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## INDIA AND SRI LANKA – A CHANGING RELATIONSHIP



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### ABSTRACT

The bilateral relations between India and Sri Lanka have been generally friendly but the relations got deteriorated with the escalation of civil war in 1980s in Sri Lanka. With the defeat of LTTE in 2009 by the Sri Lankan Government, India was highly concerned about the issues of war crimes and human rights violations by the Sri Lankan Army and thus, allied with international community against Sri Lanka. The relations got further deteriorated under Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa on account of the latter's close embrace of China. However, a change of regime in Colombo under President Sirisena has encouraged optimism of improvement in bilateral relations between the two countries.

**KEYWORDS :** *Changing Relationship , closest neighbour , Geographical contiguity , geographical proximity .*



### INTRODUCTION :

Sri Lanka is located off the coast of South East Asia having India as its closest neighbour. Both the countries have built upon a long legacy of intellectual, cultural, religious and linguistic exchange which dates back to more than 2,500 years old. Indian influence can be found on all aspects of Sri Lankan life. Gandhiji referred to Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon) as India's "daughter State"<sup>1</sup>. Geographical contiguity along with constant movement of peoples, more prominently the

indentured labours during the British regime, between India and Sri Lanka have led to benign India-Sri Lanka relations. Sri Lanka has very close cultural links with India as it is well known that Emperor Ashoka sent his son Mahendra and his daughter Sangh Mitra for the propagation of Buddhist religion in this island country, which still continued to be a predominant religion of the country. Recently in 2012, 2600th year of the attainment of enlightenment by Lord Buddha – Sambuddhatva Jayanti was celebrated jointly by both the countries.

This, geological connection and geographical proximity was to historically connect the mainland with the island and Buddhism – the great historical religion, faith and philosophy was to serve as an umbilical cord not only bonding the two nations but also moulding and nourishing the

island's cultural pattern and civilization.

Sri Lanka lies in a key maritime route placing it in a strategic position where it has found itself frequently playing politics in courts of more powerful allies. But India-Sri Lanka relations have made remarkable progress both economically, socially and politically in South Asia over the last few decades.

### POLITICAL RELATIONS

In the modern era, the two factors influencing India's relations with Sri Lanka have been security and the shared ethnicity of Tamils living in southern India and in northern and eastern Sri Lanka. Beginning in the mid-1950s, and coinciding with the withdrawal of Britain's military presence in the Indian Ocean, India and Sri Lanka increasingly came to share regional security interests. In the 1970s, the ties were strengthened by the relationship between Indira Gandhi and Sri Lanka's prime minister, Mrs. Sirimavo Ratwatte Dias (S.R.D.) Bandaranaike<sup>2</sup>.

Till 1983 two issues that ran through gamut of Indo Sri Lanka relations: grant of citizenship to the Indian Plantation Tamils; and the disputed maritime boundary, and hence the fishing rights, in the Palk Straights centering on the island of Kachchathivu. Following the ethnic riots of July 1983, the large inflow of Tamil refugees flooding into India created a genuine wave of sympathy in Tamil Nadu for their brethren in Sri Lanka. LTTE's militarism and dedication to the Eelam cause added an element of Jingoism to this mix.

As the ethnic conflicts between Sri Lankan Sinhalese in South and Sri Lankan Tamils in north and east escalated, Tamil separatists received funding, weapons etc from South India. The clandestine assistance came from private entities and elements in the state Government of Tamil Nadu and was tolerated by Central Government till 1987. On July 29, 1987, Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Sri Lankan president Junius Richard (J.R.) Jayawardene signed an accord designed to settle the conflict by sending the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) to establish order and disarm Tamil separatists<sup>3</sup>.

The Indo-Sri Lanka accord of 1987 has been called a watershed in Indo-Sri Lankan relations. This accord sought not only to address the Tamil issue but also the nagging security concerns of both the countries. However, while issues of convergence were being addressed events took a dramatic turn. The accord was followed by a Sinhalese nationalist rebellion which had strong anti Indian orientation. The young Sinhalese rebels described their objectives as 'liberating the motherland from India's hegemonic expansion'. The Indian Peace Keeping Force had to be dispatched. By the time it was withdrawn in March 1990, India had paid a heavy price in terms of military casualties and political bitterness. The subsequent SAARC summit in Colombo in 1991 was boycotted by an angry India.

Bilateral relations improved somewhat in the early 1990s, but it suffered another jolt with the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi in May 1991, allegedly by the LTTE, forcing New Delhi to crack down on the LTTE presence in Tamil Nadu and to institute naval patrols in the Palk Strait to interdict LTTE movements to India<sup>4</sup>. All efforts by Sri Lankan Government to bring down LTTE by accommodating their grievances within a united Sri Lanka failed. The terrorism becoming unbearable and uncompromising provoked strong military actions. The civil war finally ended in 2009 with the fall of LTTE, killing of its chief Shri V. Parbhakaran and capture of its main leaders. However, it had already resulted in heavy casualty and also displacement of nearly 3 lakh Tamil civilians who had to be housed in camps for Internally Displaced Persons (IDP).

In the three decade long conflict between Sri Lankan forces and the LTTE which ended in 2009, India had, on one hand supported the Sri Lankan government in its fight against LTTE sponsored terrorism, but continued to be concerned about the plight of the Tamil civilian population. In the post LTTE period the dominant concern was the fate of the Internally Displaced Population (IDP). This

displaced Tamil population was a huge humanitarian concern that the Indian government had to address. Several issues are likely to dominate the Indo-Sri Lankan dialogue in the years to come that have a bearing on India's role in South Asia. The most critical of these is likely to be the Tamil factor in the bilateral dialogue. This factor has a dual dimension, one that deals with the humanitarian issues of rehabilitation of Tamil displaced persons in Sri Lanka and the other the role of Tamil Nadu in Indian policy towards Sri Lanka. One of the contentious issues is the 13th Amendment to Sri Lankan constitution that was enacted by the Sri Lankan government after Indo-Sri Lankan agreement of 1987 and provided for devolution of powers in the Tamil majority Northern and Eastern provinces in the island nation. There have been demands from different quarters for either repealing or removing some of the provisions of the Amendment. India has been critical of the efforts to dilute this amendment.

After disappearance of the LTTE from political scene, the Indian government expected that Colombo would pursue a genuine policy and reconstruct the wounded society in the war affected areas. New Delhi supported the Colombo in 2009 when a resolution was introduced by the European Union in United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), regarding human rights violations in northern Sri Lanka. India felt that Colombo would make initiatives to restore normalcy in the northern area. Moreover, India was reluctant to support a country specific resolution and preferred to work through bilateral engagement.

In his state visit to India from 8-11 June, 2010, Sri Lankan President expressed his determination to create a political settlement acceptable to all communities that would act as a catalyst for the necessary conditions in which all the people of Sri Lanka could lead their lives in an atmosphere of peace, justice and dignity, consistent with democracy, pluralism, equal opportunity and respect for human rights. The Prime Minister of India expressed India's constructive support for efforts that build peace and reconciliation among all communities in Sri Lanka<sup>5</sup>.

After three years of EU Resolution of 2009, US introduced a resolution in UNHRC in March, 2012 to take steps to bring back normalcy on the island. Unlike in 2009, India supported the resolution and went against Sri Lanka. India viewed that though the Sri Lankan government had made initiatives in rehabilitation work but the later did not take steps regarding the political process, devolution of powers, return of private land, demilitarisation, reduction of high security zones, promotion of trilingual policy and restoration of civilian administration. Despite its reservations with regard to Sri Lankan government policy towards Tamil in northern Sri Lanka, India persuaded US to make two changes in the draft (UNHRC March, 2012) to make it non intrusive and contribute to a political reconciliation process on the Island. However, Colombo viewed New Delhi stand on resolution of 2012 as unacceptable as the latter's vote was not determined by the merits of the issue but by strategic alliances it had with the US and domestic factor in Tamil Nadu. Sri Lanka further argued that the resolution would undermine the principle of non interference in matters within the domestic jurisdiction of a country<sup>6</sup>.

The bilateral relations between India and Sri Lanka deteriorated under former Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa on account of the latter's close embrace of China. Following its election win in January, the new Sri Lankan government widely touted its strengthening of ties with India, and made little effort to conceal the shift away from China. A recent visit of Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena in February, 2015 has encouraged optimism of improvement in bilateral relations between India and the Island nation. During Sirisena's visit, India and Sri Lanka signed four agreements that are expected to strengthen bilateral co-operation. However, these can counter effectively China's enormous presence in the island seems doubtful<sup>7</sup>.



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## ECONOMIC RELATIONS

Economic relations between India and Sri Lanka have a long history with recorded commercial links going back many centuries. After the independence, despite close political ties, economic ties weakened as both countries implemented inward-looking economic policies. However, the economic ties between the two countries again started to strengthen when Sri Lanka initiated a liberalization drive in 1977-78 but it was only after India liberalized its economy in early 1990s that the bilateral trade witnessed a considerable improvement. It was further encouraged by the South Asian regional integration initiatives and a bilateral Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between the two countries<sup>8</sup>. India-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement (ISLFTA) which was signed in 1998 became operational in 2000 and the bilateral trade increased about five fold from US \$ 658 million in 2000 to US \$ 3425 million in 2008<sup>9</sup>. Although bilateral trade declined to US\$ 2.03 billion in 2009, largely as a result of the global economic downturn, it rebounded to US\$ 3.04 billion in 2010 and reached US \$ 4.86 billion in 2011, which was a new peak since coming into force of India-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement in March 2000. According to Sri Lankan Customs trade data the bilateral trade amounted to US\$ 4.01 billion in 2012.

In 2012, Sri Lanka continued to be the largest trading partner of India in South Asia. Sri Lanka's imports from India amounted US\$ 3,483.74 million and exports to India amounted US\$ 518.71 million registering a decline of 19.51% and 1.91% respectively as compared to corresponding period of 2011. India had a share of 19.52% and 5.69% respectively in the global imports and exports of Sri Lanka during 2012. The decline in exports from India to Sri Lanka in 2012 is largely due to steep increase in the excise duty imposed on the import of vehicles on two occasions during the year 2012 that has seriously affected the competitive advantage enjoyed by Indian auto companies and overall volume of vehicles imported from India has declined by 50-60%. This had major adverse impact on the overall bilateral trade<sup>10</sup>.

## CHINA FACTOR IN INDIA-SRI LANKA RELATIONS

The bilateral relations between India and Sri Lanka are good and apparently friendly. However, Chinese presence in various spheres of Sri Lankan activities has become more visible and penetrating in the recent years and looms large over India-Sri Lanka relations.

The Sino-Sri Lanka relationship has always been cordial. Sri Lanka was among the first countries to recognize the People's Republic of China. In the 1950s, the two signed a landmark rubber-rice agreement that provided Sri Lanka with a large market for its rubber in China, even as Beijing supplied it with low-priced rice.

But it was after Rajapaksa became president in 2005 that the bilateral relationship touched new heights. During the Sri Lankan civil war, China strongly supported Rajapaksa's military strategy against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. Unlike India, which was selective and conditional in the support it extended Rajapaksa, China offered wholehearted support, supplying Colombo with all the hardware on its military wish-list. In the postwar period, Beijing was unwavering in its defense of the Rajapaksa government at various international human rights forums<sup>11</sup>. After the war was ended China is the main financial contributor of Sri Lanka's development projects. China has been involved to construct the Hambantota port and Hambantota international airport. Hambantota port is the most important project for the China strategically to seek her maritime lane for developing her trade passing in the Indian Ocean.

Some of security analysts argue that this port may be used by China to encircle India. It is a crucial link in the String of Pearls which china is building in the region through a network of ports to consolidate its economic military influence in Indian Ocean region.

New Delhi saw Sirisena's election as a positive event in this sense. Sirisena's election manifesto contained thinly veiled criticisms of the Rajapaksa government's approach to China and suggests a much more egalitarian approach to Sri Lanka's foreign relations. However, in his first 45 days in office, Sirisena has been reluctant to burn any bridges with Beijing. Indeed, planned projects between Sri Lanka and China will go on without interruption<sup>12</sup>. Sirisena has additionally announced plans to visit China after his India visit.

Modi has been proactive about approaching Sri Lanka on increasing defense cooperation. He and Sirisena have reportedly agreed to expand India-Sri Lanka cooperation on defense and security issues. Modi additionally told the press that he and Sirisena welcome India-Sri Lanka progress in "maritime security cooperation, including in the trilateral format with Maldives." As demonstrated by his election manifesto, Sirisena is aware of Indian sensitivities toward Sri Lanka's rapprochement with China. Current trends suggest that cooperation between New Delhi and Colombo should grow on these issues as long as Sirisena is in charge.

### CONCLUSION

Historically, Indian and Sri Lanka have amicable relations. However, in the post war era, their bilateral relations have been spoiled by the growing political issues and are now not amicable and trustful. A change of regime in Colombo under Sirisena has encouraged optimism of improvement in bilateral relations between the two countries.

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