

# India-Sri Lanka relations

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**Source:** *The Hindu*

**Manifest pedagogy:** The recent visit by Sri Lankan President elect is significant in view of Chinese influence in the region and India's national Interests. Moreover, maritime interests coupled with other ethnic and historical concerns need to be highlighted in Indo-Lankan relations.

**In news:** Srilankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa visited India

**Placing it in syllabus:** India- Srilanka bilateral relations

**Dimensions:**

- Agreements signed
- Concerns between the two countries and solutions
- Way forward

**Content:**

**Agreements signed:**

- India has announced a special **Line of Credit of \$50 million** for strengthening Sri Lanka's abilities to **counter terror threats.**
- Both countries have agreed to cooperate on counter-terrorism.
- **Sri Lankan police officers** in major Indian institutions are already receiving the **counter terrorist training.**
- India has announced **\$400 million Line of Credit** for **infrastructure development** in Srilanka.
- Sri Lankan President assured that Colombo will take **steps to release** the **boats of Indian fishermen in Sri Lankan custody.**
- Under the **Indian Housing Project**, 46,000 houses have been constructed for the internally displaced in the

Northern and Eastern Provinces of Sri Lanka and **14,000 houses for Tamils of Indian origin in the Up-Country region is in progress.**

- The two leaders have decided to utilise the \$100 million credit line earlier announced for **setting up solar projects in Srilanka.**
- Mr. Rajapaksa **extended an invite to Mr. Modi to visit Sri Lanka** as the first foreign head of government to be hosted by the new presidency.

### **Concerns:**

#### **Fishermen issue:**

- Indian boats have been fishing in the troubled waters of Palk Strait and the Gulf of Mannar for centuries.
- In **1974 and 1976 treaties** were signed between the two countries to demarcate **International Maritime Boundary Line (IMBL).**
- However, the treaties failed to factor in the **hardship of thousands of traditional fishermen** who were forced to restrict themselves to a meagre area in their fishing forays.
- The **small islet of Katchatheevu**, used by them for sorting their catch and drying their nets, **fell on the other side of the IMBL.**



- **Fishermen often risk their lives and cross the IMBL** rather than return empty-handed.
- However, the high alert **Sri Lankan Navy have either arrested or destroyed fishing nets** and vessels of those who have **crossed the line.**

### **Solutions:**

To deal with the issue of detention of fishermen in a humane manner, India and Sri Lanka have set up a **Joint Working Group**

**(JWG) on Fisheries** as the mechanism to help find a permanent solution. The first meeting took place in December 2016 in New Delhi and second meeting in Colombo on April 07, 2017. The next round of Ministerial-level talks and JWG meetings were held during October 2017 at New Delhi.

### **China factor:**

- In recent years, **China has extended billions of dollars of loans** to the Sri Lankan government for new **infrastructure projects**.
- This is **not good for India's strategic depth** in Indian Ocean Region (IOR).
- Sri Lanka handed over the **strategic port of Hambantota**, which is expected to play a key role in **China's Belt and Road Initiative**, to China on a **99-year lease**.
- It has also been **supplying arms** to Sri Lanka.
- China has invested sufficiently in building **Colombo international container terminal** by China Harbor Corporation.

### **Solutions:**

In order to allay Indian concerns the Sri Lankan government has sought to **limit China's role to running commercial operations at the Hambantota port** while it retains oversight of security operations. **India is also investing into Sri Lanka's infrastructure development** in the Northern and Eastern provinces. India is also **planning to build Trincomalee Port** to counterweight the Chinese developments at Hambantota Port.

### **13th amendment:**

- On 29 July **1987**, **Indo-Sri Lanka Accord** was signed **between Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Sri Lankan President J.R. Jayewardene**.
- On 14 November 1987, the **Sri Lankan Parliament passed the 13th Amendment** to the 1978 Constitution of Sri Lanka **and the Provincial Councils Act No. 42 of 1987** to

establish provincial councils.

- The amendment aims at **creating provincial councils** in Sri Lanka and **enable Sinhalese and Tamil as national languages** while preserving English as the link language.
- Since all the provisions of the 13th amendment were not implemented, it is called **13-Minus**.
- 13 Minus **implies that Police, Land and Financial powers have not been devolved**.
- Government has stressed that the structure that is implemented **should be acceptable to all parts of the country**.
- In **2007, the North and East were demerged** and this was followed by **more centralized powers in the hands of President**, thus eroding whatsoever autonomy was with the provinces.

### **Solutions:**

In February 2016, the Chief Minister of Sri Lanka's Northern Province, **C.V. Wigneswaran sought India's direct intervention in the complete implementation of the amendment**.

During Gotabaya's visit, PM Modi has reiterated for the early implementation of the 13th amendment.

### **Way forward:**

The Sri Lankan President has described India as **"our closest neighbour and long-standing friend"**. He assured that **cooperation with India is multifaceted with priority** given to security-related matters while cooperation with other countries are largely economic and commercial.

Given the mutual trust and historical ties, both countries should work together to strengthen their multi-dimensional partnership. In line with **India's 'neighbourhood first' policy and SAGAR doctrine**, primacy should be given to relationship with Sri Lanka.

Meanwhile Sri Lanka should carry forward the **process of reconciliation**, to fulfill the aspirations of the Tamils for equality, justice, peace and respect. **Counter-terrorism will be a big area of cooperation** between Colombo and New Delhi which requires **detailed intelligence sharing**.

A **permanent solution to the issue of fishermen** needs to be worked out through bilateral engagements. **Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA)** must be signed to improve the economic cooperation between both countries.

The biggest advantage that India has over China when it comes to bilateral ties with Sri Lanka is its **deep civilizational and cultural connect**. Sri Lanka's first nuclear partnership with any country was signed with India.

**Chinese funding in infrastructure projects** is blamed of **lacking transparency**, pushing participating smaller nations in a **debt-trap** (e.g. Hambantota port deal), having **devastating social and environmental impact** and even serving to **undermine sovereignty**.

It is here that **India carries a greater goodwill and trust over China**. Hence if it manages to wisely invest in infrastructure projects abroad, along with **ensuring timely execution of projects** that are already undergoing, India may benefit from the trust deficit that South Asian nations suffer from when it comes to China.