

Sri Lanka: India opts to wait

Govt. prefers to watch developments including Parliament vote, weighs options

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Even as the European Union and the United States expressed concern over the manner in which Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena withdrew support to Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and swore in former President Mahinda Rajapaksa in his place, and China chose to congratulate Mr. Rajapaksa, New Delhi chose to maintain a studied silence on Saturday.

With Prime Minister Narendra Modi away on a visit to Japan, the Ministry of External Affairs would prefer not to jump the gun on developments, especially given the fact that two separate Prime Ministers are now laying claim to the official residence at Temple Trees. A final outcome would probably only be known after a show of strength in Parliament and it is better to let each play out their hand, said officials.



Narendra Modi, right, with Ranil Wickremesinghe during the latter's visit to New Delhi earlier this month. ■ AP

The UPA government never lived down its decision in 2012 to call and congratulate Mohamed Waheed, hours after he deposed President Mohamed Nasheed in a coup and a repeat of that in Sri Lanka would have been inadvisable.

The NDA government has also been quite displeased with the way it was dragged into the internal politics of Sri Lanka in recent weeks, with both Mr. Sirisena and Mr. Wickremesinghe reach-

ing out to Prime Minister Modi to explain their version of events after a stormy Cabinet meeting on October 14.

NEWS ANALYSIS

The government's reticence is in sharp contrast to a more strong-arm policy in the neighbourhood over the past few years. It is likely that New Delhi has found that taking credit or being blamed for every political development in the neigh-

bourhood is, over time, detrimental to the "Neighbourhood First" policy it espouses, with accusations of interference being made by parties in Sri Lanka, Nepal and the Maldives. Playing a card either way during Sri Lanka's current turmoil would not be seen as helpful to India's long-term interests in the region.

Also, there is New Delhi's extremely volatile relationship with Mr. Rajapaksa himself. When he lost power, Mr. Rajapaksa had blamed the R&AW for facilitating the opposition's unity efforts, and the relationship with the former President had been fraught for a while. While Mr. Rajapaksa has softened his stand, telling *The Hindu* last month that it was time to "move on" from past differences, New Delhi is unsure of just where it may stand with him.

For now, New Delhi may just find that discretion is the better part of valour.