



CHINA'S EXPANSIONIST POLICY IN SOUTH ASIA: IMPLICATIONS ON INDO- SRI LANKAN RELATIONS

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Abstract

Sri Lanka is one of the closest neighbours to India; the relationship between the both is about 2,500 years old. In the past though there have differences between India and Sri Lanka regarding the LTTE forces demanding concessions to Sri Lankan Tamils accompanied by violent clashes followed by assassination of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. This nearly three-decade long armed conflict between Sri Lankan forces and the LTTE finally came to an end in May 2009.

India has always been in favour of peace; it initiated negotiations and talks to solve the ethnic differences. India's consistent position is in favour of a negotiated political settlement, which is acceptable to all communities within the framework of a united Sri Lanka and which goes hand in hand with democracy, pluralism and respect for human rights. Recently, both the countries are sharing cordial and a stable relationship and come together for achieving economic and security objectives. But recently Sri Lanka can also be seen moving towards China for economic support. Sri Lanka's prominent position in the Indo- pacific region also attracts the Asian giant.

Keywords: India, Sri Lanka, South Asia, Tamils, China and LTTE.

Indo- Sri Lankan Relations

Relationship of India and Sri Lanka goes back to ancient times, with Emperor Asoka establishing close ties with the country. Buddhism was brought in the 3rd century BCE by Mahinda, son of King Asoka. It is said that Mahinda and his men went to Mihintale hill and met King Tissa to whom they delivered the first sermon in Buddhism. Later, Sangamitta brought the sapling of the Bodhi tree to then Lanka, which survives till date in the country where it was planted. The Sri Lankan Chronicles like Dipavamsa and Mahavamsa suggest that Emperor Asoka was held in high respect by the contemporary Lankan king.

After the Independence, the politics in Sri Lanka was dominated by the majority Sinhala community. They were hostile to a number of Tamils who had migrated from India and settled there. The neglect of Tamil concerns led to militant Tamil nationalism and led to formation of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, who were demanding 'Tamil Eelam' for the Tamils of Sri Lanka. Indian Peacekeeping forces were deployed in Sri Lanka for peacekeeping purposes. In order to end the Sri Lankan civil war, India and Sri Lanka signed an accord in 1987. The main intention behind the accord was to end the war going on between militant Sri Lankan Tamil nationalists also known as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and the Sri Lankan militants. Operation Pawan was launched by the Peacekeeping forces of India to control Jaffna from the LTTE, that went on for three weeks and finally, IPKF were able to throw Jaffna away. The Sri Lankan countrymen saw it as interference in their internal matters, but the government headed by Rajiv Gandhi didn't withdraw the peacekeeping forces. Before the General Elections of 1991 a very unfortunate event took place, Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated by a suicide bomber named Thenmozhi Rajaratnam, according to the reports she was one of the members of LTTE, this was done to prevent him from coming to power again. After this, India did not intervene in the matters of Sri Lanka for many years.



This whole civil war lasting up to 25 years led to political unrest in both the countries.

India and Sri Lanka enjoy an old relationship with each other. In spite of some conflicts and disagreements in the past decades, both the countries share a warm relationship with each other. In recent years, the relationship has been marked by growing trade and investment; both the countries have come forward to cooperate in the areas like education, infrastructural development, culture and defence.

Political relations have grown by number of visits and summits in recent years. A Virtual Bilateral Summit was hosted by the Indian Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi and Sri Lankan Prime Minister H. E Mahinda Rajapaksa along with many other senior officials from both the sides on 26th September 2020, this was the first VBS meeting held by India with a neighbouring country. A grant of USD 15 million for promotion of Bilateral Buddhist ties was allocated by India along with a inaugural flight carrying Sri Lankan pilgrims to the sacred city of Kushinagar. A joint statement covering all the areas of bilateral cooperation was issued under 'Mitratvamaga' in the Summit. (Ministry of External Affairs Portal, 2021)

External Affairs Minister Dr. S Jaishankar visited Sri Lanka from 5-7 January 2021. During his visit the EAM had a meeting with President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and the Prime Minister. A meeting with the Foreign Minister H.E. Dinesh Gunawardena and Fisheries Minister H.E. Douglas Devananda was also held.

Indian National Security Advisor, Shri Ajit Doval attended the fourth Maritime dialogue under the "India- Sri Lanka- Maldives" trilateral mechanisms in November 2020.

India and Sri Lanka share vibrant economic relations which are significantly growing over the recent years. The India Sri Lanka Free trade Agreement (ISFTA) in 2000 resulted in expansion of trade ties between both the countries. The countries are also involved in development partnership in the areas like infrastructure, education, health, housing, industrial development etc.

Sri Lanka has been among India's largest trading partners in the SAARC. In the year 2020, India was Sri Lanka's largest trading partner with the merchandise amounting to USD \$3.6 billion (High Commission of Colombo, 2021). After the free trade agreement in 2000, Sri Lanka's exports have also increased substantially.

India is also among the largest investors to Sri Lanka. A number of leading companies have invested and established their presence in Sri Lanka. Investment from India is mainly in the areas like petroleum, retail, tourism and hotel, real estate etc. Similarly investments from Sri Lanka are also on rise taking advantage of wider market and dynamic economy.

India and Sri Lanka share 2,500 years old linguistic, cultural, and historical ties. In modern times, a cultural cooperation agreement was signed between the governments of both the countries in 1977 at New Delhi for periodic cultural exchange programs.

In recent years, both India and Sri Lanka have also cooperated in areas related to defence and security. Various joint military exercises like Mitra Shakti (between Indian Army and Sri Lankan Army) and SLINEX (between Sri Lankan Navy and Indian Navy) have taken place between the countries to promote interoperability, synergy and to counter terrorism.

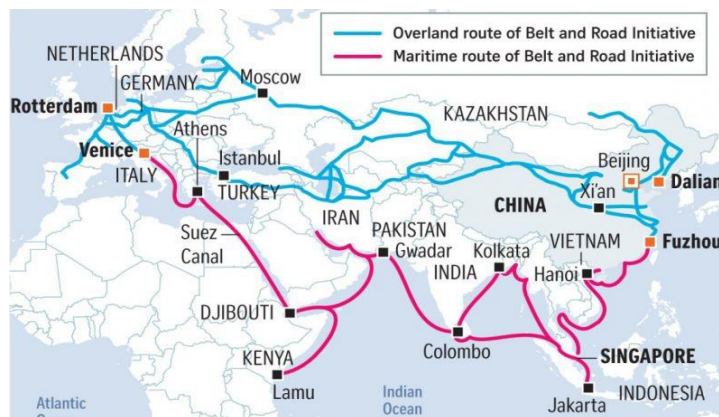


China's Expansion in South Asia

China has always been interested in enlarging its economic and political influence in South Asian geopolitics. Its influence began to expand in the region, around the beginning of this century especially its Belt and Road Initiative, which has accelerated the building of ties with the South Asian economies.

South Asia holds great importance to China mainly because of three reasons. Firstly, its geographic position, China's trade is dependent on the Malacca Strait and sea lanes passing through the Indian Ocean, so it wants to establish significance over it.

Secondly, many South Asian countries like the Maldives, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka are part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), with an expectation to get support from China for their developing economies. China on the other hand wants to build good strategic relations with these countries.



China's Belt and Road initiative, Image source: Asiagreen News insight.
Areas under

In recent times, when India suspended its COVID-19 vaccine exports including its neighbours to address the spike in the infection within the country, China made use of this opportunity and provided vaccines to these countries to project it as a responsible neighbour.

Thirdly, due to the violent clashes in the Galwan valley, India went on to form a stronger alliance with the US led Quad consisting of Australia, Japan, US and India. Apart from this India has also been engaged in military exercises with the US like Yudh Abhyas to promote cooperation and synergy. As India is shifting its focus to the West instead of its immediate neighbours, China has been trying to seize this opportunity to establish its dominant position in the South Asian region.

Implications on Indo-Sri Lankan relations

India and Sri Lanka have enjoyed an affable and quite stable relationship since Independence. Post LTTE issue, both the countries have coordinated over economic and security objectives including freedom of navigation through the Indian Ocean and countering terrorism. But over the years, Sri Lanka has been shifting its focus towards China for financial support and views it as more dependable partner; this has given rise to concerns in India over its bilateral relationship with the island country. These concerns have doubled up due to some recent incidents like killing of



Indian fishermen by the Sri Lankan navy and cancellation of the East container Terminal port to India.

Sri Lanka's divergence towards China is largely due to two factors. Firstly, it continues to be suspicious about India's intentions about the Tamil cause. Secondly, India's slow response delayed approvals. Last year, India took five months to approve a loan sought by Colombo whereas Beijing approved an additional US \$500 million from its development Bank in no time (Srinivasan Meera, 2021).

Investments by the Chinese companies in the construction of Hambantota port, which later incurred huge losses and eventually the port was leased to China for 99 years by Sri Lanka. Control of Hambantota port gives China a good hold over the Indian Ocean and some of the most important sea lanes of the world like the Suez Canal and Malacca Straits connecting Europe and Asia.

India's Response

India can prove to be a stronger partner in many areas like education, healthcare and tourism to Sri Lanka than China. With the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation Scheme and Colombo Plan, Sri Lankans can benefit from 400 slots short and medium term courses in a variety of technical and professional disciplines.

In the information and technology sector, India can create job opportunities by investing and establishing its companies in the island nation that can help in boosting the country's economy-which was also emphasized during the meeting of the delegates of both the countries. Apart from this, PM Modi extended US \$ 15 million grant to promote Buddhist ties with Sri Lanka last year, the two countries can look forward to create Buddhism knowledge and tourism corridor as the island's great number of tourists comes from India and which in turn will help in boosting people to people contact between the countries (Roy Dipanjan, 2020)

Currently, Sri Lanka is amidst a huge economic crisis which is slowly creating political unrest in the country. The island nation is in need of 3 to 4 billion dollars in order to get out of the crisis, for this it mainly relies on external help. While China has been a helping partner to Sri Lanka but its increasing dependency on China has caused it to fall into debt trap. China has its own strategic interests for investing in the island nation and its industries and hubs are still recovering from the effects of the Pandemic.

On the other hand, India under its "*Neighbourhood First Policy* " is always ready to lend a helping hand to its close neighbour. During the past few months, India has extended assistance of about \$ 2.5 billion to Sri Lanka including credit facilities and fuel and food supplies. The RBI has also extended currency swap of \$400 million and deferred payments owned by the Central Bank of Sri Lanka under the Asian Clearance Union (The Times of India, 2022). Apart from this, India also sent ration and other essential commodities to Colombo as an aid. Hence, India has always tried to have friendly ties with Sri Lanka.

In order to counter balance China's growing influence in the Indo- pacific region, India has joined the quad along with the US, Japan, and Australia to make the Indo-pacific an inclusive, free and open region in which the sovereignty and integrity of all the countries are upheld.



Conclusion

India and Sri Lanka have enjoyed a dynamic relationship since ancient times. Both the countries have a legacy of cultural, economic and intellectual ties. Though, this relationship has undergone a lot of changes in the past few decades. There has been a high level of exchanges and regular visits in order to strengthen their political relations. Apart from this, India and Sri Lanka share strong economic ties, India being its most important trading partner and one of the top sources of FDI.

However, over the recent years, China as a fast growing economy is trying to build cordial relationships with its South Asian neighbours in order to establish its dominant position in the region. Its growing closeness to Sri Lanka mainly for sea resources and Sri Lanka's drift towards China as a more reliable partner for its developing economy are growing concerns for India but nevertheless, owing to the cultural, historical and geographical closeness shared between the countries, there's still a hope to rebuild the ties between both the countries. Therefore, both the countries need to carefully and deliberately work towards strengthening their bilateral ties.

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