

INDIA AND SRI LANKA BILATERAL RELATIONS

NEWS: **India and Sri Lanka** further deepened their ties as **Prime Minister Narendra Modi** received a grand welcome in Colombo, becoming the **first foreign leader hosted by the newly formed Dissanayake government.**

WHAT'S IN THE NEWS?

Key Outcomes and Agreements Of The Visit

- **Defence pact signed:** Strengthens collaboration through the **Colombo Security Conclave** and enhanced security cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region.
- **Assurance from Sri Lanka:** Srilanka reaffirmed that **its territory will not be used against India's security interests**, boosting regional stability.
- **India-assisted railway modernisation projects: Maho-Omanthai line (128 km)** refurbished with \$91.27 million Indian assistance.
 - Advanced signalling system from **Maho to Anuradhapura**, funded by a **\$14.89 million Indian grant.**
- **Trincomalee Energy Hub Development:** Multi-product pipeline and port energy infrastructure to be jointly developed.
 - **Grid interconnectivity agreement signed**, allowing electricity trade between India and Sri Lanka.
- **Sampur Solar Power Project:** Virtually inaugurated by both leaders, contributing to Sri Lanka's clean energy goals.

Colombo Security Conclave (CSC)

- **About:** The CSC is a **regional security grouping comprising India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Mauritius, with Seychelles as an observer.**
 - Its core objective is to **strengthen regional security** by addressing transnational threats and challenges of common concern.
- **Origin:** CSC began in **2011** as the **Trilateral for Maritime Security Cooperation** involving **India, Maldives, and Sri Lanka.**
 - It became **inactive after 2014** due to **India-Maldives tensions.**
 - The initiative was **revived and rebranded as the Colombo Security Conclave in 2020.**
 - Mauritius joined during the revival, followed by the inclusion of

Bangladesh.

- **Structure:** The CSC operates through regular meetings of National Security Advisors (NSAs) and Deputy NSAs of member countries.
- **Secretariat:** A Permanent Secretariat has been established in **Colombo, Sri Lanka**, to coordinate activities.

- **Debt restructuring agreement concluded between India and Sri Lanka: Over \$100 million worth of Indian loans converted to grants.**
- Interest rates reduced on Indian loans to ease Colombo's repayment burden.
- **Digital Identity Project:** India provided **₹300 crore grant** to support Sri Lanka's **Digital Identity Project**.
- **Special aid package for Eastern Sri Lanka:** India to provide **LKR 2.4 billion (~INR 66 crore)** to support social and economic development in Eastern Provinces.
- **Visit to Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi shrine in Anuradhapura:** PM Modi and President Dissanayake jointly offered prayers at the **sacred Mahabodhi tree**, symbolising deep civilisational ties.
- **Prime Minister Modi was awarded the Mitra Vibhushana: It is Sri Lanka's highest civilian honour for a foreign head of state.**
- Conferred for India's support through terror attacks (2019), COVID-19, and the economic crisis.
- **Fishermen & Maritime Issues:** Joint commitment to a humane approach on fishermen's arrests and boat seizures. Sri Lanka requested India's help to end bottom trawling, which causes irreversible ecological damage.

Significance of this Visit

- **Sign of Priority:** President Dissanayake chose India for his first foreign visit, and now Prime Minister Modi is the first foreign leader to visit Sri Lanka under Dissanayake's presidency.
 - This signals **mutual diplomatic priority** and **renewed commitment** to regional closeness under **India's "Neighbourhood First" policy**.
- **Strengthening Bilateral Security:** The 2025 Defence Memorandum of Understanding formalizes India-Sri Lanka security cooperation, representing a **strategic move to enhance regional stability and counter growing Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean region**.

- **Strategic Reassurance to India:** Sri Lanka's commitment to ensuring that its territory and surrounding waters are not used against India's interests directly alleviates India's concerns over increasing Chinese maritime presence, **particularly around the Hambantota Port.**
- **Recognition of India's Support:** Conferment of 'Mitra Vibhushana award' acknowledges India's consistent support and cultural affinity.

Historical Ties Between India and Sri Lanka

- **Ancient Cultural Links:** The relationship dates back over 2,500 years, with **Buddhism introduced to Sri Lanka by Emperor Ashoka's son Mahinda** in the 3rd century BCE, forming deep religious and cultural bonds.
- **Chola Influence:** South India's **Chola dynasty invaded Sri Lanka** in the 10th century CE, leaving a lasting legacy in art, architecture, and language.
- **Post-Colonial Cooperation:** Both nations gained independence from British rule around the same time i.e. **India in 1947 and Sri Lanka in 1948** and India aiding Sri Lanka in building democratic institutions.
- **Ethnic Conflict and IPKF:** India played a key role during Sri Lanka's civil war, signing the 1987 India-Sri Lanka Accord to support Tamil rights through the 13th Amendment and **deploying the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF).**
- **Impact of Rajiv Gandhi's Assassination:** The assassination by the **Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)** in 1991 marked a turning point in India's policy, leading to a more cautious approach.
- **Post-War Phase:** After the civil war ended in 2009, **India has continued to support reconciliation and development in Sri Lanka.**

Significance of Sri Lanka To India

- **Strategic Geopolitical Location:** Sri Lanka lies **close to the southern tip of India** in the Indian Ocean, making it a **vital neighbor for India** in ensuring **regional security and stability.**
 - It occupies a central place in India's '**Neighbourhood First**' policy and **Security and growth for all in the region (S.A.G.A.R) vision.**
- **Maritime Security Partner:** Located **near key maritime chokepoints like the Palk Strait and Gulf of Mannar**, Sri Lanka plays a crucial role in safeguarding India's maritime interests and sea lanes.

- **Cultural and Historical Bonds:** India and Sri Lanka share centuries-old **cultural, religious, and historical ties**, strengthening diplomatic relations and fostering people-to-people connections.
- **Energy Security and Connectivity:** Sri Lanka is important **for India's energy strategy**, offering opportunities for regional energy cooperation, including renewable energy initiatives and cross-border power links.
- **Regional Influence in South Asia:** As key players in South Asia, India and Sri Lanka's cooperation **can shape regional dynamics**, promoting peace, stability, and development across the region.

Multilateral Organisations where **India and Sri Lanka** are both members:

- **South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)**
 - **Members:** Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, **India**, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, **Sri Lanka**.
 - **Focus:** Regional cooperation in South Asia on development, trade, and culture
- **Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC)**
 - **Members:** Bangladesh, Bhutan, **India**, Myanmar, Nepal, **Sri Lanka**, Thailand
 - **Focus:** Regional cooperation in the Bay of Bengal region across sectors like connectivity, trade, and security.
- **Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA):** It is an international organisation consisting of **23 member states bordering the Indian Ocean including India and Sri Lanka**.
- **Commonwealth of Nations:** The **Commonwealth of Nations** is a **voluntary association of 56 independent countries**, most of which were formerly part of the British Empire. **Both India and Sri Lanka are its members.**

Significance of India To Sri Lanka

- **Development Assistance:** In the **2024-25** fiscal year, India significantly **increased its aid to Sri Lanka to ₹245 crore**, a substantial rise from ₹60 crore in the previous year, reflecting strengthened bilateral ties.
- **Tourism Growth:** India remains the **largest source of tourists to Sri Lanka**.

- In the **first half of 2024**, nearly **200,000 Indian tourists** visited, accounting for **18% of total arrivals**. This surge significantly contributes to Sri Lanka's tourism sector recovery.
- **Relief During Sri Lanka Economic Crisis:** India extended **emergency financial support of about \$4 billion**, providing relief at a time when citizens struggled amid critical shortages of essentials.
- **International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout:** India was among the **first countries to provide financing assurances to the IMF**, a prerequisite for the IMF's \$2.9 billion bailout package approved in 2023.
- **Largest Global Trading Partner:** India and Sri Lanka have a **Free Trade Agreement (FTA)** in place since **March 2000**, which significantly boosted bilateral trade. As a result, **India has become Sri Lanka's largest global trading partner**, with trade volumes growing steadily over the years.
- **Others:**
 - **Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR):** India consistently **acts as a first responder** during emergencies in Sri Lanka, extending timely humanitarian aid and disaster relief support.
 - **Regional Security Cooperation:** India supports Sri Lanka's role in regional security through the **Colombo Security Conclave**, promoting collective maritime and regional security frameworks.
 - **Maritime and Capacity Building Support:** India aids capacity building in Sri Lanka, notably through projects like the installation of the **Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC)**, funded by an Indian grant.

Exercises Between India and Sri Lanka

- **Mitra Shakti:** It is an **annual joint military exercise** between **India and Sri Lanka**, focused on counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism operations in semi-urban terrain.
 - It is the **largest bilateral exercise** conducted by the Sri Lankan Army and a key element of the growing India and Sri Lanka defence partnership.
- **SLINEX:** It is a **bilateral naval exercise** between the **Indian and Sri Lankan navies**.
 - It aims to **enhance maritime interoperability**, with focus on naval

operations, communication, and joint manoeuvres in the **Indian Ocean Region**.

Challenges in the India Sri Lanka Relations

- **Fisheries Conflict:** A long-standing dispute between Sri Lankan Tamil fishermen and Indian fishermen from Tamil Nadu, primarily due to the **use of bottom-trawling by Indian boats**, which harms marine ecosystems and threatens local livelihoods.
 - Although both countries agreed in 2016 to phase out bottom-trawling, **Sri Lankan fishermen claim that Indian trawlers continue the practice**, causing ecological damage and economic losses.
- **Tamil Political Solution:** Sri Lanka's war-affected Tamil community hopes for **India's support in achieving a political settlement** and holding long-delayed provincial council elections in the north and east.
- **Debt Diplomacy:** Sri Lanka's reliance on Chinese loans for infrastructure projects like **Hambantota Port** has led to Chinese control of strategic assets, challenging India's regional interests.
- **Maritime Boundary Dispute:** **Katchatheevu** is a small uninhabited island in **Palk Strait**, that connects the **Bay of Bengal to the Arabian Sea**.
 - It is a **disputed territory between Sri Lanka and India**, claimed until 1976 by India, and **administered by Sri Lanka at the moment**.
- **India's Support for the 13th Amendment in Sri Lanka:** Following Sri Lanka's civil war, **India has consistently advocated for the full implementation of the 13th Amendment** to ensure meaningful devolution of power, especially to the Northern and Eastern provinces.

About the 13th Amendment:

- The **13th Amendment**, introduced in 1987 through the **India-Sri Lanka Accord**, laid the foundation for **Sri Lanka's Provincial Council system**.
- It aimed to **decentralize governance** by transferring authority over areas like land, policing, education, health, agriculture, housing, and finance to the provincial level.

Way Forward

- **Regular Dialogue and Cooperation:** India and Sri Lanka should continue to build their relationship through **regular dialogue and cooperation**, grounded in **mutual respect, to ensure regional peace and prosperity.**
- **Broadening Outreach Beyond Ethnic Lines:** India should **adopt a broader approach** that engages all communities and stakeholders in Sri Lanka to build stronger, more inclusive bilateral ties.
 - Allowing regional politics to dictate foreign engagement risks **undermining India's long-term strategic interests** and ceding influence to external powers like China.
- **Balancing China's Growing Influence:** India should proactively address China's strategic footprint in Sri Lanka through transparent dialogue and **by offering competitive, sustainable alternatives in areas like infrastructure, trade, and development.**
- **Providing Non-Reciprocal but Firm Support:** India should continue **offering non-reciprocal aid and support to Sri Lanka as a big brotherly gesture**, but it must also ensure its goodwill is respected and that its strategic interests are safeguarded.
- **Promote Tamil Reconciliation:** Collaborate with Sri Lanka to **expedite the devolution process and improve living standards for Tamils in the Northern Province.**

Conclusion

India-Sri Lanka ties, guided by **Neighborhood First** and **SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region)** policies, can deepen through inclusive dialogue and strategic cooperation for regional peace and prosperity.

Source: <https://www.newsonair.gov.in/pm-modi-and-sri-lankan-president-to-launch-railway-projects-at-anuradhapura-in-the-island-nation-today/>