

The Belt Tightens:

China's learning curve on employing
soft power Sri Lanka



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Abstract

As China's ascendancy in the geopolitical order accelerates, lesser powers are increasingly critical to the growth of its economy, trade relationships and international prestige. Sri Lanka, long a useful entity for the Middle Kingdom, has benefited substantially from Chinese investment and cordial relations. During the hardline Rajapaksa regime and 26-year civil war in Sri Lanka, Chinese largesse allowed the island nation's power structure not just to sustain itself but to consolidate and to stand astride impressive development projects even as it faced sanctions from the West over its human rights record and authoritarian rule. Nine years on from the end of the destabilizing civil war, I examine how the Eastern embrace evolved from soft power into increasingly strategic hard power in Sri Lanka. I also consider the limitations of this success: Although it was clearly more effective than the more traditional hard-power economic sanctions from the West in achieving its goals, the still-evolving skills of China and Sri Lanka in converting resources into effective soft power have resulted in behaviors that are hardly projecting a glowing, attractive image of the City on the Hill.