, India, and the European Union. The temporary suspension of the Colombo Port City Project was one of the

initial moves of the new administration". (The Diplomat, 2015) Moreover bilateral relations between the US and Sri Lanka were strengthened with John Kerry's visit to the latter. This visit by the Secretary of State a week after elections, is sufficient evidence to deduce that America had begun to make strategic inroads into this South Asian *entrépot*. Such a carefully calibrated move by Washington also indicates growing influence of the US in the Indo – Pacific region which is primarily aimed at diluting the influence of the rising dragon in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Kerry's visit was a watershed event in Sri Lanka's foreign policy history since it was "the first visit by a Secretary of State of the United States of America in 43 years. We also had a cabinet – level visit of Samantha Power last May, and of course many other visits by high – level officials of the State Department". (US Embassy in Sri Lanka, 2016) This visit was further followed by another visit of a "Director level" delegation comprising of Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs, Nisha Biswal, and Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights and Labour, Tom Malinowsky, a week after elections. Therefore, America's interest in Sri Lanka has not been diminished but has augmented and above facts are sufficient evidence to suggest that Washington will utilize its hard power capabilities through the UNHRC to pressurize Sri Lanka. Unlike the Rajapaksas who were suspicious about the machinations of the West, Wikremesinghe accommodates American presence in Sri Lanka. As indicated above, RW was a nephew of JR, the 1st Executive President of Sri Lanka. The latter was nicknamed as "Yankie Dickie" because of his special relationship with Ronald Reagan and his pro – American tilt in the 1980s. Wikremesinghe was entertained by George W. Bush in July 2002 when the former was the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka from 2001 – 2004. As a consequence, RW allowed Sri Lanka to be used as a transit point for the Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) extra – rendition programme in 2003. Given such links with Washington, the Sirisena administration hurtled towards America's sphere of influence, spearheaded by RW.

In addition, unlike the Sirisena administration, MR provided a *carte blanche*

to Chinese nuclear submarines to dock in the Colombo port. Conversely, the Sirisena administration, imposed restrictions on Chinese submarine visits to Colombo from the very inception of his term as President in 2015. Moreover, the Sirisena – Wickremesinghe administration opened the strategic port of Trincomalee to the state-of-the-art Nimitz class aircraft carrier, USS John C. Stennis. China's disappointment and frustration with this new administration was made visible through former Chinese ambassador to Sri Lanka, Yi Xianliang, when he addressed the media criticizing certain comments made by Sri Lanka's Finance Minister on Chinese loans being "expensive" (The Hindu, 2016). The ambassador further reckoned that; the Chinese companies had incurred losses due to the delay of the Colombo Port City Project. Conversely, although RW had made many high-level state visits to China and had praised Chinese investments in Sri Lanka through his speeches on the global stage, his conduct as the Prime Minister under the Sirisena administration raised a multitude of rhetorical questions. Since the election of the Sirisena administration, China had been skeptical about the permanency of the "strategic cooperative partnership" established during the Rajapaksa administration. Unhindered access granted to Chinese submarines during the former regime has now come to an abrupt halt. When a senior Sri Lankan Navy delegation was entertained on the US Navy's aircraft carrier Carl Vinson a few days before Kerry's visit, "the new Sri Lankan government declined permission for Chinese vessels to dock in the country". (The Economic Times, 2015) Therefore it is prudent to deduce that Sri Lanka's foreign policy trajectory under the Sirisena administration was determined by RW and not Sirisena, despite the latter being the Executive President of the country. As a consequence, Sri Lanka tilted towards the US while freezing relations with China.

Sri Lanka's diplomatic relations took another twist after the ISIS inspired Easter Sunday attacks on 21st April 2019. The President and the Foreign Minister embarked on two different foreign trips in the aftermath of the attacks. This was in the backdrop of a constitutional crisis, and government

dysfunction where Presidential decisions were largely disregarded by the legislature led by RW. Sirisena's visit to China and Tilak Marapana's meeting with Mike Pompeo in Washington clearly reflect duplicity of Sri Lanka's foreign relations under the Sirisena administration. While China pledged financial assistance to enhance Sri Lanka's counter-terrorism capacity building to safeguard national security and stability (Xinhuanet, 2019) the US was determined to hasten the signing and the implementation of the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) and the Acquisition and Cross Servicing Agreement (ACSA). "When Western intelligence personnel surged into the country in the wake of the Easter terror attacks, it was against the backdrop of military ties with the US that had been steadily deepening since 2015, with multiple ship visits, training exercises and most recently an operation to ferry supplies to a US aircraft carrier in the India Ocean, using Sri Lanka's ports and airport... Given the geopolitical tensions in the Indian Ocean region, one of the US's goals in getting Sri Lanka to sign military agreements with the US would be, presumably, to preempt China from extending its footprint by locking Sri Lanka into such agreements. Pledging commitment to a 'shared goal of a free and open Indo-Pacific might then be decoded to mean 'jointly resisting Chinese influence in the region'". (The Island, 2019) The Sirisena - Wickremesinghe administration has seem to achieve their aspiration of transforming Rajapaksa's pro - China policy into a pro - West policy by strengthening economic and military ties with Washington while distancing Beijing. The above facts suggest that although financial assistance of China to Sri Lanka in a post - conflict context is of paramount importance, machinations of the West and India's security concerns trump over Sri Lanka's interests. At the end of his 5-year term, MS declared that he will not run for the second term and extended his support to GR, the presidential candidate of the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP). As the former secretary of defence under MR and as an individual with no prior experience in the political sphere, GR successfully capitalized on the fear psychosis of the public since the April Easter Sunday attacks in 2019. As a consequence, GR won the election against

Sajith Premadasa who the main contender from the UNP. Foreign policy experts was believe that, since GR is a Rajapaksa, the country will again oscillate back to a pro - China policy thus alienating the US and India.

Conclusion

Accurate perception of systemic stimuli by the FPE is of cardinal importance in determining the foreign policy trajectory of a country. Especially for a small buffer state like Sri Lanka, grasping the signals from Washington, Beijing, and New Delhi are of paramount importance, failing which, the country will plunge into a vortex of self-destruction. The *raison d'être* of MR's pro - China policy between 2005 and 2015 is to signal the West that China will remain a strategic partner and a bosom friend despite Sri Lanka being ostracized by the West. The Rajapaksa administration seems to have fully grasped the pressures and the machinations of the West and the transformation of the international society manifest through the relative decline of the US, hence advocating a pro - China policy. As a result, the said administration was successful in securing much needed financial support and investments for mega projects, and political support at the UNSC and UNHRC hence demonstrating Rajapaksa's diplomatic dexterity. Conversely, the Sirisena - Wickremesinghe administration between 2015 and 2019 failed to comprehend the said systemic changes. As a consequence, their pro - West policy failed to detach Sri Lanka from the human rights orbit of the West. Furthermore, despite international exposure, the Sirisena administration failed to secure much needed foreign investment thus pushing the economy towards recession. The public's displeasure on Sirisena - Wickremesinghe administration's foreign policy failures were also reflected through the election of GR as President in 2019.

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