

Sri Lanka's Dual Diplomacy: Navigating Ties with China and India

Rajni Gamage and Aakil Riyaz

Summary

In October 2025, Sri Lankan Prime Minister Harini Amarasuriya made official visits to China and India. The back-to-back trips indicate an effort to balance Sri Lanka's external relations between its two key regional partners at a time of cautious rapprochement between the two Asian powers.

Sri Lanka's Prime Minister Dr Harini Amarasuriya [visited China](#) from 11 to 14 October 2025 to attend the Global Leaders' Meeting on Women 2025 in Beijing. During the visit, she held bilateral meetings with Chinese President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Qiang. The Sri Lankan prime minister also met with Huawei representatives at the Sri Lankan Embassy, who presented the Smart Classroom concept for potential use in Sri Lanka's education sector.

In a subsequent [visit to India](#) from 16 to 18 October 2025, Amarasuriya met with India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi and visited the Indian Institute of Technology Delhi and NITI Aayog, while also attending a business forum focused on enhancing collaboration in education, technology and trade. The New Delhi-Colombo Education Bridge was proposed during the visit as an initiative to promote collaboration in education between India and Sri Lanka.

Framing Bilateral Narratives

During the visit to China, the Sri Lankan prime minister emphasised China's role as a strategic development partner under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and cooperation in infrastructure, the digital economy and agriculture. Amarasuriya also highlighted key Chinese-backed projects, such as the Colombo Port City, Hambantota Port and Central Expressway, as vital to Sri Lanka's growth strategy. She also [recognised China's support](#) in education and human capital development in strengthening the country's development capacity and urged greater Chinese engagement in Sri Lanka's agriculture, gemstone, tourism and investment sectors.

During her remarks and engagements in India, Amarasuriya [positioned India](#) as a model for policy innovation, institutional reform and evidence-based governance. By engaging with India's initiatives in infrastructure, education, digital governance and artificial intelligence, she underscored Sri Lanka's intent to learn from and collaborate with India in building resilient and future-oriented state institutions. Her framing presented India not just as an economic or geopolitical partner, but also as a governance ally whose experiences could inform Sri Lanka's reform and development agenda under the National People's Power (NPP) government.

The Sri Lankan prime minister's visits to China and India underscore the NPP government's efforts to strengthen domestic legitimacy by securing development support and demonstrating its commitment to reforms as part of its anti-corruption mandate. The visits were also aimed at projecting the NPP as a globally engaged, competent administration capable of delivering tangible benefits to Sri Lankans, while navigating complex geopolitical relationships. Sections of the political opposition have, however, criticised the NPP leadership's foreign visits for lacking transparency on some agreements discussed or signed, and for failing to deliver tangible outcomes that meaningfully address Sri Lanka's urgent economic and social challenges.

Opportunity Amidst Cautious Rapprochement

For China, the visit reaffirmed historical goodwill and showcased continuity in a relationship whose high points came under Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike and later President Mahinda Rajapaksa. Xi [emphasised](#) that Sri Lanka is a priority partner in Beijing's neighbourhood diplomacy and the BRI, portraying Sri Lanka's political leadership as supportive of the 'One China' policy and China's global initiatives, and its global leadership role, including of the Global South.

Meanwhile, the Indian side framed the Sri Lankan prime minister's visit as a manifestation of its 'Neighbourhood First' policy and underlined cultural proximity, reaffirming India's role as Sri Lanka's primary regional partner. Amarasuriya's visit to her alma mater, Hindu College, was spoken of as a symbolic and [emotional "homecoming"](#) that celebrated shared educational and cultural ties between India and Sri Lanka.

The Sri Lankan prime minister's visits to China and India come at a moment of cautious rapprochement between the two Asian powers, driven in part by economic pressures such as a 50-per cent tariff imposed by United States' (US) President Donald Trump on Indian imports into the US, which he claims is a response to New Delhi's continued purchase of Russian oil. China and India have since taken steps to [stabilise bilateral ties](#), including reopening trade routes and resuming direct flights, which, in turn, reduce American leverage in the region.

Against this backdrop, Sri Lanka appears to be positioning itself as a trusted partner capable of benefiting from renewed India-China economic and strategic dialogue, and one which is seeking opportunities to bolster its fragile economic position. The government recognises the urgent need for export diversification, with the US' recent 20 per cent unilateral tariffs severely affecting the country's export-dependent economy, particularly its vital apparel sector. However, without a clearly defined and coherent foreign policy strategy, the NPP's efforts to expand engagement with the major powers risk delivering limited results and may leave it vulnerable to manipulation by the one-sided interests of any overbearing dominant power.

.

Dr Rajni Gamage is a Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS). She can be contacted at r.gamage@nus.edu.sg. Mr Aakil Riyaz is a journalist at the Business Desk at *The Morning*. He can be contacted at aakilriyaz@gmail.com. The authors bear full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.