



Indian Prime Minister's Visit to Sri Lanka

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Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi's visit to Sri Lanka is significant on many grounds. This is for the first time in more than two decades that an Indian Prime Minister has visited Sri Lanka and Mr. Modi is the first Indian Prime Minister to visit Sri Lanka's North-East, ravaged by nearly thirty years of ethnic conflict. The visit is significant in the wake of new political dispensation in the island which saw Maithripala Sirisena becoming the new President of Sri Lanka after the January presidential elections. The new regime's interest to improve ties with India was evident when the newly elected President of Sri Lanka chose India as his first foreign trip destination.

Relations between India and Sri Lanka, since the onset of ethnic conflict in 1983, have traversed a complicated path depending on the internal politics to a great extent. Both the countries understand this and attempts were made to improve bilateral ties through continuous development assistance, signing of Free Trade Agreement and Trilateral Maritime Security Agreement. This resulted in continuous engagement between the two countries despite turbulent internal politics. The military defeat of the LTTE in 2009 and the Sri Lankan government's failure to initiate a reconciliation process acceptable to all the political parties in the country led to the defeat of the former President, Rajapaksa. The previous regime, many argue, tilted towards extra regional powers, which made India

cautious due to its security concerns. In this context, the visit helped in cementing relationship with an important neighbour.

India and Sri Lanka signed four MoUs during this visit. These include youth exchanges and education, construction of a university auditorium, visa exemptions for official passport holders and customs cooperation. Apart from these MoUs, the Prime Minister announced a US\$ 318 million Line of Credit (LoC) to upgrade the Sri Lankan railways; promised to build Trincomalee as a petroleum hub and complete 500 MW Sampur power project as well as initiate e-visa services for Sri Lankans. India has committed 1.6 billion U.S. dollars in development assistance in the past. While addressing the Parliament of Sri Lanka, the PM spoke of concluding ambitious Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement, which was pending for long. The issues covered during the visit reflected Indian and Sri Lankan governments' willingness to engage at multiple levels. For instance two agreements and two MoUs were signed during Sri Lankan President's visit to India in February. These included cultural and agricultural cooperation for the year 2015-18, expansion of defence and strategic cooperation and the Civil Nuclear Co-operation Agreement which was signed for the first time between the two countries.

Another important aspect of this visit was the commitment shown by India to rebuild the war torn Northern and Eastern parts of Sri Lanka. During his visit to Jaffna, the Prime Minister handed over 27,000 new houses to homeless Tamils and inaugurated a train service in the north-western town of Talaimannar. Prime Minister Modi met the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) leaders and asked them to give some time to the new government to arrive at a political solution acceptable to all. He pointed out that the "TNA should come up with a different strategy to engage with the new government."

The visit to Jaffna was an indication of the fact that the Indian government would expect the present regime in Sri Lanka to deal with the question of reconciliation in a peaceful and constitutional manner. The suggestion given by the Indian Prime Minister for 'early and full implementation of the 13th amendment and to go beyond that' to find an

amicable solution got a mixed response. The Indian Prime Minister stressed on “cooperative federalism”. While the PM of Sri Lanka, Ranil Wickramasinghe expressed support to the view, the hard-line Sinhala parties, such as JVP and JHU were of the view that this amendment was imposed upon by India and did not offer a solution to the ethnic problem. The suggestion was well received by Tamil leadership because in the present scenario, Tamil parties realize that a solution has to be found within a united Sri Lanka. This view was reflected in a statement made by the Northern Province Chief Minister, Mr. Wigneswaran. He said that there is a need to “replace the 13th Amendment with a more dynamic system of devolution of powers, because this amendment cannot be a final solution.”

Another issue that was touched upon was the issue of fishermen. Recent remarks by the Sri Lankan Prime Minister about the Sri Lankan government’s right to shoot fishermen trespassing into Sri Lankan waters reflected the gravity of the situation. Since it is a livelihood issue for fishermen on both sides, both the governments have decided to handle it on humanitarian grounds. The involvement of fishermen associations in talks to find practical arrangement was suggested by Prime Minister Modi. This suggestion needs a follow-up.

On the question of China’s role in Sri Lanka, even though the Indian Prime Minister avoided any direct reference to China’s role in the island nation during his visit, India expects that its concerns are taken into account by the new Sri Lankan government while dealing with China. In the past, India expressed its concern over the presence of two Chinese submarines at the Colombo port. But the fact is that China’s role is firmly established in Sri Lanka. China is now the biggest investor and the second biggest trade partner of Sri Lanka. During 2005-2012, China provided \$4.8 billion as assistance to Sri Lanka. Of this, only two per cent has been outright grant, and the remaining 98 per cent constituted soft loans. It has also increased military ties with Sri Lanka to the concern of India. For example, Chinese military supplies are estimated at \$100 million per year. Therefore, China-Sri Lanka relations under Sirisena will be crucial to China’s position in the Indian Ocean.

While addressing the Sri Lankan Parliament, Prime Minister Modi mentioned the need for co-operation for regional development and development of ocean economy. India's concern about the presence of extra regional powers in the Indian Ocean arena was addressed when he said that Sri Lanka's "leadership and partnership will be vital for building a peaceful, secure, stable and prosperous maritime neighbourhood." India understands that the 18th SAARC summit goal of developing Blue Economy will not be possible without the help of countries located in the Indian Ocean.

However, relations between India and Sri Lanka will also depend on how the Indian government handles the expectations of the new government in Sri Lanka. For instance, Sri Lanka is hopeful of continuous support from India at international bodies with regard to war crimes probe and also expects India's support in handling corruption cases against the former President.

Overall, the visit was used to reiterate cultural, religious and ethnic bonding between the two countries, and buttress the need for cooperation at various levels for regional peace and prosperity.

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