Issue Brief
November 17, 2026

Beijing's Political Networks: Elite Capture and Party-to-Party Diplomacy in Sri Lanka

Tabita Rosendal

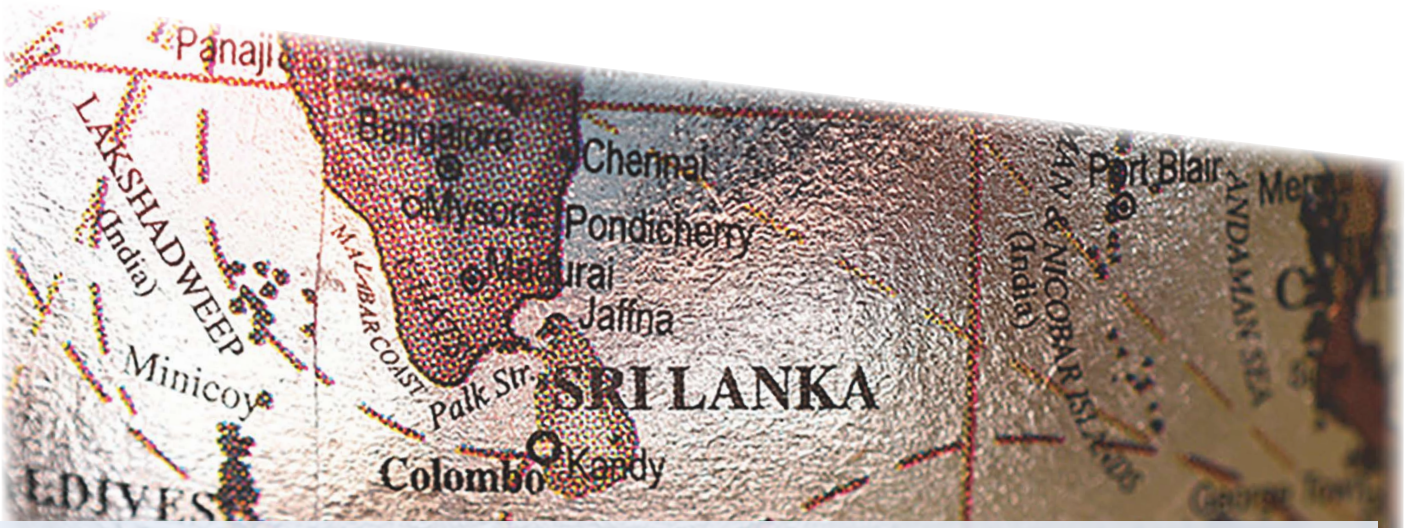


Photo credit: Adriana Beckova / Shutterstock.com

Party-to-party diplomacy has become an increasingly important instrument for China's engagements with the "Global South." With its geostrategic location and post-default political trajectory, Sri Lanka provides an illuminating example of how small states experience and navigate these party exchanges. At the same time, the Sri Lankan case offers insights into how party-to-party relationships are cultivated and sustained, with lessons resonating beyond South Asia. This issue brief provides an overview of the structure of China's party diplomacy, the development of Sino-Sri Lankan party exchanges, and the effects of political change on these ties.

Under Xi Jinping, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has significantly expanded its international party diplomacy; a strategy that has been part of a broader effort to strengthen China's political influence, economic interests, and normative presence abroad. Central to this global push is the International Department of the CCP Central Committee (ID-CCP). The department has evolved from a traditional liaison body[1] into a key instrument for advancing the party's foreign policy interests. This includes championing the "Belt and Road" Initiative (BRI), sharing views on China's governance and development model,[2] cultivating elite networks, facilitating Beijing's vision of a "Community of Shared Future for Mankind,"[3] and promoting alternative values.[4] In short, the ID-CCP seeks to build long-term relationships that complement traditional state-to-state diplomacy and reinforce China's strategic interests abroad.[5]

Sri Lanka represents an illustrative case of contemporary Chinese party diplomacy in South Asia. The country's strategic location in the Indian Ocean, its importance to the BRI, and its evolving domestic political landscape have made it a significant target for CCP outreach. At the same time, Sri Lanka's democratic backsliding,

economic vulnerabilities, and competition among external actors, including China, India, the United States, Japan, and Australia, have created an environment in which political influence is actively contested. Successive governments have generally adhered, at least on paper, to a policy of non-alignment dating back to the Bandaranaike era, while balancing relations with major partners.[6] In practice, however, different administrations have varied in their foreign-policy orientation.[7]

Sino-Sri Lankan party-to-party relations should therefore be understood within the broader context of geopolitical competition, domestic elite bargaining, and Sri Lanka's longstanding tradition of balancing external powers—even if the latter is not necessarily carried out in a concerted manner. Against this background, this issue brief provides an overview of contemporary Sino-Sri Lankan party relations, their historical roots, and how party diplomacy is conducted. While the case of China's party diplomacy in Sri Lanka is important in its own right, it resonates beyond South Asia, mirroring cases in developing countries elsewhere—particularly those with colonial pasts.[8]

> ***"Sri Lanka's strategic location in the Indian Ocean, its importance to the BRI, and its evolving domestic political landscape have made it a significant target for CCP outreach. At the same time, its democratic backsliding, economic vulnerabilities, and competition among external actors, including India, the United States, Japan, and Australia, have created an environment in which political influence is actively contested.***

Sino-Sri Lankan Party Exchanges from Past to Present

Contemporary Sino-Sri Lankan party-to-party exchanges are rooted in a longer bilateral relationship. Relations can be traced to historical commercial and religious interactions along the Maritime Silk Route, including the visit of the Chinese Buddhist monk Fa Xian around 410 CE and Admiral Zheng He's voyages in the fifteenth century. The 1952 "Rubber-Rice Pact" and the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1957 institutionalized these ties.[9] Since then, relations have fluctuated in line with changes in leadership and policy priorities in both countries.[10]

Sino-Sri Lankan relations deepened considerably during the Sri Lankan civil war (1983–2009), when China provided military assistance and diplomatic support as Western partners became increasingly critical of Colombo's human rights record.[11] Following the war, Chinese-backed infrastructure projects, most notably the Hambantota International Port and Port City Colombo, expanded Beijing's economic footprint and elevated the political significance of bilateral relations. The 2017 lease of the Hambantota International Port to China Merchants Port further intensified international scrutiny and debates surrounding Chinese influence and alleged "debt-trap diplomacy."[12] Sri Lanka's economic crisis from 2022 onward complicated its relations with major regional powers. Successive administrations, including those of Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Ranil Wickremesinghe, sought

to balance relations with China, India, Japan, and Western partners while maintaining access to external financing. At the same time, the crisis reinforced China's position as a key political and economic partner, given its role as a major bilateral creditor and its participation in debt restructuring negotiations with the International Monetary Fund.[13]

This broader historical and contemporary context has strengthened links between Chinese and Sri Lankan political actors, including party-to-party relations.

The Architecture of Chinese Party Diplomacy

While China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs coordinates the country's official diplomatic efforts, the ID-CCP serves as the principal actor in party-to-party engagement. Originally focused on communist and other leftist parties, the department has since expanded its outreach to encompass governing parties, opposition movements, influential elites, and prospective future leaders across the ideological spectrum.[14]

Party diplomacy serves several overlapping objectives. These include enhancing China's soft power, promoting Chinese narratives and governance experiences, building support for the BRI, encouraging alignment on strategic issues, and strengthening relationships with political elites capable of influencing future policy decisions.[15] Unlike conventional diplomacy, party exchanges often occur with limited public visibility, creating space for sensitive discussions, relationship-building with actors outside official diplomatic channels, and broad political networking.[16] Through these networks, the CCP gains access not only to formal government decision-makers but also to a range of other political, economic, and cultural actors.

"Successive administrations, including those of Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Ranil Wickremesinghe, sought to balance relations with China, India, Japan, and Western partners while maintaining access to external financing. At the same time, the 2022 crisis reinforced China's position as a key political and economic partner, given its role as a major bilateral creditor and its participation in debt restructuring negotiations with the International Monetary Fund.

In Sri Lanka, the ID-CCP's *Bureau I*, responsible for South and Southeast Asia, oversees relations with political parties and influential figures. Chinese embassy officials, including ambassadors, have also played an important role in facilitating high-level interactions and maintaining day-to-day political contacts.[17] The ID-CCP has cultivated relationships with Sri Lankan parties across the ideological spectrum, including the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), United National Party (UNP), and the Communist Party of Sri Lanka (CPSL). Recently, the department has also intensified relations with the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Jathika Jana Balawegaya (JJB), or National People's Power (NPP), alliance. Anura Kumara Dissanayake (better known as AKD),

Sri Lanka's current president (2024–present), is the JVP leader and ran as the NPP presidential candidate against Sajith Premadasa of the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB).[18]

Exchanges, Knowledge Transfers, and Elite Engagement

Chinese party diplomacy in Sri Lanka operates primarily through two interconnected mechanisms: general exchanges and knowledge transfers. Sri Lankan political delegations are regularly invited to China for seminars, study tours, lectures, cultural programs, and meetings with Chinese officials and experts. These activities aim to familiarize political actors with China's development model, governance practices, and policy experiences while cultivating personal relationships with CCP officials.[19] For example, in the early and mid-2000s, the ID-CCP's party diplomacy repeatedly engaged in high-level exchanges with Mahinda Rajapaksa and the SLFP in Beijing and Sri Lanka, expressing appreciation for their support on issues such as human rights, Taiwan, and Tibet and emphasizing the need for continued cooperation.[20]

> ***Party diplomacy serves several overlapping objectives. These include enhancing China's soft power, promoting Chinese narratives and governance experiences, building support for the BRI, encouraging alignment on strategic issues, and strengthening relationships with political elites capable of influencing future policy decisions.***

Knowledge transfers include training programs that expose foreign political elites to subjects such as party organization, governance, and administrative management. The convening of international meetings to address key issues and promote the benefits of China's governance approach and economic model is another important component of these efforts.[21] Examples include the virtual governance seminar held between the ID-CCP and the SLPP under Gotabaya Rajapaksa in 2020,[22] and broad-based consultations involving numerous Sri Lankan political leaders during anniversary celebrations in 2022.[23] These exchanges simultaneously provide the CCP with insights into local political developments, elite dynamics, and emerging opportunities for engagement.[24] For example, given the importance of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and the political influence of the *Maha Sangha*, the CCP, through the United Front Work Department, has promoted the BRI by using Buddhist strategic narratives and Buddhist-themed infrastructure projects, such as the Colombo Lotus Tower.[25]

From the Rajapaksas to Dissanayake

The evolution of Chinese party diplomacy illustrates the CCP's pragmatic approach to Sri Lankan politics. Although the Rajapaksa administrations developed particularly close relations with Beijing, China began cultivating ties with competing political actors when the family faced electoral setbacks. For example, after Maithripala Sirisena's victory in 2015, Beijing moved quickly to build constructive relations with the new administration through financial assistance, infrastructure investments, and development projects, despite initial policy disagreements over Chinese-funded projects. Sirisena and his Prime

Minister, Ranil Wickremesinghe, at first adopted a more India-oriented foreign policy and took steps to curb China's influence, including temporarily suspending the Port City Colombo project. However, the new government struggled to secure sufficient investment from Western partners or India to support the country's economy.

After the (interim) fall of the Rajapaksa family from power, China began to strengthen ties with Sirisena. Alongside the construction of a Chinese-funded kidney hospital in Polonnaruwa, Sirisena's home constituency, Beijing provided Sri Lanka a US$295 million grant.[26] The growing visibility of Chinese economic engagement further strained relations with Wickremesinghe, who favored closer ties with India. The Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government thus found itself managing an increasingly delicate geopolitical environment characterized by competing investments, partnerships, and sources of influence from China, India, and the United States. In 2017, the government responded to a domestic balance-of-payments crisis by leasing the Hambantota International Port to China Merchants Port for 99 years after securing Chinese funding and investment. The deal subsequently attracted significant domestic and international criticism, which strained bilateral relations in subsequent years.[27] Likewise, allegations of Chinese financial support for political campaigns have periodically surfaced, including claims involving figures within or associated with the Rajapaksa family and Wickremesinghe's administration.[28] While such allegations remain politically contentious, they have contributed to broader debates regarding elite capture, political influence, and transparency in Chinese engagement.

Finally, AKD's election in 2024 marked a new stage in Sino-Sri Lankan party relations. Following the JVP's victory, party-to-party exchanges between the CCP and JVP accelerated, including

> ***In Sri Lanka, the ID-CCP's* Bureau I*, responsible for South and Southeast Asia, oversees relations with political parties and influential figures. Chinese embassy officials, including ambassadors, have also played an important role in facilitating high-level interactions and maintaining day-to-day political contacts.***

meetings focused on governance cooperation, development strategies, high-level exchanges, and people-to-people ties.[29] Similarly, during his first official state visit to China, AKD and Xi Jinping reaffirmed their commitment to cooperation on BRI projects and broader economic development initiatives.[30]

Concluding Reflections

Contemporary Sino-Sri Lankan party-to-party relations reveal how the CCP complements state diplomacy with long-term elite engagement. This strategy aims to support Beijing's strategic priorities, including sustaining BRI projects, maintaining political goodwill, promoting Chinese governance narratives, and securing continued access to key decision-makers. For the CCP, party diplomacy has emerged as an increasingly important mechanism for sustaining influence across changing administrations and shifting electoral outcomes. Nevertheless, the reception of these activities has been mixed, and elite responses have often depended on broader political and economic motivations for engaging

with China and retaining access to Chinese funding streams. This highlights the importance of understanding the agency of domestic elites in engaging with Chinese economic and political initiatives.

The effectiveness of these efforts also remains contested. China's party diplomacy operates within a crowded geopolitical environment in which India, Japan, the United States, and Australia also seek to shape Sri Lanka's policy trajectory. Domestic and international political change, economic uncertainty, and public concerns regarding transparency and sovereignty continue to constrain the extent of Beijing's influence. While party diplomacy has become a central pillar of Sino-Sri Lankan relations, its long-term impact on political alignment, governance practices, and elite preferences remains an important area for future research.[31]

This issue brief is a part of the ISDP SCSA-IPA research project, "The Silk Noose: China's Power Architecture in South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region".

Author –

Tabita Rosendal *is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Department of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies, University of Copenhagen, and an editor of the Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies (CJAS). Her research focuses broadly on Global China, including a project on Danish-Chinese science diplomacy and a broader research agenda focused on the political economy of development and the evolving geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific, with particular emphasis on Sri Lanka and South Asia. She obtained her PhD in East and Southeast Asian Studies from Lund University in 2025, where she subsequently served as a Lecturer in Chinese International Relations. This brief builds on research conducted for her PhD thesis.*

© The Institute for Security and Development Policy, 2026. This Policy Brief can be freely reproduced provided that ISDP is informed.

About ISDP

The Institute for Security and Development Policy is a Stockholm-based independent and non-profit research and policy institute. The Institute is dedicated to expanding understanding of international affairs, particularly the interrelationship between the issue areas of conflict, security and development. The Institute's primary areas of geographic focus are Asia and Europe's neighborhood.

www.isdp.eu

Endnotes

1 J. Eisenman, "China's relational power in Africa: Beijing's 'new type of party-to-party relations'," *Third World Quarterly* 44, no. 12 (2023): 2441–2461, 2447.

2 L. Benabdallah, "Power or Influence? Making Sense of China's Evolving Party-to-party Diplomacy in Africa," *African Studies Quarterly* 19, no. 3-4 (2020): 94–114, 105; B. Gates, "Ideas *Sixiang*: Competing for Hearts and Minds around the Globe," in *Daring to Struggle: China's Global Ambitions Under Xi Jinping* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 162–185.

3 G. Li, "Promotion of Cooperation between the Communist Party of China and the Tanzania's Chama Cha Mapinduzi in the New Era," *The African Review* 50 (2023): 137–173.

4 C. Hackenesch and J. Bader, "The Struggle for Minds and Influence: The Chinese Communist Party's Global Outreach," *International Studies Quarterly* 64 (2020): 723–733; J. Bader and C. Hackenesch, "Networking with Chinese Characteristics: China's Party-to-Party Relations in Asia," in *Authoritarian Gravity Centers: A Cross-Regional Study of Authoritarian Promotion and Diffusion*, edited by Marianne Kneuer and Thomas Demmelhuber (New York: Routledge, 2020), 225–248.

5 T. Rosendal, *Fragmented Power: The Reception of China's Foreign Policy Strategies in Sri Lanka* (MediaTryck: Lund, 2025).

6 D. M. Prasad, "Ceylon's Foreign Policy under the Bandaranaikes 1956–65: A Study in the Emergence and Role of Non-Alignment," *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 33, no. 3 (1972): 271–290, 271–272.

7 A. Abeyagoonasekera, *Teardrop Diplomacy – China's Sri Lanka Foray* (New Delhi: Bloomsbury, 2023).

8 O. Hodzi, "African Political Elites and the Making(s) of the China Model in Africa," *Politics & Policy* 48, no. 5 (2020): 887–907, 902; W. Yao, "Assessing Effects of China's Party Diplomacy vis-à-vis Southeast Asia: Ideas, Interests, and Controversies," *Asian Perspectives* 47, no. 4 (2023): 579–602, . 594.

9 Embassy of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka in Beijing, "Sri Lanka China Relations," 2022, https://www.emb-beijing.gov.lk/en/sri-lanka-china-relations.

10 T. Rosendal, n. 5, 38–40.

11 N. DeVotta, "China's Influence in Sri Lanka: Negotiating Development, Authoritarianism, and Regional Transformation," in *Rising China's Influence in Developing Asia*, edited by Evelyn Goh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 129–152.

12 M. Abi-Habib, "How China Got Sri Lanka to Cough Up a Port," *The New York Times*, June 25, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/25/world/asia/china-sri-lanka-port.html; D. Brautigam, "A critical look at Chinese 'debt-trap diplomacy': the rise of a meme," *Area Development and Policy* 5, no. 1 (2020): 1–14.

13 A. Abeyagoonasekera, n. 7; T. Tudoroiu, *The Geopolitics of China's Belt and Road Initiative* (London: Routledge, 2023).

14 D. L. Shambaugh, "China's 'Quiet Diplomacy': The International Department of the Chinese Communist Party," *China: An International Journal* 5, no. 1 (2007): 26–54; Hackenesch and Bader, n. 4..

15 G. Li, n. 3; H. Sun, "开启新时代中国特色大党外交新征程," [Starting a new journey of major-party diplomacy with Chinese characteristics in the new era], 学习时报 [*Study Times*], January 17, 2018, http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2018/0117/c40531-29769527.html; S. Zhou, "China's Party Diplomacy in Southeast Asia," *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies* 7, no. 4 (2021): 451–465.

16 D. L. Shambaugh, n. 14; J. Eisenman, n. 1.

17 "Communist Party of China and SLPP hold virtual advanced seminar on governance," *Daily FT*, November 6, 2020, https://www.ft.lk/news/Communist-Party-of-China-and-SLPP-hold-virtual-advanced-seminar-on-governance/56-708551.

18 R. Kuruwita, "President Anura Kumara Dissanayake: A New Era of Re-form Amid Economic Turmoil in Sri Lanka," *The Diplomat*, September 23, 2024, https://thediplomat.com/2024/09/president-anura-kumara-dissanayake-a-new-era-of-reform-amid-economic-turmoil-in-sri-lanka/.

19 J. Eisenman, n. 1, 2449–2451; W. Yao, n. 8, 582–583.

20 "China, Sri Lanka Vow to Strengthen Close Ties," *Xinhua*, March 16, 2006, http://www.china.org.cn/international/2006-03/16/content_1161994.htm; "China to Push for Relations with Sri Lanka," *Xinhua*, October 26, 2006. http://www.china.org.cn/international/2006-10/26/content_1186122.htm.

21 J. Eisenman, n. 1. 2449–2451; H. Sun, n. 15; W. Yao, n. 8, 583–584.

22 ID-CCP, "Song Tao Holds Video Talks with Senior Leaders of Ruling Party of Sri Lanka," August 26, 2020, https://www.idcpc.gov.cn/english2023/bzhd/202009/t20200903_156764.html.

23 ID-CCP, "CPC and Political Parties of Sri Lanka Celebrate the 65th Anniversary of the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between China and Sri Lanka and the 70th Anniversary of the Signing of the Rubber-Rice Pact," February 17, 2022, https://www.idcpc.org.cn/english2023/bzhd/202308/t20230804_161789.html.

24 H. Sun, n. 15; W. Yao, n. 8; Hackenesch and Bader, n. 4. 730.

25 T. Rosendal, "China's Buddhist strategic narratives in Sri Lanka—benefits and Buddhism?" *The Pacific Review* 36, no. 6 (2023): 1426–1455.

26 "Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena welcomes US$295 million 'gift' from Beijing despite controversy about reported election funding," *South China Morning Post*, July 22, 2018, https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/south-asia/article/2156348/sri-lankan-president-maithripala-sirisena-welcomes-us295.

27 T. Tudoroiu, n. 13, 217; U. Moramudali and T. Panduwawala, "The political economy of Hambantota port: unveiling the realities of debt trap diplomacy and BRI vision," *Asian Journal of Political Science* 32, no. 3, (2024): 380–399; T. Rosendal, n. 5..

28 N. DeVotta, n. 11, 129-134; T. Tudoroiu, n. 13, 217; M. Abi-Habib, n. 12.

29 "Chinese Communist Party representatives meet AKD," *Daily FT*, April 24, 2024, https://www.ft.lk/news/Chinese-Communist-Party-representatives-meet-AKD/56-760970; ID-CCP, "Liu Haixing Meets with a Delegation of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna of Sri Lanka," October 20, 2025, https://www.idcpc.org.cn/english2023/bzhd/202510/t20251020_167729.html.

30 R. Kuruwita, "Which Candidate is China Likely to Back in Sri Lanka's 2024 Presidential Election?" *The Diplomat*, September 9, 2024, https://thediplomat.com/2024/09/which-candidate-is-china-likely-to-back-in-sri-lankas-2024-presidential-election/; R. Kuruwita, "Sri Lankan President Seals Several Deals in China," *The Diplomat*, January 21, 2025, https://thediplomat.com/2025/01/sri-lankanpresident-seals-several-deals-in-china/.

31 T. Rosendal, n. 5, 41–44, 97–100.