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Winning over the Skeptics: Why China Needs to Enhance Its Public Diplomacy in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Sri Lanka is an indispensable partner for China in its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Although the BRI brings reciprocal benefits to Sri Lanka, the Sri Lankan public has been wary, suspicious and in certain instances, hostile towards Chinese activity in Sri Lanka. This study examines the Sri Lankan public opinion towards China and its implications to the Chinese presence in the island. It is a qualitative analysis of secondary data gathered from books, journal articles, newspapers and previous studies. The study finds that negative public sentiments born due to fears over “debt traps”, Chinese immigrant labor, and ecological concerns have dampened China’s aspirations in Sri Lanka. Widespread public displeasure and negative rhetoric towards China is specially seen during the 2015 presidential election, through the use of China as a political scapegoat and island wide protests. This negative image, if not addressed, will not only damage China-Sri Lanka relations, but also jeopardize the Sri Lankan component of the BRI. This study proposes that the success of the BRI lies in China’s

ability to harness support from the local public. Given the skeptic image towards China in Sri Lanka, it is imperative that the Chinese government invests in public diplomacy to project a positive image of itself. China must initiate a public diplomacy campaign that inculcates mutual trust, mutual understanding, and constant communication. The Chinese Embassy in Sri Lanka must transfer cultural and technical knowledge, invest in local welfare projects, address issues of transparency and build a proactive online presence. This would help China to repair its image in Sri Lanka, gain credibility among the general public and accrue the much-needed local support for the BRI.

Keywords: Public diplomacy, Public opinion, Belt and Road Initiative, Chinese investment in Sri Lanka, Debt trap