

# The Changing Asian Perspective, India-Sri Lanka Relations: An Appraisal

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## Abstract:

India and Sri Lanka have been close neighbours with more than 2500 years of shared history. The interaction between the two countries ranges across various areas but the relations in linear and smooth. To understand the current standing of the two countries, it is necessary to understand the context in which the two states conduct their relations. But despite this, there is a need for freshness in the partnership between the two countries. Over the years, Sri Lanka has turned to China and sees China as a more reliable partner for domestic economic development. The state of bilateral partnership between Sri Lanka and China is a matter of concern for India. India sees China's closeness with Sri Lanka as a weak link in its relations with the island nation.

**Keywords:** Neighbour, partnership, reliable, domestic, bilateral etc.

**Introduction:** In the global perspective, Sri Lanka is an important neighboring country of India from strategic, cultural, political, economic point of view. Sri Lanka is an island country located in the Indian Ocean to the south of India. The Palk Strait is a virtual dividing line between India and Sri Lanka. Strengthening ties with Sri Lanka is strategically important for India. Relations between the two countries date back over 2,500 years and both sides have built their relations on a legacy of intellectual, cultural, religious and linguistic interaction. In the post-Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) era, the two neighbors are working together for security and economic purposes. India and Sri Lanka are working on some important common objectives. These objectives include freedom of navigation in the Indian Ocean Region, countering the threat of terrorism and following the policy of a prosperous South Asian neighbor and working together on serious issues. But despite this, there is a need for freshness in the partnership between the two countries. Over the years, Sri Lanka has turned to China for economic support and sees China as a more reliable partner for domestic economic development. The state of bilateral partnership between Sri Lanka and China is a matter of concern for India. India sees China's closeness with Sri Lanka as a weak link in its relations with the island nation. In recent years, relations have been marked by closer contacts at the highest political level, growing trade and investment, cooperation in the fields of development, education, culture and defence, as well as a broader understanding on key issues of international interest. India and Sri Lankan relations have been friendly and relatively stable since the independence of both countries.

**Political Relations:** Political relations between the two countries have been marked by high-level exchange of visits at regular intervals. Prime Minister Shri Ranil Wickremesinghe paid an official visit to India from 18-20 October 2018. Former President and currently the Leader of the Opposition, Mahinda Rajapaksa visited New Delhi from 10-13 September 2018 to address a private event and called on the Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi. He again visited Bangalore on 8–13 February 2019 to deliver a speech at an event organized by The Hindu newspaper. President Sirisena visited India on a

four-day visit from 15 February 2015. President Sirisena visited India on 13–14 May 2016 on a working visit. During the visit he visited New Delhi, Ujjain and Sanchi. President Sirisena visited India on a private visit from 19–21 August 2016. President Sirisena visited India on 15-17 October 2016 to participate in the BRICS-BIMSTEC Outreach Summit. President Sirisena attended the seventh session of the Conference of the Parties (COP 7) to the World Health Organization (WHO) Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) in New Delhi on 6-7 November 2016. President Sirisena attended the founding conference of the International Solar Alliance (ISA).

**Commercial Relations:** Sri Lanka has long been a priority destination for direct investment from India. Sri Lanka is one of India's largest trading partners in SAARC. Trade between the two countries grew particularly rapidly after the entry into force of the India-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement in March 2000. According to Sri Lankan Customs, bilateral trade stood at US\$4.93 billion in 2018. Exports from India to Sri Lanka stood at US\$4.16 billion in 2018, while exports from Sri Lanka to India stood at US\$767 million. The main items of export from Sri Lanka to India are: base oil, poultry feed, betel nut, (waste and scrap) paper or paperboard, pepper, ignition wiring sets, copper wire, marble, travertine and alabaster. India is one of the largest investors in Sri Lanka with a cumulative investment of about USD 1.239 billion. Indian investments in Sri Lanka are mainly in petroleum retail, IT, financial services, real estate, telecommunications, hospitality and tourism, banking and food processing (tea and fruit juices, copper and other metal industries), tyres, cement, glass manufacturing , and are in diverse fields including. Development of infrastructure (railways, electricity, water supply). The last few years have also seen an increasing trend of Sri Lankan investments in India. Significant examples include Brandix (about US\$1 billion to set up a garment city in Visakhapatnam), MAS Holdings, John Keels, Healey and Aitken Spence (hotels), besides other investments in the freight servicing and logistics sector. . There is a healthy relationship between the business chambers of both the countries. Various Indian Chambers of Commerce have signed MoUs with Sri Lankan Chambers to promote trade and economic relations, investments between India and Sri Lanka. Indian delegations also participate extensively in the various trade fairs held in Sri Lanka.

**Development Cooperation:** Sri Lanka is a major recipient of development assistance from the Government of India. India's overall commitment is close to US\$ 3 billion, of which about US\$ 560 million is purely in the form of grant. The Indian Housing Project is the Government of India's (GoI) flagship project of developmental assistance to Sri Lanka, with an initial commitment of building 50,000 houses for estate workers in war-affected areas as well as plantation areas. With an overall grant commitment of over Indian Rupees (INR) 1372 crores, it is one of the largest projects undertaken by the Government of India abroad. To date, construction of all the committed 46,000 houses has been completed in the Northern and Eastern provinces. Nearly 1,000 homes have been completed out of the remaining 4,000 homes under construction in Central and Uva provinces for estate workers through an innovative community-driven approach. The first batch of these houses built in the plantation areas was handed over on 12 August 2018 in the presence of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe at a function which was attended by Prime Minister Narendra Modi via video message. At that time, India and Sri Lanka signed an agreement to start construction of 10,000 additional houses, which was announced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his visit to Sri Lanka in May 2017, at an estimated cost of Rs 485 crore. With this, India's total commitment to build houses in Sri Lanka has gone up to 60,000. In addition to housing, India is supporting a large number of high-impact community development projects

in the areas of education, health, transport connectivity, small and medium enterprise development and training across the country under grant assistance. Projects completed during the year 2020 include provision of livelihood support to around 70,000 people in the fishing and farming community in Hambantota, supply of medical equipment to Vavuniya Hospital and 150 boats and fishing gear for Mullaitivu fishermen. A modern 1500-seat auditorium named after Rabindranath Tagore was also handed over to Ruhuna University, Matara in October 2018. work on construction of 153 houses in Sobitha Thero village of Anuradhapura, upgradation of Saraswati Central College in Puselwa, Kandy; Construction of 600 houses under Model Village Housing Project in 25 districts of Sri Lanka and Gram-Shakti Housing Project for construction of 600 houses in Southern Province of Sri Lanka, Trilingual School in Polonnaruwa, Construction of 5000 MT cold storage in Dambulla and 600 houses Construction is progressing well in each of the northern and southern provinces. Construction of 3400 toilets in Batticaloa, 300 transit housing units in Mannar and establishment of IT Incubation Center in North were signed. The island-wide operation of the 1990 emergency ambulance service in Sri Lanka, funded under Indian grant aid, was launched in Jaffna on 21 July 2018, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi joined by Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe via live video link from New Delhi . Started in July 2016 in the Western and Southern provinces of Sri Lanka under Indian grant assistance of about US\$ 7.56 million (88 ambulances), the service has been expanded to all provinces of Sri Lanka under the Indian grant. The grant covers the purchase of 209 additional ambulances, training cost, as well as operational cost for one year after the launch of the services. In June 2017, a contract agreement was signed between India's Exim Bank and the Government of Sri Lanka for the supply of 160 passenger coaches to Sri Lanka Railways, worth about US\$82.64 million, under an Indian Line of Credit (LoC) agreement of US\$318 million. Signed between RITES Limited and the Government of Sri Lanka in Colombo on 7 September 2018. Other projects identified under this line of credit have also made progress. India announced a new US\$100 million LoC to undertake solar projects in Sri Lanka during the founding conference of the International Solar Alliance held on 11 March 2018, which was attended by Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena.

**Cultural Relations:** The Cultural Cooperation Agreement signed by the Government of India and the Government of Sri Lanka in New Delhi on 29 November 1977 forms the basis for periodic cultural exchange programs between the two countries. The Indian Cultural Center in Colombo is actively promoting awareness of Indian culture by providing classes in Indian music, dance, Hindi and yoga. The first International Day of Yoga was celebrated on 21 June 2015 at the prestigious ocean resort Galle Face Green. Two thousand yoga lovers participated in the programme. In 2016, a similar event was organized at Mahavihar Devi Park to celebrate International Day of Yoga. The 3rd and 4th International Day of Yoga (IDY) was celebrated at the iconic Independence Square in Colombo with the participation of Sri Lankan President H.E. Maithripala Sirisena and thousands of yoga enthusiasts.

**People-to-people contact:** To further strengthen people-to-people ties, the first pilgrimage to Bodhgaya for Sri Lankan Armed Forces personnel and their families was organized from 24-26 June 2018. A special Indian Air Force C-17 aircraft was deployed in Colombo to airlift 160 armed forces personnel and their families to Bodh Gaya and back. The second edition of the visit where both Indian and Sri Lankan armies visited Sri Lanka and India respectively was held in June 2019. A 55-member delegation of the Mahabodhi Society of India visited major Buddhist sites in Sri Lanka during the last week of June 2018. The Prime Minister announced in his Vesak address on 12 May 2017 during his visit

to Colombo that AI would operate direct flights between Varanasi and Colombo. The inaugural flight between Varanasi and Colombo was flagged off on 4 August 2017.

**Fishermen issue:** Given the proximity of the territorial waters of both countries, especially in the Palk Strait and the Gulf of Mannar, incidents of fishermen straying are common. The two countries have agreed on some practical arrangements to deal with the issue of bona fide fishermen from both sides crossing the International Maritime Boundary Line. Through these arrangements, it has been possible to deal with the issue of detention of fishermen in a humane manner. India and Sri Lanka have agreed to set up a Joint Working Group (JWG) on Fisheries between India's Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare and Sri Lanka's Ministry of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Development to help find a sustainable solution.

### Conclusion:

The latest controversy began when the Chinese research vessel Yuan Wang-5 arrived at the strategically important Hambantota port in southern Sri Lanka on 16 August 2022. The Chinese military research vessel was originally scheduled to arrive at the Sri Lankan port on August 11 but was denied permission by the Sri Lankan authorities as India then raised "related security issues". According to Indian media reports, China was given conditional permission on 13 August for its ship to reach the port. The condition was that the Chinese military research vessel would keep its "Automatic Identification System (AIS) on" in Sri Lanka's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and would not carry out any scientific research in Sri Lanka's maritime zone. Nurturing the policy of Neighborhood First with Sri Lanka is important for India to safeguard its strategic interests in the Indian Ocean region. Platforms such as BIMSTEC, SAARC, SAGAR and IORA can be used to promote cooperation in areas such as technology-driven agriculture, maritime domain development, IT and communication infrastructure, etc. India will have to continue working on the Kankasanturai port in Jaffna and the oil tank farm project in Trincomali to ensure that China does not make any further inroads in Sri Lanka. In the technology sector, India can create employment opportunities in Sri Lanka by expanding the presence of its IT companies. These organizations can create thousands of direct and indirect jobs and boost the service economy of the island nation.

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